



SCHOOL of  
GRADUATE STUDIES  
EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

East Tennessee State University  
**Digital Commons @ East  
Tennessee State University**

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

---

5-2016

# Women in the 1929 Textile Strikes in Elizabethton, Tennessee and Gastonia, North Carolina

Steven K. Knapp

*East Tennessee State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.etsu.edu/etd>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Knapp, Steven K., "Women in the 1929 Textile Strikes in Elizabethton, Tennessee and Gastonia, North Carolina" (2016). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 3042. <http://dc.etsu.edu/etd/3042>

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact [dcadmin@etsu.edu](mailto:dcadmin@etsu.edu).

Women in the 1929 Textile Strikes in Elizabethton, Tennessee and Gastonia, North Carolina

---

A thesis

presented to

the Faculty of the Department of History

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in History

---

by

Steven Kelly Knapp

May 2016

---

Dr. Tom Lee, Chair

Dr. William Burgess

Dr. Dinah Mayo-Bobee

Keywords: Southern Labor Movement, Women in the Labor Movement, Textile Mills, Loray Mill, Bemberg Plant, Glanzstoff Plant, Ella Mae Wiggins, United Textile Workers, National Textile Workers Union

## ABSTRACT

Women in the 1929 Textile Strikes in Elizabethton Tennessee and Gastonia North Carolina

by

Steven Kelly Knapp

In southern labor history the role of women remains one of the most overlooked and misconstrued. Most works on the subject have relegated women to support roles within the labor movement or designated those who stood out as wild women. Through the use of existing works on the topic, interviews with strikers and witnesses, and contemporary newspaper articles, this thesis will show, in two case studies, of Elizabethton, Tennessee, and Gastonia, North Carolina, that women involved in the 1929 strikes were neither merely supporters nor wild women. They were instead the public faces of the textile labor movement and took major roles in the leadership, organization and course of their respective strikes. Like women before them, in the suffragist movement, and the early women's labor movements in Lowell, Massachusetts and other northern mills, they acted at the confluence of competing forces and demands. Often characterized in the newspapers and popular mindset as mothers striking for better wages for their families and for better conditions, they couched their militancy in the language of motherhood, garnering public support for their unions and rousing outrage at the mistreatment directed toward them. The women in Elizabethton and Gastonia merged the new woman of the 1920s and the Victorian ideals of motherhood. Their fight reflected the tensions surrounding gender and labor which had arisen in the economic and cultural struggles of the 1920s South.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
LIST OF TABLES.....	4
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	5
2. THE MILL: THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY IN THE SOUTH, CONDITIONS & CULTURE.....	19
3. ELIZABETHTON.....	34
4. GASTONIA.....	53
5. CONCLUSION.....	71
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	74
VITA.....	79

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Population of Selected Urban Centers, 1870-1967.....	23
2. North Carolina Population, 1900-1930.....	24

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

*Now listen to the workers  
Both women and you men  
Let's win for them the victory  
I'm sure t'will be no sin.*

From Ella Mae Wiggins, "Mill Mother's Lament"<sup>1</sup>

In the early afternoon of September 14, 1929, an open-bed pickup truck headed out of Bessemer City, North Carolina bound for Gastonia, a short drive away. The truck carried approximately twenty members of the National Textile Workers' Union and their supporters. Among those in the truck was Ella Mae Wiggins, mother of five, songstress and organizer for the striking mill workers at the Loray Mill in Gastonia. The group was on its way to a rally near the mill to help encourage the strikers. As they traveled along, a motorcade of anti-union men, primarily members of the Loray Mill Committee of the One Hundred and American Legion, ambushed them. One of the anti-union vehicles veered in front of the truck causing a collision. The anti-union conspirators immediately began firing into the stunned strikers. Ella Mae Wiggins was shot in the spine, and as she fell she exclaimed "oh lordy, I'm shot." Once the shooting subsided, survivors carried her to a nearby house where she died a few minutes later.<sup>2</sup> Ella Mae Wiggins' became the great martyr for the southern textile labor movement. Her life,

---

<sup>1</sup> Stanza from Ella Mae Wiggins' *Mill Mother's Lament* in John Salmond, *Gastonia 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 62.

<sup>2</sup> "Arrest of Seven Men in Woman's Death," *Altoona Mirror*, September 16, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

death, and the public reaction to her death exemplified the complex role of women within the 1920s labor movement in the southern textile industry.

Despite the rosy view of the 1920s in the popular mindset, the decade also saw one of the most turbulent chapters in American history. From the onset of the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s, the working classes became locked in a bitter conflict between the owning and managing classes. Disagreements over wages, working hours, labor conditions, unionization, and various other grievances led to strikes, riots, and open violence between the workers and their managers. Since the mid-late 1800s, there had been labor unrest in the United States , but the decade of 1920 stands out as perhaps the most violent and turbulent decade in the history of the American labor movement.

By the dawn of the mid-twentieth century, the United States was awash in various labor unions and unrest. The growth of industrial unions in the late 1800s such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) helped to cement the place of the labor union within the American industrial complex. The IWW sought to unite the industrial workers of all industries into “one big union,” the better to bargain with the large corporations and the United States government.<sup>3</sup> The combination of unrest due to conditions and wages and the fear of unions spawned by the Red Scares following the Russian Civil War led to the creation of a labor powder keg which throughout the twentieth century would explode into violence and strikes. Two of the first and most prominent labor strikes occurred from 1913-1914. In September, 1913 copper miners in Colorado struck for better wages, conditions and recognition of their union by the mining companies. The miners and their families were forced from their company-owned homes into tent colonies. What followed was nearly a year of armed conflict between striking miners, scabs

---

<sup>3</sup> Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor* (New York: International Publishers, 1982), 512-513.

(non-union workers brought in during strikes), company guards, and the National Guard. The most gruesome event of the strike was when company guards raided a striker camp and proceeded to burn tents and shoot aimlessly in what became known as the Ludlow Massacre. During that time roughly seventy people were killed, including several women and children caught in the crossfire. On April 30, 1914, federal troops arrived to stop the fighting. United Mine Workers and American Federation of Labor (AFL) organizers applauded the arrival, and the strike ended later that year with a compromise between workers and the companies.<sup>4</sup>

However the overall issue of the American labor movement was by no means quelled. In 1910, a laborer named Joseph Hillstrom joined the Industrial Workers of the World in California. Joe Hill, as he became known, became one of the great songwriters for American labor. Although English was not his first language (he was born in Sweden), Hill wrote many songs that became rallying ballads for striking laborers throughout the United States. In January, 1914, Hill became embroiled in a conspiracy surrounding the death of his employer's son. After a lengthy trial, Hill was executed in January, 1915. He swiftly became the great martyr for labor's cause, his songs and name being used in numerous rallying cries for workers' solidarity.<sup>5</sup> His legend would come to outweigh that of another labor balladeer and martyr, Ella Mae Wiggins.

From 1920 to 1922, longstanding conflicts in the Kentucky and West Virginia coalfields exploded into open violence. In 1920, miners in the southwestern coalfields of West Virginia struck. They demanded better wages, safer conditions, an end to the mine guard system, and recognition of the union. In May, 1920, the Matewan Massacre, which resulted in the deaths of several Baldwin-Felts company agents, the mayor and several strikers, set the match to the West

---

<sup>4</sup> David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 346-351.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Lougee, *Pie in the Sky: How Joe Hill's Lawyers Lost His Case, Got Him Shot, And were Disbarred* (Bloomington, IN: IUniverse Inc., 2011), 2-9.



Virginia powder keg. For over a year, West Virginia existed in a state of civil war due to labor unrest.<sup>6</sup> The conflict culminated in the famous “March on Mingo” and Battle of Blair Mountain. Between August and September of 1921, an army of several thousand armed miners marched on Mingo County, to assist in unionization efforts and to avenge Sid Hatfield, the pro-union sheriff of Matewan, West Virginia, assassinated shortly after the Matewan Massacre. In order to reach Mingo County, the miners had to pass through non-union Logan County, where they were forced to contend with Don Chafin, the anti-union sheriff of Logan, and his militia. For several days the two sides exchanged gunfire in the hills bordering the county. Only the arrival of federal troops and the National Guard quelled the violence.<sup>7</sup> The unrest in West Virginia dominated the headlines of American newspapers for several months, and the Mine Wars of the early 1920s set the precedent for labor unrest in the coming years.

While the major episodes of labor unrest like the Ludlow Massacre or the Battle of Blair Mountain have received the most recognition of historians and the popular consciousness, one of the most interesting and overlooked series of events in American labor history took place in the last year of the 1920s. In 1929, a series of strikes shook the southern textile industry. Southern Appalachia and the Piedmont South had been late to enter the Industrial Revolution, but by 1929 the southern textile industry thrived. Almost every town of considerable size in North Carolina boasted at least one textile mill. Some of these mills were owned by locals, but many more were owned by New England corporations seeking to escape the labor unions and laws of the North. Some even came from overseas, as in the case of the Elizabethton Tennessee mills, owned by German companies (Bemberg). The textile strikes of 1929 mirrored labor unrest in other parts of

---

<sup>6</sup> Lon Savage, *Thunder in the Mountains: The West Virginia Mine War 1920-1921* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), 19-27.

<sup>7</sup> James Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Miners and Their Battle for Freedom* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015), 265-285.

the country, in terms of violence and attempts by the National Guard to maintain the peace. However, the textile strikes of 1929 differed in one major detail. The textile strikes in North Carolina and Tennessee prominently featured women in leading roles.

