The Mill Mother's Lament

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

As you read...

ELLA MAE WIGGINS

Ella Mae Wiggins was born in Tennessee in 1900. Her father was a logger, and she grew up poor, moving frequently with her family. Before she was twenty years old, both her father and mother died. At the age of twenty, she married John Wiggins.

John suggested that they move to a textile mill town in order to have steady work and better pay. They moved to South Carolina and began working in the mills. While Ella and John lived and worked in South Carolina, they had nine children, four of whom died of whooping cough. The Wiggins family eventually relocated to North Carolina, and John abandoned his family. Ella was left alone to raise five children on the meager wages she earned working twelve-hour shifts at the textile mill.

Wiggins joined the union movement in North Carolina. She was one of the few union leaders who tried to organize white and black workers into the same union, something that was often met with hostility by other white union leaders.

As a union leader, Ella Mae Wiggins went to Washington and testified in front of Congress about the deplorable conditions in mills and mill towns. Her own experience gave her authority to speak of her hardships: When she had lived in South Carolina and her four children had become sick, she asked her boss to let her work the day shift and stay with her children at night. He refused, so she quit her job, but without her income there was no money for medicine, and her children died. She also spoke of the difficult lives of mothers who worked long hours in the mills to provide for their families, but could not because the wages were so low.

In 1929, Wiggins went with other union leaders to support the striking workers at Gastonia. Her truck was turned away and they never made it to the mill. As the union leaders were returning to their camp outside of Gastonia, a group of armed men stopped their car and fired on the union leaders. Ella Mae Wiggins was shot in the chest and died at the age of 29.

PROTEST SONGS

Ella Mae Wiggins wrote a number of ballads, or songs, that striking workers sang to raise their spirits. “The Mill Mother’s Lament” portrayed women as providers for their families who were forced to choose between caring for their children and the demands of mill work. Sung to a familiar tune that the workers had heard on the radio, Wiggins’ ballad became an anthem for cotton mill workers across the South.

As you read the lyrics to “Mill Mother’s Lament,” what images of motherhood did Wiggins use in her ballad? Do you think this would have been an effective protest song? Why or why not?
We leave our homes in the morning,
We kiss our children good-bye,
While we slave for the bosses,
Our children scream and cry.
    And when we draw our money,
Our grocery bills to pay,
Not a cent to spend for clothing,
Not a cent to lay away.
    And on that very evening
Our little son will say:
“I need some shoes, Mother,
And so does Sister May.”
    How it grieves the heart of a mother,
You everyone must know.
But we can’t buy for our children,
Our wages are too low.
    It is for our little children,
That seems to us so dear,
But for us nor them, dear workers,
The bosses do not care.
    But understand, all workers,
Our union they do fear.
Let’s stand together, workers,
And have a union here.

On the web

More about Ella Mae Wiggins
http://ncmuseumofhistory.org/workshops/womenshistory/SESSION4.html#wiggins
A brief biography from the North Carolina Museum of History.

More from LEARN NC
Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including Ella Mae Wiggins, Gaston County, Gastonia, North Carolina, history, industry, labor, labor unions, music, strikes, and textile mills.

About the author

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