In past studies of labor history, women were rarely cast in roles of prominence. Many historians of the labor movement who have analyzed the role of women have cast women in one of two roles. Women have been either cast in a support role, providing moral and physical (food, repairs, medical) support to the men, engaged in the leadership and confrontational aspects of labor unrest, or they have cast women in a separate genre of labor history. The notion of women being a separate entity in the realm of labor history was best evidenced in the work of historians focusing on the early years of the American labor movement. A 1957 study of the Industrial Workers of the World by Paul Brissenden argued that women were of the same status as “juniors” within the union, and thus in most union activities they were relegated to support work.<sup>8</sup> In her work, an analysis of women’s work in auxiliary organizations attached to the United Auto Workers and the Amalgamated Association of International Steel and Tin Workers, Jennifer Klein casted women as a supporting force rather than a major factor within American labor.<sup>9</sup> Aileen Kraditor focused on the philosophical place of women within the labor movement. Rather than analyzing specific roles, Kraditor focused her study on the philosophical separation of women within various labor movements. She primarily discussed how early Socialist unions supported legal equality, but encouraged separate spheres for the genders. Kraditor devoted much of her study to how the early unions “believed socialism [and labor reform] had to do only

---

<sup>8</sup> Paul Brissenden, *The IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1957), 160-161.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Klein, *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, and the Shaping of America’s Public-Private Welfare State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 144.

with the public sphere.”<sup>10</sup> Other historians, such as Philip Foner focused their analysis of women in the labor movement in the terms of analyzing a minority. Foner addressed the subject of women in the labor movement much in the same vein as he addressed the inclusion of African-Americans and immigrants into the movement. Foner argued that women were included, but kept at a distance within the labor movement, or were even separated into women only or women-centric unions.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of one of the most studied events in American labor history, the West Virginia Coal Wars, the subject of women has been addressed in the same manner as most historical works. Most works focusing on the West Virginia Coal Wars relegate their study of women to their role as supporters of the strike efforts. Robert Shogan primarily focused his study of women to their efforts as nurses during the 1921 Blair Mountain conflict. Shogan’s primary mention of women regards their following of the striking miners into Mingo County. “Wives and daughters, wearing the insignia of UMW (United Mine Workers) locals on their nurse’s caps, marched along with the men to tend to the wounded.”<sup>12</sup>

In more recent works on the West Virginia Coal Wars, the study of women in the strikes of the 1920s has been expanded, but has continued to focus on women as a support group rather than a major factor. The work of James Green refers to the families of striking miners engaging in “unwomanly actions,” such as sabotaging railway lines and “[assaulting] scabs with mops, brooms, and iron skilletts.”<sup>13</sup> Despite his brief exploration of direct female strike activities, most

---

<sup>10</sup> Aileen Kraditor, *The Radical Persuasion 1890-1917* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 196.

<sup>11</sup> Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, 500-507.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Shogan, *The Battle for Blair Mountain: The Story of America’s Largest Labor Uprising* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 194.

<sup>13</sup> Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills*, 127.

of Green's work falls in line with previous work on the subject by painting women involved in the labor movement as supporters, rather than direct agents.

Women's involvement in labor and reform movements was not a new phenomenon. As early as the 1890s, women were heavily involved in the suffragist movement, the Knights of Labor, and the Patrons of Husbandry (Grange), among others. In various acts of resistance, women laborers actively challenged employers and restrictive social expectations.

In 1912, the millworkers of Lawrence, Massachusetts, struck for better pay and conditions. The workers paraded through the streets and became embroiled in numerous standoffs with state and local militia. A month into the strike the IWW sent mothers and children from Lawrence to New York, where, as Bruce Watson described, "[the] dirty-faced, malnourished, bewildered [children] were paraded through the streets."<sup>14</sup> The first parade garnered great media attention for the strikers. On their second attempt however, the wives of strikers and their children were met by police and strikebreakers at the train stations. A severe brawl ensued in which police beat many of the participants. The brawl made national headlines and was widely condemned. In the wave of protests which followed, a twenty-one year old woman, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, took center stage as a fiery speaker for the workers' cause.<sup>15</sup> In many newspapers the beating of the women and children was demonized as barbaric behavior. However, the immigrant backgrounds (most were of Irish, Italian or German stock) of many of the strikers made kept them distanced from the native population of the United States, and lead to widespread distrust of the strike and its primary union, the Industrial Workers of the World.

In the South, the complex relationship between protest and women's roles was complicated further by the constraints of southern identity's tie to womanhood. In particular,

---

<sup>14</sup>Bruce Watson, *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream* (New York: Viking Publishing, 2005), 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> Watson, *Bread and Roses*, 152-153.

white southerners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw their region as the repository of noble virtue. To many southerners, the South held on to older societal customs which the North had lost. Within this repository there was a strict social code to be followed, with moral institutions that provided the enforcement of this code. As Charles Wilson explained, “the church and the home, institutions of morality, were said to be in decline in the North, but thriving in Dixie.”<sup>16</sup> Women in the South lived in a much more stratified society than their northern sisters. Southern womanhood embodied the woman as “the guardian and symbol of southern virtue.”<sup>17</sup> According to the southern notions of womanhood the southern woman remained in the home and, as Marjorie Wheeler stated, “played [the] role of preserver of religion and morality, inspiration to her husband, and the conduit of southern values to future generations of southern statesmen.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite these constraints, southern women still found ways to involve themselves publically in reform movements. From the 1890s until ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, suffragists frequently marched, demonstrated and often found themselves in direct confrontations with the authorities. In the South however, suffragists attempted to tread a middle way. The ideal of southern womanhood remained strong and women activists worked tirelessly to maintain the image of the southern woman. One Virginia activist stated, “the wise suffrage leaders here have realized that success depends upon showing their cause to be compatible with the essentials of the Virginia traditions [of] womanliness, and both instinct and judgment have

---

<sup>16</sup> Charles Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 168.

<sup>17</sup> Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Wheeler, *New Women of the New South*, 6.

prevented the adoption here of the more aggressive forms of campaigning.”<sup>19</sup> The leading female figures of the women’s suffrage movement in the South were forced by the southern societal mores of the time to represent themselves as “daughters of privilege” in order to gain success.<sup>20</sup> However, despite being forced to cloak their movement in the guise of southern womanhood, the suffragist movement strengthened the women of the South. As Marjorie Spruill Wheeler explained, the “inhospitable political climate” of the South, and the eventual success of the suffragist movement, gave the women of the South a newfound sense of independence, which would prove invaluable in the coming years.<sup>21</sup>

In the wake of women winning the vote and assuming expanded roles during WWI, the jazz culture of the 1920s produced the ideal of the new woman, independent and publically involved. The decade saw an increase in both unmarried and married women in the workforce, and an increasing desire among women to find work outside the home. One woman of the time asked “can we make ourselves believe that such homes raise the level of national life and bring a deeper satisfaction to the individual?”<sup>22</sup> The new woman upheld the ideal of economic and social independence, and as Dorothy Brown argued, “[relished] in glorifying and publicizing [her] femininity [and] emancipation from the standards man had set for her.”<sup>23</sup> The new women of the 1920s took part in the growing economic apparatus of the United States and sought a more equal footing with their male counterparts, both politically and economically.

Notably, the claims made by women for greater autonomy in the 1920s even permeated the movements aligned against it. The second embodiment of the Ku Klux Klan after 1915,

---

<sup>19</sup> Elna C. Green, *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 58-59.

<sup>20</sup> Wheeler, *New Women of the New South*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Wheeler, *New Women of the New South*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Dorothy Brown, *Setting a Course: American Women in the 1920s* (Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Publishing, 1987), 98.

<sup>23</sup> Brown, *Setting a Course*, 32.

espoused the southern notion of womanhood in which women were to remain in the home and serve as the moral heart of the family. Nonetheless, in the 1920s the Women of the Ku Klux Klan formed and took a very public role in campaigning for Klan objectives. Although the Klan claimed to uphold the southern ideal of womanhood, it supported the Women of the Ku Klux Klan in its public efforts. The Women of the Ku Klux Klan seemed to be everything the Klan stood against. The Women of the Ku Klux Klan took part in public rallies, frequently marched, and many prominent women in the movement were publically employed.<sup>24</sup> Thus, both the ideal of the southern woman and the ideal of the 1920s new woman crossed paths in the pursuit of political and social change. Cornelia Spencer, from North Carolina, stated “girls who are growing up at the present time ought not to compare themselves with those of even twenty years ago. Every year is adding to their opportunities and advantages...with the strongest conservative principles it is impossible to believe that women will continue to move in the same narrow ruts as before.”<sup>25</sup> The freedom of the new woman of the 1920s would play a vital role in the strikes of 1929, both as a rationale for opposition to the strikes and as a way for women strikers to defend their activism.

Within the realm of textiles specifically, historians have followed the route of other studies of labor and the labor movement. Allen Tullos’ work with regards to women primarily focused on the roles and tasks left to women, such as household work and the communities (i.e. church) established amongst women within the mill communities. Tullos delved little into the roles played by women during labor disputes. Instead he focused on specific roles ascribed to

---

<sup>24</sup> Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 180.

<sup>25</sup> Cornelia Spencer in Anne Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 105.

them by mill society.<sup>26</sup> Similar to Tullos, G.C Waldrep III's study of the textile industry in upstate South Carolina primarily focused on the role of women within gender specific arenas, such as household work, and the separate social circles established by women within church groups and clubs.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, while labor scholars have generally failed to acknowledge that women participated actively in southern labor strikes before the 1920s, they have acknowledged the power of one significant female figure, Mother Jones. A diminutive grandmotherly figure with the power to shape strikes and use profanity like any man, Mary Harris Jones rose to prevalence during the Paint Creek and Cabin creek coal strikes of 1912-1913. She personified the radical woman and her use of public speaking infused with fiery rhetoric challenged characterizations of proper women as obedient and subordinate supporters rather than actors, , but Jones' image was complicated, especially in the southern mountains. Even while she spoke vehemently in defense of her miners and their families, she portrayed herself as a mother figure, and the miners as her children.<sup>28</sup>

By focusing on Mother Jones and dismissing other evidences of female labor activism, scholars have neglected the role of women's activism. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall penned numerous articles on the strikes in Elizabethton, Tennessee. Hall's *Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South*, painted a vivid picture of the Elizabethton 1929 strike from the viewpoint of local women, a point which this thesis will seek to illustrate through the use of interviews and newspaper articles. John Salmond's *Gastonia 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike* provided a detailed glimpse into the Loray Mill strike and its aftermath. Salmond used the

---

<sup>26</sup> Allen Tullos, *Habits of Industry* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 230-257.

<sup>27</sup> G.C Waldrep III, *Southern Workers and the Search for Community: Spartanburg County, South Carolina* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 17-25.

<sup>28</sup> David Corbin, *Gun Thugs, Rednecks, and Radicals: A Documentary History of the West Virginia Mine Wars* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011), 72-74.



experience and death of Ella Mae Wiggins as a glimpse into the violence of the strike, yet he neglected an important facet of the participation of women like Wiggins. More women present in the workforce, union organization efforts (such as the Summer School for Women) the 1920s independent new woman ideal, and the lingering Victorian ideals of motherhood amongst the majority of the national population (especially southerners), all shaped the activities of women strikers in Elizabethton and Gastonia. Like Mother Jones, the women of the 1929 strikes couched their labor militancy in a language of motherhood.

In recent decades, numerous scholars have considered the power of notions of motherhood in the context of gender studies. Carol Berkin, for instance, has argued that during the turmoil of the American Revolution the ideal of motherhood was championed as the mother struggling to provide for her children while her husband fought for independence. The mother of the American Revolution was expected to be industrious and frugal to meet the needs of her family, but she was also expected to be fierce. Women in Massachusetts and Connecticut were praised for instigating public disorder to obtain necessities from greedy merchants.<sup>29</sup> After the United States gained independence, women and mothers were expected to become symbols of virtue and education to the family. In 1787, Benjamin Rush wrote “[the] possible share he (the future citizen of the United States) may have in the government of our country makes it necessary that our ladies should be qualified to a certain degree, by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government.”<sup>30</sup> The expectation of motherhood entailed women being the bearers of necessity, virtue, and knowledge to their families, and, in the spirit of the American Revolution, that expectation also entailed

---

<sup>29</sup> Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 31-33.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Rush in Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 155.

women being willing to upset traditional societal roles to obtain the necessities for their dependents.

The common perception of women in the labor movement was a product of both the Victorian era and the 1920s ideal of the “new woman.” Women were commonly viewed by unionists and industrialists as the “fairer sex.” They were viewed as rising above the grit of labor unrest. Even amongst the reformist unions women were often relegated to support roles, and were expected to avoid confrontations.<sup>31</sup> When they were involved in labor disputes, women, especially in the public eye, were cast as “wild women,” or as somehow violating established social roles. This thesis will establish the prominent roles played by women in the strikes at the Bemberg and Glanzstoff plants in Elizabethton Tennessee and the Loray Mill of Gastonia North Carolina. In both of those strikes women served as some of the key instigators, organizers, and public faces of the strike.

The first chapter will analyze the basic culture, conditions and background of the typical southern textile mill. Utilizing various academic works, contemporary newspaper articles and interviews, the second chapter will analyze the Elizabethton strike which began in March, 1929. The Elizabethton strike was instigated by the women of the Bemberg and Glanzstoff rayon plants and grew into one of the first major textile strikes in the South. The women served as the public face and spokespersons of the strike, and were referred to as “contemporary Amazons” while the men were left to the “dirty work.” This view of the Elizabethton female strikers was supported by Jacquelyn Hall’s works on the subject. The newspapers which covered the strike often focused on the motherhood ideal espoused by many of the strikers, such as Mrs. Roy Marshall. The third chapter will address the Loray Mill strike of April, 1929, and focus on the role of Ella Mae Wiggins, the great songstress of North Carolina’s textile industry. John Salmond addressed

---

<sup>31</sup> Kraditor, *The Radical Persuasion 1890-1917*, 154-165.

the role of women such as Ella Mae Wiggins in his work *Gastonia 1929*; the third chapter will expand upon his work and further explain the role of Ella Mae Wiggins and other women present at the Loray Mill in 1929. As with Elizabethton, the newspapers, particularly in the case of Ella Mae Wiggins, painted an image of a mother struggling to gain a better living for her children. In the case of Gastonia, the slaying of a mother caused a massive public outcry for a conclusion to the violence. Thus, in both cases, the women's cause which primarily centered on better wages, conditions, and independence, couched itself in the language of motherhood in order to gain more widespread public support in the rigid social structure of the 1920s South.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE MILL: THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY IN THE SOUTH, CONDITIONS & CULTURE

One cannot obtain a proper understanding of the textile strikes of 1929 without first gaining an understanding of the textile industry and the Industrial Revolution in the South. The primary industry in the South was textile mills. The 1920s saw an expansion in the textile industry throughout the South. Between 1925 and 1927 the textile economy of the South grew to control over 62 percent of the textile production of the United States. Southern textiles also saw a dramatic increase in the number of wage-earning laborers, an increase from 246,974 in 1925 to 281,390 in 1927. Thus the South came to control 57.5 percent of the total population of wage earners in the textile industry in the United States.<sup>32</sup> Much of this increase came at the expense of the textile industry in the rest of the country. While the southern textile industry expanded the northern textile industry faltered. In 1925, the New England region saw the closure of at least thirty mills and North Carolina surpassed it in textile employment and industry.<sup>33</sup>

Many of the mills which opened in the South during the early 1920s were owned by northern and foreign companies. These companies sought to take advantage of the South's labor pool of poor whites and sharecroppers. The northern industrialists believed that by moving the industry to the South they might escape the growing industrial unrest of the North and cheapen their operating costs. The companies also strengthened their position in the South by appealing to local leaders with anti-union rhetoric, arguing that any movement to unionize the industry would destroy the perceived prosperity. The textile companies were thus able to enjoy, as Broadus

---

<sup>32</sup> Broadus Mitchell and George Mitchell, *The Industrial Revolution in the South* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 1930), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Mitchell, *The Industrial Revolution in the South*, 3-4.

Mitchell stated, “a low cost of production through expensive human subsidy.”<sup>34</sup> In the early 1900s, for instance, the labor costs in the South were 40 percent lower than in the North, and the working day for the southern textile worker was 24 percent longer.<sup>35</sup>

Around many of the new southern mills there arose many mill villages and towns. Many mill towns were driven by the notion of paternalism. The primary fear of many mill owners was that if their workers felt belittled or inferior they would be more prone to unionization. The diminishing status of the poor yeoman farmers of the post-bellum South and the general view of wage labor as inferior led mill operators to adopt a strategy of uplift. The strategy of uplift involved the mill companies establishing schools, churches and recreational facilities, whereby the educational standing and social involvement of the mill workers would be strengthened rather than diminished by entering the textile industry.

Many mills sought to employ widows, orphans, and the yeoman. Driven by overpopulation and poor soil, thousands of yeoman farmers and their families flocked to the textile mills, where they could obtain steady work and education for their families. Others sought the mills in times of financial downturn, to help augment their incomes. In the 1890s, during a period of economic uncertainty, many North Carolina farmers from the Uwharry country (north of Charlotte) went to work in textile mills in either Concord, North Carolina or Danville, Virginia, and returned to their farms when times improved. In many ways, the mill replaced the antebellum planter. Rather than turning to the planter in time of need, the yeoman turned to the mill. The mill owner became the leading patriarch of southern life, replacing the planter and

---

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, *The Industrial Revolution in the South*, 144.

<sup>35</sup> Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South 1880-1930* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 123-125.

aristocrat.<sup>36</sup> However, as time progressed the yeomen became more and more reliant on mill work as it provided a steady income and precious amenities for their families. By 1900, many of those who held onto the agrarian notions of the past were viewed as old-fashioned and a new class was formed, a southern industrial class, which looked to the future of industry, rather than the past of agriculture.

The workers of the southern textile industry did not hail from the urban class of the South. The vast majority of southern textile workers instead came from the rural classes seeking a replacement to farming or to augment their income from agriculture. Prior to the rise of textiles, one of the main ways rural families attempted to augment their income was to find work in the timber industry. Throughout Western North Carolina and East Tennessee lumber operations exported the hardwoods of southern Appalachia to the industries of the North. These lumber towns and camps that sprouted to support the logging operations were not the ideal sort of communities. Most lumber camp houses were of cheap construction, lacking any sort of plumbing or sanitation. The timber companies put little effort into the construction or maintenance of the lumber towns, as they were expected to be temporary, only existing as long as it took to harvest the timber of the region. The collapse of timber industry in many mountain counties of Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee in the early 1900s drove many mountain laborers into the textile industry. Textile mills were established in towns such as Marshall, Kingsport, and Elizabethton to take advantage of “an inexhaustible supply of cheap

---

<sup>36</sup> Gary Freeze, *Patriarchy Lost: The Preconditions for Paternalism in the Odell Cotton Mills of North Carolina: 1882-1900*, in *Race, Class and Community in Southern Labor History*, eds. Gary Fink and Merl Reed. (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 27-40.

labor.”<sup>37</sup> Mill owners also sent recruiters into the deeper mountains speaking of a virtual paradise in the mill towns, where rural families could escape the hardships of agricultural life.<sup>38</sup>

In East Tennessee the establishment of the textile and rayon industries created an urban population boom (see Table 1). Beginning in the 1870s, Elizabethton and Bristol began campaigns to attract industries to their communities. By the turn of the century, the towns of Bristol, Johnson City, Elizabethton and Kingsport all boasted mills and saw an upsurge in their populations in the years from 1880 to 1960. These campaigns attracted textile companies from the North and from overseas, as in the case of the Bemberg and Glanzstoff plants in Elizabethton which were owned by German companies. The lure of cheap labor, lax labor regulations, and the perceived lack of unionization efforts were all used to attract outside businesses into the area.<sup>39</sup> There was also the added influx of commuter workers who traveled into the towns to work, but still maintained a close connection with the agricultural lifestyle. In the case of the Elizabethton plants, buses traveled into the outlying rural communities and ferried workers in for their shifts at the two rayon plants. Buses traveled to the outlying communities of Stoney Creek, Roan Mountain, and Gap Creek.<sup>40</sup> The draw of steady work and extra financial income attracted many rural workers into the East Tennessee textile industry. Many of these workers maintained a close-knit community which would come into play in the strike of 1929.

---

<sup>37</sup> Eller, *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers*, 125.

<sup>38</sup> Eller, *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers*, 125-126.

<sup>39</sup> David Icenogle, “Rural Nonfarm Population and Settlement in Upper East Tennessee,” (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1970), 33-34.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Cole, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, May 10, 1981, interview H-0311, transcript, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

Table 1: Population of Selected Urban Centers 1870-1967

Year	Jonesborough	Bristol	Johnson City	Elizabethton	Kingsport
1870	900	N/A	600	321	200
1880	895	1,647	685	362	N/A
1890	937	3,324	4,161	734	N/A
1900	854	5,271	4,645	1,270	N/A
1910	806	7,148	8,502	2,478	300
1920	815	8,047	12,442	2,749	5,692
1930	981	12,005	25,080	8,093	11,914
1940	976	14,004	25,332	8,516	14,404
1950	1,126	16,771	27,864	10,754	19,571
1960	1,148	17,582	31,187	10,896	26,314
1967	N/A	20,809	34,712	N/A	33,767

Source: David Icenogle, "Rural Nonfarm Population and Settlement in Upper East Tennessee," (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1970), 36.

Piedmont and Western North Carolina followed much the same vein as Eastern Tennessee in terms of the rural population finding work in the textile industry. Many North Carolina towns used the same appeals as Elizabethton and Kingsport, cheap labor, lax labor laws, and lack of unions, to draw in textile companies from New England and other areas. In the late 1890s-early 1900s, North Carolina had been in economic upheaval. The boll weevil crisis of 1922 had nearly destroyed the state's cotton industry and attempts to establish a profitable fruit industry in the state had failed. North Carolina's mill-hopeful communities were helped by the state legislature which worked tirelessly to promote industry. For instance North Carolina's legislature put a great deal of the state's funds into the construction of a better highway system throughout the Piedmont. By the end of the 1920s the state had completed several major highways across the state, becoming known simply as "the Good Roads State."<sup>41</sup> The construction of better infrastructure, better industrial relations combined with an increased demand for textiles following the First World War led to the growth of a large-scale textile

---

<sup>41</sup> Gary Freeze, *North Carolina: Land of Contrasts* (Atlanta, GA: Clairmont Press, 2009), 399-400.



industry in the state. By the dawn of the 1920s North Carolina produced over \$191 million worth of textile products.<sup>42</sup> The introduction of a powerful textile industry into the state led North Carolina's rural poor down the same road as Tennessee's. North Carolina's urban/mill population soared, nearly doubling between 1929 and 1930, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: North Carolina Population 1900-1930

Year	Rural	Urban	Percent Urban
1900	1,707,020	186,790	9.9
1910	1,887,813	318,474	14.4
1920	2,068,753	490,370	19.2
1930	2,360,429	809,847	25.5

Source: Freeze, *North Carolina: Land of Contrasts*, 400.

A mill village was a paradise compared to the bare-knuckle existence of the lumber camp, insofar as a mill village house would most likely have electricity and some sort of sanitation. While the lumber camp house was of a bare essentials nature, the typical mill village house was built to last. Mill worker houses, commonly referred to as “shotgun houses” due to the speed with which they were constructed, were often built of clapboard construction, with raised foundations, and would most likely boast electricity and plumbing, a far cry from the board-batten houses of the lumber camp.<sup>43</sup> Some lucky mill workers, as at the Saxon Mill near Spartanburg South Carolina, were housed in brick houses with electric stoves in their kitchens.<sup>44</sup> One Georgia mill was celebrated for the design of its village, which was designed by German landscape architects. Regardless of their aesthetic elements, the general layout of a mill house

---

<sup>42</sup> Brent Glass & Kelly Gress, *Textiles in North Carolina*, North Carolina Encyclopedia. <http://ncpedia.org/textiles-part-2-rise-north-carolina> (Accessed December 30, 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Rita Wehunt-Black, *Gaston County: A Brief History* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2008), 92-94.

<sup>44</sup> G.C Waldrep III, *Southern Workers and the Search for Community* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 15.

was the same. Most homes contained three or four rooms, electricity and where feasible, running water. Companies charged a rent ranging from twenty-five cents to fifty cents per month.<sup>45</sup>

Besides the better housing, mill workers were encouraged to cultivate gardens in which they grew collards, corn, and squash to augment their diet of store bought pork and beans (the staple of any decent North Carolina diet).<sup>46</sup> A flood of rural workers flocked to the mill towns between 1880 and the turn of the century, creating a new class in the South.

The mill town or village into which rural workers moved was a world unto itself. The agrarian background of many mill workers' families instilled a culture of close-knit community, and the mill village only fostered that sense of community. The goal of the mill village, in terms of the companies, was simple. By providing the necessities in close proximity to the mill itself the workforce was close by and thereby "retain a maximum workforce [as] close to the plant as possible."<sup>47</sup> Within the mill town there was often a company built church (more often than not there were several), a company run store, various fraternal buildings (i.e. Oddfellows, Woodmen and Elks), and recreational facilities. Although the company store was a necessity in many coal towns and lumber camps, in mill villages the luxury of a store often depended on the area. Many mills closer to urban centers such as Gastonia and Elizabethton would often relegate the supplying of their workers' necessities to the local merchants. Often the textile company was more than willing "to be relieved of the responsibility connected with mill stores."<sup>48</sup> This was due to the fact that in order to compete with local businesses the mill store was often forced to obtain the best quality and most expensive products for their employees, thus making them a

---

<sup>45</sup> John Garret van Osdell, "Cotton Mills, Labor, and the Southern Mind," (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1966), 43.

<sup>46</sup>Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 45.

<sup>47</sup> Waldrep, *Southern Workers and the Search for Community*, 16.

<sup>48</sup> August Kohn, *The Cotton Mills of South Carolina* (Columbia SC: SC Department of Agriculture, Commerce and Immigration, 1907), 66.

burden on most textile companies. Many mill companies also established schools in their mill villages, following the paternalistic patterns of the day. Mill schools aided the textile companies in their paternalistic aims. The schools often championed the idea of the mill being a godsend to their community, and rarely questioned the mill's practices. In smaller mill communities, if the company did not build a school it would often subsidize the teachers, thus maintain a control over the education of its future employees.<sup>49</sup>

Most mill towns also boasted of at least one baseball team and the sport helped to establish competition and camaraderie with other mill towns and workers.<sup>50</sup> "Textile ball," as the mill baseball circuit became known, "[became] a way of life. It gave a sense of legitimacy in a society content to see linheads remain invisible [far away] and on the other side of the tracks."<sup>51</sup> According to one South Carolina mill worker, "baseball was the biggest thing, next to churches."<sup>52</sup> Textile companies actually worked hard to foster baseball and fraternalism within the mill villages as a sort of opiate for the masses. As long as the pastime and enjoyment spawned no conflict between company and worker, the company would be supportive, even going as far as the build facilities and purchase equipment. At several points in the history of the textile industry sports were even used to help end strikes. During the strike of 1934 at the Honea Path Chiquola mill in South Carolina, many workers became opposed to the strike, not due to the death of nine strikers, , but rather because the strike forced their baseball team to forfeit the championship to their main rival, Gluck Mill.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> David Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880-1920* (Baton Rouge LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 94-96.

<sup>50</sup> Waldrep, *Southern Workers and the Search for Community*, 23-24.

<sup>51</sup> Waldrep, *Southern Workers and the Search for Community*, 24.

<sup>52</sup> Elbert J. Pye in Waldrep, *Southern Workers and the Search for Community*. 25.

<sup>53</sup> Waldrep, *Southern Workers and the Search for Community*, 24-25.

Mills also formed bands, sponsored dances or other social events to keep the workers happy. In many of the mills surrounding Gastonia, North Carolina there were multiple brass, jazz, and traditional orchestras to provide entertainment at various mill town gatherings. Some mill villages also boasted dance and pool halls. The dance halls were viewed as a common meeting place, whilst the pool halls were reserved for the single men and the local bootlegger.<sup>54</sup> During the Christmas season many of the Gastonia area mill operators would distribute Christmas gifts, food and bonuses to workers' families. Some mills also provided their mill villages with a doctor, midwife, and in some cases went as far as to build hospitals for their workers. In some of the more prosperous mills "it was theoretically possible that a man's mother might attend a pre-natal clinic established by the mill, [and that] he be delivered by a mill paid doctor."<sup>55</sup> Despite the array of opiates aimed at keeping the workers placated, some refused to take part in company festivities and instead relied on themselves and their neighbors for recreation.<sup>56</sup> The Loray Mill in Gastonia North Carolina supplied no type of company sponsored recreation in the 1920s and became the site of one of the most contentious textile strikes in the 1920s.<sup>57</sup>

One of the most important buildings and organizations within the mill village community was the church. The wide array of Christian denominations found in the South was often mirrored in the mill villages and the adjacent towns, but there was often a clear distinction between the mill workers churches and the churches of the townspeople. Within many mill

---

<sup>54</sup> John Shelton Reed, "*Millways Remembered: A Conversation with Kenneth and Margaret Morland*," *Southern Cultures*, 1, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 171-172.

<sup>55</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 60.

<sup>56</sup> Wehunt-Black, *Gaston County*, 91-92.

<sup>57</sup> Mareda Sigmon Cobb and Carrie Sigmon Yelton, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, June 16 and 18, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0115, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC.

<http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

communities, primarily in North Carolina; there was a clear hierarchy of denominations. In most North Carolina Piedmont communities, the Presbyterian Church was the most prominent, but often made no attempt to integrate itself into the mill workers community. There were occasions when the town churches established missions within the mill community, but rarely did they attempt to involve themselves directly with the millhands. Within the mill villages it was the Baptist and Holiness churches that claimed the most workers. Many mill workers were also frequent attendees at tent revivals and camp meetings of the Holiness and Methodist churches. In the mill communities surrounding Gastonia North Carolina in the late 1920s the highly evangelistic meetings led by Earl Armstrong were particularly popular.<sup>58</sup> Revivals and camp meetings provided perhaps the most important part of the mill workers' spiritual life. The revival offered the chance for broader socialization with workers from other mills and towns, and they became even more popular during the labor unrest of the 1920s-1930s when the "managerial domination of the mill churches became too obvious for the workers to ignore."<sup>59</sup> The strict mores and expressive worship services attracted many workers as a form of escape from the monotony of mill existence.<sup>60</sup>

The distrust and animosity between the "mill people" and the "townspeople" deepened community ethic amongst textile workers. It was common for the people of the town, for example in Elizabethton or Gastonia, to look down upon those who worked in the mills due to a perceived forsaking of independence on the part of the mill hand. The mercantile and bourgeois people of the towns looked upon the mill workers as little more than ruffians and serfs due to a

---

<sup>58</sup> Mareda Sigmon Cobb and Carrie Sigmon Yelton, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, June 16 and 18, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0115, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC, <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 45-47.

<sup>60</sup> Reed, "'Millways' Remembered," 170-171.

traditional southern distrust of any sort of wage labor. The townspeople scoffed at “the lintheads who lived in imagined squalor and indecency in the ugly frame shacks on the mill hill...[They] despised the millworker as a hired hand, working in a gang like a Negro taking orders from a boss.”<sup>61</sup> In many towns adjacent to mill villages it was expected that mill workers, upon visiting a private home or establishment in town were to use the back door and eat their meals in the kitchen.<sup>62</sup> The distrust flowed both ways, as many in the mill villages looked upon the townspeople as stuck-up and snobbish. As John Garret van Osdell argued, “the response of the mill worker was to withdraw further into isolation among his own people; widening the gulf that separated him from the rest of society...he insisted upon his independence within the mill community and would not tolerate being referred to as the hired hand of the mill.”<sup>63</sup> Thus mill workers and townspeople often socialized in different circles, attended different churches, and partook of different recreational activities. However, many merchants within the towns were not opposed to the establishment of mills and mill villages as that meant a higher income in both business revenue and taxes for their localities.<sup>64</sup>

The agrarian roots of many mill workers accustomed them to hard work, and the entire family was expected to contribute. Mill working hours ranged from fifty-five hours to as long as seventy-five hours. These hours could suddenly change when a mill operator decided to declare a “stretch-out.” In a “stretch-out,” a mill operator demanded increased production during a brief time with no overtime pay or compensation for the workers. During “stretch-outs,” workers were expected to put in more hours of labor and at times were not allowed to leave their stations for

---

<sup>61</sup> John Garret van Osdell, “Cotton Mills, Labor, and the Southern Mind,” (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1966) 39.

<sup>62</sup> Reed, “Millways’ Remembered,” 173.

<sup>63</sup> Osdell, “Cotton Mills,” 40

<sup>64</sup> Mitchell, *The Industrial Revolution in the South*, 144-145.

breaks or meals.<sup>65</sup> Many southern mills also suffered from became known as “absenteeism.” “The appearance of a circus, traveling evangelist or even the opening of hunting or fishing season might mean an undeclared holiday on which wise managers would not even open the mills because they knew that most of the workers would not respond to the mill whistle.”<sup>66</sup> Most mills were forced by necessity to have on the rosters more workers than they had positions in order to maintain operations. Wages varied from mill to mill and often depended on the type of job the worker held. During the First World War, wages in southern mills increased drastically, but once the war concluded they began to fall just as rapidly. Although the wages varied they were “at all time considerably lower than those paid in New England, a point which aroused a great deal of inter-regional controversy and produced reams of polemical literature in both sections.”<sup>67</sup> In some mills, such as the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina, workers were not paid by the hour, but rather by the piece. Workers paid by the piece were paid according to how much material or product they produced during the day, much in the same fashion as coal miners were paid by the ton of coal mined. Some workers, such as Mareda Cobb of Gastonia actually preferred the piece system to the hourly wage. Cobb stated “I enjoyed my job. I loved to work, and I always liked to be right at the top of the payroll on piecework....I had a bossman come to me and [tell] me at one time that [I] was going to have to cut down as I drew more than [him] that week.”<sup>68</sup> For many southern mill workers the piecework system made sense, the more you worked the more you were paid.

---

<sup>65</sup> Mareda Sigmon Cobb and Carrie Sigmon Yelton, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, June 16 and 18, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0115, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC, <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 51-53.

<sup>67</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 49-50.

<sup>68</sup> Mareda Sigmon Cobb and Carrie Sigmon Yelton, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, June 16 and 18, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0115, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical collection.

As with wages the treatment of workers varied from mill to mill. In the majority of North Carolina Piedmont mills the primary commonality was that the mill worker “was not to be ordered, but asked, not closely supervised, but allowed a degree of freedom in his work, and finally was not to be scorned as an inferior, but carefully treated as an equal.”<sup>69</sup> This treatment was in part due to the background of the vast majority of mill workers. Most mill workers came from the former yeoman classes of the South. Although their status had diminished in the post-Civil War years they still sought to maintain of supremacy over the predominantly African-American sharecroppers. According to John Garret van Osdell, “a white man was simply not to be treated as a Negro... [Lest the management] insult the racially based dignity of his workers...and by this heresy [fill] the entire community with horror and fury.”<sup>70</sup> In this fashion a new system of paternalism developed in which the mill owners sought to uplift the yeoman into a higher standing than the sharecropping class. One South Carolina mill owner, William Gregg, remarked “we may really regard ourselves (the mill owners) as the pioneers developing the real character of the poor in South Carolina. Graniteville (Gregg’s mill) is truly the home of the poor widow and helpless children, or for a family brought to ruin...here they meet with protection, are educated and brought to habits of industry under the care of intelligent men.”<sup>71</sup>

Besides the treatment of employees on the basis of race, there were also numerous cases of favoritism exercised by mill managers. In the case of one Loray Mill worker, Carrie Yelton, she lost her position due to favoritism. Yelton’s first job was “creeling.” She “put socks on the hand clipper and then turned thirds on a broom handle” (Yelton’s way of saying warping the

---

Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC,  
<http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 54.

<sup>70</sup> John Garret van Osdell, "Cotton Mills, Labor, and the Southern Mind," (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1966), 53-54.

<sup>71</sup>William Gregg in Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 56.



fabric) for which she was paid forty cents an hour. Eventually one of the managers' wives took a liking to the position and Yelton was moved to a spooling position, which she did not enjoy.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, although the workers exercised independence and obtained acceptable treatment, the management and owners exercised absolute control over their lives, controlling their pay, churches and communities. The mill was the most important facet in the textile worker's life, "touching and molding almost every aspect of his existence...[it was possible] that a man's mother attend a pre-natal clinic established by the mill, that he be born in a mill owned hospital and delivered by a mill paid doctor, that he be educated in a mill supported school, married in a mill subsidized church to a girl he had met in the mill, live all his life in a house belonging to the mill, and when he died be buried in a coffin, supplied at a cost, by the mill in a mill owned cemetery. It is utterly impossible to discuss the life of a mill hand without, at every moment, mentioning the mill."<sup>73</sup>

With increased mechanization and technological advances the textile mill became ever the more risky to work in. It was not uncommon for workers to lose tips of fingers or limbs in the machines.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps one of the most terrifying enemies of the mill workers health was "Brown Lung," or Byssinosis. "Brown Lung" (similar to the "Black Lung" among coal miners contracted by the inhaling of coal dust) was contracted through the constant inhaling the cotton-fiber dust of the textile mills, effectively clogging the lungs and airways with cloth. The working shops of a textile mill were perpetually clouded in a "fog of dust." One mill worker, Grover Hardin,

---

<sup>72</sup> Mareda Sigmon Cobb and Carrie Sigmon Yelton, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, June 16 and 18, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0115, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC, <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>73</sup> John Garret van Osdell, "Cotton Mills, Labor, and the Southern Mind," (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1966 60.

<sup>74</sup> Mareda Sigmon Cobb and Carrie Sigmon Yelton, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, June 16 and 18, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0115, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC, <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

recalled how upon entering a mill “you’d have a tough time coughing. You’d cough, sneeze and cough, and fill your mouth with tobacco and anything else to try to keep [the] dust from strangling you.”<sup>75</sup> Most mill doctors, into the 1950s and 1960s, would diagnose workers with “a touch of asthma” when in reality the workers were in effect being smothered to death by cotton-fibers.

From the onset of the textile industry relied heavily upon women and women played vital role in many facets of mill work and life. The earliest textile mills in the South almost exclusively recruited single women, widows, and orphans to work their operations. By the mid twentieth century women were working equal jobs to the men, but always in separate areas. It was very rare to see women and men working on the same floor, save as supervisors (who were almost always male). In many mill families almost all of the women worked in some fashion in the textile mills, as clerks, inspectors, and weavers. In many mills the women ended up doing the same jobs as the men, just separately. One Ethel Hilliard of Burlington North Carolina `worked in the spinning room starting in 1927. Her main task was “winding quills off a thread to go into the looms.”<sup>76</sup> Just like the men, the women were subject to the same risks and at times expected to do the same work. However they were at times subjected to favoritism at the hands of the male foremen. Carrie Yelton recalled that male foremen, if they liked a woman, would disregard shoddy work, which at times affected the entire shift crew.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps due to expectations placed upon them, mill women would play a vital role in the labor unrest that shook the textile industry in 1929.

---

<sup>75</sup> Grover Hardin in Allen Tullos, *Habits of Industry* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 276.

<sup>76</sup>Ethel Hilliard in Tullos, *Habits of Industry*, 235.

<sup>77</sup> Mareda Sigmon Cobb and Carrie Sigmon Yelton, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, June 16 and 18, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0115, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC, <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

## CHAPTER 3

### ELIZABETHTON

The textile strike of 1929 shook the southern textile industry to its core. Although eight years earlier the violence in the West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky coal strikes had made national headlines, there was still a general notion that labor unrest was a northern and western phenomenon. In 1929 a series of strikes broke out across the upper South, from Tennessee and Virginia into the Piedmont of North and South Carolina. The first strike in this chain reaction took place in Elizabethton Tennessee in March, 1929. The walk-out and resulting strike at the Bemberg and Glanzstoff plants in Elizabethton set off a wave, and the initial impetus to that wave would be instigated and propagated by women. The strike at the American Bemberg and Glanzstoff plants was almost entirely instigated and publicized by women. Only the actual union organizing and “dirty work” (violence and intimidation) were carried out male union officials.

The American Bemberg Corporation was officially incorporated in Delaware in July, 1925, establishing its corporate offices in New York City. The Bemberg Corporation was an affiliate of the German company Vereinigte Glanzstoff Farbriken of Barmen. Affiliated with the American Bemberg Corporation was the River View Realty Company which controlled the mill housing, real estate, and properties near the plants. The American Bemberg Corporation ran plants in Rome Georgia and Hopewell Virginia as well as Elizabethton. The company was attracted to the East Tennessee region due to easy access to water, a cheap labor supply and a ten year exemption from county, city, and state taxes. In July, 1925, the Carter County Chancery Court voted to exempt American Bemberg from county taxes.<sup>78</sup> In October, 1926 the Bemberg

---

<sup>78</sup> Tom Lee, *The Tennessee-Virginia Tri-Cities: Urbanization in Appalachia 1900-1950* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 132.

Company began operations at the Bemberg Rayon Plant in Elizabethton Tennessee. By 1928, the company employed well over three thousand people.<sup>79</sup>

The primary product of the American Bemberg Corporation's plants in Elizabethton was cuprammonium rayon. Cuprammonium rayon was invented in the 1890s, and was also known as artificial silk. Rayon was manufactured by extracting the cellulose from wood pulp or cotton using a solution of copper oxide and ammonia, forcing the mixture through a spinneret in a process called stretch spinning.<sup>80</sup> The specific process used at the American Bemberg plants involved the taking of cotton linter or wood pulp and dissolving it in an ammonium copper solution. The solution was then forced through glass jets into a coagulating bath which caused the fibers to form into threads of rayon.<sup>81</sup> The strands of fiber thus produced were then shipped to various textile plants throughout the South and Europe. Bemberg rayon yarn was used in the production of underwear, gloves, outerwear, and saw extensive use in the Milanese knitting industry.<sup>82</sup>

When the American Bemberg Rayon Plant opened in 1926 there was a rush for jobs. The construction of the plant sparked a massive citywide improvement program in Elizabethton. Local developers rushed to construct housing and roads to accommodate the expected flood of workers and merchants. Edwin C. Alexander, the county manager at the time, was hailed by locals as the man who had brought industry to Elizabethton. So much was he appreciated that the

---

<sup>79</sup> *Prospectus of the American Bemberg Corporation*, filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission, Washington, DC, April 22-May 6 1940, Buford J. Goldstein Collection, Accession #428, Folder 5, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Davidson, "Cuprammonium Rayon Fibers," Florida State University, 2015.  
<https://micro.magnet.fsu.edu/primer/techniques/polarized/gallery/pages/cuprammoniumrayonsmall.html>  
(Accessed January 3, 2016)

<sup>81</sup> *Rayon Making Process Described by Editor of Textile World. 1929*, Edwin C. Alexander Collection, Accession #466, Box I, Folder 6, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University. Johnson City, TN.

<sup>82</sup> *Prospectus of the American Bemberg Corporation*, filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission, Washington, DC, April 22-May 6 1940, Buford J. Goldstein Collection, Accession #428, Folder 5, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN. 3.

Elizabethton Chamber of Commerce presented him with a gold watch in return for his efforts. The excitement was so great in Elizabethton that the *Elizabeth Star* bragged “, but few people know what rayon is, and we don’t either, but whatever brings \$17,000,000 and then some into our midst has our profound respect and the man who could bring it has our love and admiration.”<sup>83</sup>

However the expected city growth did not materialize as expected. Many of the workers in the rayon plants commuted in from the outlying communities rather than live in the mill housing, spawning a thriving taxi and bus industry. Men and women flocked in from the surrounding communities to obtain work. Many of the workers in the plant were women. Out of the 3,213 employees at the mill in 1928, 30 percent were women and the nearby Glanzstoff mill had a total percentage of 40 percent women in its workforce.<sup>84</sup> The vast majority of the women employed by the Bamberg Corporation in Elizabethton were between sixteen and twenty one, and there is evidence that the company ignored existing child labor laws and hired some as young as fourteen and twelve. Most of the women worked in the processing end of the plant, working as inspectors, weavers, and spinners. Unlike the women, the majority of men who worked in the Elizabethton mills were married and older. Most of them worked in the chemical division of the plant, turning the cellulose fibers into rayon.<sup>85</sup> Both men and women who worked in the rayon plants in Elizabethton followed in long tradition of mountain family members who helped augment the family’s farm income by working in industry. Following the example of

---

<sup>83</sup> “Crawford Lands Plant! Glanzstoff Units Sure!” Clipping from *Elizabethton Star*, 1929, Edwin C. Alexander Collection, Accession 466, Box I, Folder 6, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN.

<sup>84</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *Journal of American History*, 73, no. 2 (September, 1986): 360.

<sup>85</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 361.

their forefathers, who worked in timber and coal, many rural residents of Eastern Tennessee sought more income through the mills.

For many workers the Bemberg and Glanzstoff plants offered a chance of adventure and extra income. Flossie Cole, who grew up in the Stony Creek community of Carter County Tennessee, went to work in the Bemberg Plant to help support her family and to spend more time with her friends, who also worked in the plant in Elizabethton. Upon being hired on at Bemberg Cole was paid eight dollars and sixteen cents for fifty-six hours work per week.<sup>86</sup> Other workers were paid more than Cole. Christine Galliher was paid \$10.08 per week<sup>87</sup>, while a male worker, Robert Cole was paid nearly thirty dollars per week.<sup>88</sup>

These wage discrepancies began to weigh on the minds of many workers. Both Christine Galliher and Robert Cole began to feel that they deserved more pay than they received, and the pay scales of the Bemberg Corporation were considered very low even for the area and time. Many mill workers began to complain that they were “deliberately deceived” with promises of better wages and bonuses. Besides the disgruntlement over finances, many male workers were becoming increasingly uneasy with the labor conditions in the plant. Most of the male workers labored in the chemical department of the plant. The noxious chemicals used to break down the cellulose and pulp into rayon pooled in acid baths, in which the male workers had to wade to collect the threads. They were constantly in danger of fumes and spray. The women too, began to

---

<sup>86</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 362.

<sup>87</sup> Christine and Dave Galliher, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, August 8, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0314. Southern Oral History Collection (#4007). Southern Oral History Program Collection. Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Cole, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, May 10, 1981, interview H-0311, transcript, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

grow discontented with being paid by the piece and increasing production quotas thrust upon them by the company.<sup>89</sup>

Regulations enforced by the company created a great deal of discontent amongst the women workers at the Bemberg and Glanzstoff mills. The regulations and codes the women were required to follow were not just meant to regulate their labors, but also to affect the appearance and demeanor of the mill workers. Women working for the rayon plants were under orders not to wear any sort of makeup and to dress modestly, and in some departments they were forced to wear uniforms. The company also forced women workers to acquire passes to move from one part of the plant to the other, unlike their male counterparts. Especially disconcerting to the women were issues and regulations surrounding visits to the women's washrooms. Flossie Cole recalled how female workers were required to be accompanied by a forelady on visits to the washroom. One female employee, Christine Galliher, chose to resist the washroom stipulation. "I went to the washroom when I wanted to. I went by my own rules, if you needed to go to the washroom, [you already] work so hard, you didn't fudge on them (the company) any."<sup>90</sup> "[They] were afraid we'd stay a minute too long," and if company managers did believe the women idled too long in the washroom their pay was cut and they even ran the risk of losing their position.<sup>91</sup>

Perhaps a portion of Christine Galliher's "gumption" could be attributed to her attendance of the Southern Summer School. The school was a program held at various locations throughout the South which implored women workers to stand up for themselves within the workplace and assisted with unionization efforts. Galliher recalled how the Southern Summer

---

<sup>89</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 362-363.

<sup>90</sup> Christine and Dave Galliher, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, August 8, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0314. Southern Oral History Collection (#4007). Southern Oral History Program Collection. Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC.

<http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 364.

School taught “[you] to stand up for yourself and what you felt was right...you’re all equal, regardless of whether it’s an employer or an employee, and if you want something ask for it...[don’t] be timid, especially with somebody that would be the boss or so-and-so above you.” Galliher used her training from the Southern Summer School to stand up to one of the plant foremen. “I had one foreman [who] had pretty high pretensions...if you’d go to the washroom he’d stand there big bully like you know [and] he’d look at you like he could run through you. Well I just looked right back at him, and if I wanted to go to the washroom I went to the washroom.” When asked if the Southern Summer School helped the female workers during the strike in 1929 Galliher replied “it (the school) matured you enough to stand pat for your rights or what you thought was right.”<sup>92</sup>

One of the leading tensions between the women workers and the company management was wages. Many mill workers, particularly women, felt that they were underpaid. Most of the female employees of the Glanzstoff plant were paid \$8.60 to \$12.70 per week, all the while having to afford groceries, necessities, and pay rent of at least \$30 per month. Mrs. Roy Marshall, who would assist in the leadership of the strike, was quoted as saying “[when] the mills opened we thought we could make good money so we moved into town. My husband makes \$14 a week and it’s mighty hard for a family with ten children.”<sup>93</sup>

Tensions over wages and treatment finally boiled over on March 12, 1929. On that day women workers in the Glanzstoff inspection department “decided not to put up with the present

---

<sup>92</sup> Christine and Dave Galliher, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, August 8, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0314. Southern Oral History Collection (#4007). Southern Oral History Program Collection. Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>93</sup>Mrs. Roy Marshall in Robert Talley, “Industry Moves Into Dixie: Clannish Mountaineers, Sons and Daughters Quit Rugged Farms to Take Jobs in Big Plants,” *The Anniston Star* (Anniston) May 2, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.



conditions any longer.”<sup>94</sup> As tensions mounted, the women in the inspection department collectively demanded a pay raise from their managers. Upon being refused the women “[jointly] decided that if they didn’t give us a raise we wasn’t going to work” and they spread the work throughout the plant that they planned to walk out. At 12:30 pm they did just that.<sup>95</sup> A total of 550 women walked out on March 12, and the next day they returned and led the rest of Glanzstoff’s workers out. By March 16 the entire Glanzstoff plant was effectively shut down. Within the next few days the workers of the nearby Bemberg plant, owned by the same company, also walked out, in solidarity with their brother and sister workers from Glanzstoff.<sup>96</sup>

The initial demands of the strikers were very plain. The workers of the Glanzstoff plant wanted a wage increase to match the higher pay of other mills in the area, and the Bemberg workers demanded no increase for themselves and simply maintained solidarity with the Glanzstoff workers. The strikers were encouraged by many of their rural friends and neighbors. One Baptist preacher from the Stony Creek community intoned to them “the hand of oppression is growing on our people...you women work for practically nothing. You must come together and say that such things must cease to be.”<sup>97</sup> During the first days of the strike the Bemberg and Glanzstoff managers simply refused to meet with any of the strikers or their representatives. Angered by this, a group of women strikers approached John Penix, who according to accounts, was approached while “out in the field grubbing stumps,” to organize the striking workers into a union.<sup>98</sup> Penix was a former American Federation of Labor organizer and quickly contacted union officials operating in the region to assist in unionization efforts in Elizabethton. Within several days Alfred Hoffman of the United Textile Workers and Matilda Lindsay of the

---

<sup>94</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 365.

<sup>95</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 365.

<sup>96</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 113.

<sup>97</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 365.

<sup>98</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 114.

Women's Trade Union League arrived and found little opposition to unionization amongst the workers.<sup>99</sup> One mill worker, Robert Cole, was late in joining the strike and the union. The day after the strike began Cole attempted to return to work. "I was a little late getting in. You see, they had a picket line, and I had a little trouble getting through. Finally I got through, went on in, and he (the boss) told me he wouldn't stand for that (his tardiness). I told him that he would stand for more than that. I got a little warm and I quieted him down and that was the end of it." Two days later Cole joined the United Textile Workers. His reasoning was that "they wasn't paying us enough. They was working us for nothing. Now you think about working fifty-six hours for eleven dollars. That's what they were paying them (the women) down there in the reeling department."<sup>100</sup>

In a matter of days, 4,653 out of the 5,500 workers in the Bemberg and Glanzstoff plants had joined the union.<sup>101</sup> The strike immediately garnered a great deal of attention. Just a few days after the strike began it was reported in the Pittsburgh Press which heralded it as "[*the*] *Most Serious Situation of Textile Tieup Exists at Elizabethton.*"<sup>102</sup> The enthusiasm for the union was so great that no building was large enough for the meetings and those who wished to join, but were unable to afford dues were able to have their dues paid by collections taking up at meetings. The company was able in this time to obtain an injunction from the Elizabethton Chamber of Commerce forbidding the strikers from picketing or assembling near the mills.<sup>103</sup> This helped to create the first violent outburst of the 1929 strike. After word spread about the injunctions

---

<sup>99</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 115.

<sup>100</sup> Robert Cole, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, May 10, 1981, interview H-0311, transcript, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>101</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 115.

<sup>102</sup> "Most Serious Situation of Textile Tieup Exists at Elizabethton: Troopers Use Gas," The Pittsburgh Press (Pittsburgh) May 16, 1929. Accessed March 7, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

<sup>103</sup> Duane McCracken, *Strike Injunctions in the New South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1931), 234.

strikers attempted to block the roads into the plants and in doing so trapped several company officials, namely several lawyers and the company treasurer in their offices. The strikers allegedly proceeded to turn over cars and threatening the company officials. The company lawyer sent to obtain the injunction, George F. Dugger Sr. needed the signatures of several of the trapped officials in order to finalize the injunction from the Chamber of Commerce. Thus he was forced to drive through the assembled throng of strikers outside the plant. According to his account several rocks were thrown at his car with one crashing through the front window, cutting his face. He was able to secure the signatures, escape the plant, and return with twenty Carter County sheriffs' deputies. With the aid of the deputies and by driving his car towards the strikers at fifty miles per hour, Dugger succeeded in dispersing the strikers at that crucial moment.<sup>104</sup> Dugger would also play a crucial role in the eventual settlement of the first stage of the strike.

The Chamber of Commerce and the local business class feared that the strike and union would destroy their aspirations of Elizabethton becoming a gleaming example of industry in the region. Fearing violence similar to that experienced in West Virginia earlier in the decade, state militia units were moved into the town. The strike quickly resulted in a division amongst the town leadership. A portion of the Chamber of Commerce split off and formed the Elizabethton Board of Trade, representing the pro-union element within the town. By March 22, 1929, a conciliator, Charles Wood, from the Federal Department of Labor arrived. That night representatives from the union, company management and local businesses met in Johnson City to attempt to reach a settlement. The manager of the mills, Arthur Mothwurf, agreed to raise

---

<sup>104</sup> George F. Dugger Sr, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, August 9, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0312. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Oral History Program Collection. Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

wages, discuss grievances with workers' committees, and to allow all strikers to return to their former jobs.<sup>105</sup>

The settlement infuriated the Elizabethton Chamber of Commerce, still resolutely anti-strike and anti-union. To them the settlement and presence of United Textile Workers organizers was a detriment to all future hope of Elizabethton attracting industrial investment. In hopes of reversing their misfortunes, the Chamber allegedly arranged the kidnapping of two organizers, Alfred Hoffman and Edward McGrady, who were transported to the North Carolina line and instructed not to return under threat of death. Implicated in the allegations was Edwin C. Alexander, the very county manager who had struggled to bring the Bemberg and Glanzstoff plants to Elizabethton.<sup>106</sup> The two organizers did return and continued their operations, albeit under armed guard from a contingent of pro-union men.<sup>107</sup> Thus to many it appeared that the Elizabethton strike of 1929 would end on a comparatively peaceful note.

The kidnapping of Hoffman and McGrady angered the strikers, but did not exasperate the situation. The peace was short-lived however. The promised pay raises never materialized, and within weeks of the first stage's conclusion nearly one hundred union members were fired due to their actions during the initial phase of the strike. When members of the workers' committees attempted to complain, those employees were also fired. On April 15, 1929, not even a month after the first phase of the strike had ended, ninety mill workers were fired and the "brittle patience of the mill hands snapped."<sup>108</sup> Later that day over four thousand workers walked off the job for the second time. Flossie Cole recalled walking out of the Glanzstoff plant, "when they

---

<sup>105</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 115-117.

<sup>106</sup> "Alexander Named as Kidnap Leader," clipping from *Elizabethton Star*, 1929, Edwin C. Alexander Collection, Accession 466, Box 1, Folder 6, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN.

<sup>107</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 116-118.

<sup>108</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 119.

blew that whistle everybody knew to quit work. We all just quit our work and rushed out. Some of ‘em (the strikers) went to Bemberg and climbed the fence and got them (the Bemberg workers) out of there.”<sup>109</sup>

The second stage of the Elizabethton textile strike proceeded very differently as compared to the strike of March. National Guard units and state militia units returned to Elizabethton. The rayon plants were turned into virtual fortresses by the company. Machine guns were stationed on the roofs, and guards patrolled the grounds and manned earthworks to keep the strikers at bay. Armed columns protected by National Guardsmen were sent into the deeper valleys by the company to recruit new scab workers. Union pickets and National Guard often clashed on the roads. There were several cases of houses being bombed, the town water main was dynamited to cut water supplies to the plants and violent clashes were common. One union supporter, Max Elliott of Stony Creek, had his house destroyed by dynamite while he was away at a meeting.<sup>110</sup> In total 1,250 strikers were arrested due to confrontations with the National Guard.<sup>111</sup> During one arrest, three women were arrested for blocking the roads leading into the plants in an effort to stop non-union laborers from entering.<sup>112</sup> Robert Cole, one of the strikers, recalled how many strikers and scabs began carrying pistols. Cole was accused by company guards of shooting out the tires of guard and non-union vehicles. He was charged with eighteen separate charges relating to his use of a firearm. During his hearing his accusers varied in their accounts. “One swore I’d done the shooting down there. One swore I had an automatic gun, another swore I had an old Russian-looking gun. This lady got up on the witness stand and swore

---

<sup>109</sup> Flossie Cole in Jacquelyn Hall, "Disorderly Women," 366.

<sup>110</sup> "Stony Creek House Razed by Dynamite," clipping from *Elizabethton Star*, 1929, in Edwin C. Alexander Collection, Accession 466, Box 1, Folder 6, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN.

<sup>111</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 366-367.

<sup>112</sup> Edward Lewis, "Nine Strikers Bound Over Intimidation, Conspiracy Charged," *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, May 18, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016, at <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

I had a bright pistol. And she swore the truth. I had a .38 special. It was nickel plated. She told the truth about it , but the other two fellows lied...[in the end] just for carrying the gun is all they ever did fine me for, and they offered me a new hearing on that and the man said no, we'll just pay it off. It didn't cost me anything."<sup>113</sup> More common than firearms was the use of lead piping and clubs. "They worked one another a little bit with pipes, lead pipes. Little bit of fighting and the guards were having it pretty tough."<sup>114</sup>

The violence of the second stage of the strike and the legal complications it thus fomented did not bode well for the strikers or their union. The first stage of the strike had shattered the young union's finances. For the first weeks of the strike the union was able to provide funding for food, shelter, and legal qualms, but by the second stage of the strike those funds were dried up. The national governing body of the United Textile Workers had bylaws in place barring the payment of strike benefits to any local union less than six months old.<sup>115</sup> Thus the strikers were forced to fund their efforts in other ways.

In both stages of the Elizabethton strike women played a very prominent and very public role. The women served as the public face of the strike in the media and to the local community. The women were purposefully kept separate from the "rough stuff" of the strike.<sup>116</sup> "They had big dark secrets, I think, the men did...at the union office I'd hear some of them whispering around a little bit once in a while, saying we went so-and-so last night. I didn't really know much

---

<sup>113</sup> Robert Cole, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, May 10, 1981, interview H-0311, transcript, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Cole, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, May 10, 1981, interview H-0311, transcript, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>115</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 120.

<sup>116</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 366.

about it; only just I caught on [to it].”<sup>117</sup> The women primarily focused their efforts on bringing public awareness to their cause through the use of public demonstrations. At the beginning of the strike women rode through the main streets of Elizabethton in an array of vehicles shouting and generally causing a ruckus to draw attention to the strike. At one point, they blocked the road through the Gap Creek community to halt attempts to recruit scabs and harass union members. Upon being ordered by the National Guard to disperse and walk twelve miles into town to the jail the women proceed to lie down in the road to halt the soldiers. One woman retorted “No, by God, we didn’t walk out here and we’re not walking back!”<sup>118</sup> The National Guard finally resorted to using tear gas to disperse the women. The use of force against the women drew attention from throughout the United States. The *North Adams Transcript* in Massachusetts made the event front-page news informing its readers of the use “of tear bombs and bayonets [to] move women from [the] road.”<sup>119</sup> In the Valley Forge community the striking women frequently harassed the National Guard positions and patrols. One of their more popular and amusing tactics was to parade by the National Guard entrenchments draped in or carrying the American flag, causing the National Guardsmen to present arms each and every time they passed by. When several women were arrested on charges of violating the injunctions against demonstrating after the Gap Creek standoff, they used the hearings to bring further publicity to their cause. One female defendant, Trixie Perry, assumed the stand clothed in a dress made from red, white, and blue fabric, and donning a cap made from a small American flag. During cross-examination she was asked by the prosecuting attorney why she had chosen to dress in such as fashion. Her

---

<sup>117</sup> Christine and Dave Galliher, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, August 8, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0314. Southern Oral History Collection (#4007). Southern Oral History Program Collection. Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC.

<http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>118</sup>Hall, "Disorderly Women," 366.

<sup>119</sup> "Tennessee Adjutant General in Custody." *The North Adams Transcript* (North Adams) May 17, 1929. Accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

response was a deliberate appeal to the notion that the workers were not being treated as American citizens, "I guess so, I was born under it, guess I have a right to."<sup>120</sup> Perry had already garnered a reputation amongst her fellow strikers and the National Guardsmen as a bit of a rough and tumble character. She was at one point accused of directly threatening a National Guard lieutenant. Rather than attempt to disprove the allegations, Perry and her defense attorney made a mockery of the case. On the allegation of threatening a lieutenant she responded "he rammed a gun in my face and I told him to take it out or I would knock it out," and to the charges of blocking the road, "a little thing like me block a big road?"<sup>121</sup> When asked about the use of tear gas Perry was alleged to have said "that little old fire cracker of a thing, it won't go off."<sup>122</sup>

Another notable female defendant in the Gap Creek hearings was known simply as "Texas Bill." One guardsman stated that she frequently referred to him as "a God damned yellow son-of-a-bitch."<sup>123</sup> The prosecuting attorney frequently referred to her as the "Wild Man from Borneo."<sup>124</sup> This reputation was partially due to her habit of dressing in the style of a Western cowboy during the strike and hearing. It was these actions which earned her the nickname "Texas Bill" amongst her fellow strikers. During her particular hearing she and several fellow striking women were accused of taunting the National Guardsmen at Gap Creek, and deliberately enticing the Guardsmen to violence. "Texas Bill" was accused of getting hold of a guardsman's rifle and threatening him with it. Although she frequently played the part of the "Wild Man from Borneo," when it became her turn to testify she appeared in the courtroom in a "fashionable black picture hat and a black coat."<sup>125</sup> During her testimony "Texas Bill" put on what was an

---

<sup>120</sup>Trixie Perry in Hall, "Disorderly Women," 373.

<sup>121</sup>Trixie Perry in Hall, "Disorderly Women," 373.

<sup>122</sup>Hall, "Disorderly Women," 373.

<sup>123</sup>Hall, "Disorderly Women," 372-373.

<sup>124</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 372-373.

<sup>125</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 372-373.



obviously assumed persona of “ladylike dignity,” mocking the business class and elite of Elizabethton. When asked “what she was doing on the road so early in the morning “Texas Bill” replied “I take a walk every morning before breakfast for my health.”<sup>126</sup> During the trial the defense team tried to draw attention to the embarrassment of the National Guard. To the jury and observers delight, the attorneys “enjoyed making the guards admit they had been assaulted by sixteen and eighteen year old girls.”<sup>127</sup> Both Trixie Perry and “Texas Bill” were found not guilty. In their whole group, all of the women were released, while only three of the men were jailed for especially violent actions.<sup>128</sup>

Another primary way in which the women strikers in Elizabethton made their presence known, and brought vital assistance to the strike effort was in the realm of finances. The first stage of the strike prior to the second walk out had wrecked the United Textile Workers’ and consumed the strike fund. The refusal of the national leadership of the United Textile Workers to support the fledgling local union in Elizabethton further exasperated the situation. In response, the women of the strike elected to undertake fundraising themselves. Committees of women traveled throughout the region, into Kentucky, Virginia and North Carolina to pass the cup and raise funds for food, relief, and legal defense. They not only sought relief by demonstrating on the streets, but appealed to other unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor for assistance. In the case of Robert Cole, who was hauled before the courts on charges of shooting out the tires of non-union workers’ and company vehicles, the women helped to raise money for his and other strikers’ defense, and the men would often accompany them to assist. “We had a tag day there (in Asheville North Carolina). Bunch of girls out on the street passing the cup. I

---

<sup>126</sup>“Texas Bill” in Hall, "Disorderly Women," 373.

<sup>127</sup> Jacquelyn Hall, Hall, "Disorderly Women," 373.

<sup>128</sup> Hall, "Disorderly Women," 372-373.

had met with all their locals up there...carpenters, pipe fitters, so on and so forth. Brick Masons [We] were up there two weeks...we took up thirteen hundred dollars in one day.”<sup>129</sup>

The primary fashion in which the women promoted the efforts of the strike was through public demonstrations. These public demonstrations were typically held on the roads leading into the Bemberg and Glanzstoff plants, often mere yards from the gates. The women chanted, sang, and cast taunts at the guards and scab laborers entering the plants. Despite instances of violence as at Gap Creek, the striking women often maintained a jovial attitude towards the National Guardsmen who often returned the attention. Many of the women dressed in the typical “flapper” style of the period. Wearing short skirts, colorful blouses and hats “at jaunty angles,” they portrayed themselves as women workers of the time.<sup>130</sup> Many more women adopted a style which embraced their femininity, but emphasized their association with the Appalachian working class rather than the business or town classes. Many women on the picket line donned coveralls, the stereotypical garment of the male worker, and wore underneath cardigan sweaters and Chanel suits. The combination of “menswear and makeup” sent a clear message to the company and the business class of Elizabethton. The women of the Bemberg and Glanzstoff plants were to be treated with the same respect and wages as their male comrades. As Deidre Clemete stated, “hair barrettes, necklaces, and blouses were worn with overalls and [embodied] the fundamental struggle for a cultural identity.”<sup>131</sup>

---

<sup>129</sup> Robert Cole, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, May 10, 1981, interview H-0311, transcript, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>130</sup> “1929 Strike at American Bemberg Plant,” Film, Accession #123, Archives of Appalachia. East Tennessee State University. Johnson City, TN.

<sup>131</sup> Deirdre Clemete, “Striking Ensembles: The Importance of Clothing on the Picket Line,” *Labor Studies Journal*, 30, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 9-10.

The importance of women in the Elizabethton strike can be easily appreciated by examining the newspaper articles published throughout the United States at the time. Many of those papers sympathetic to the strikers' cause were quick to broadcast the role of women in the strike both as agitators/provocateurs, and as mothers simply fighting to obtain what was needed for their families. The *Anniston Star* of Anniston Alabama heralded the efforts of Mrs. Roy Marshall, a mother of ten, who struggled to make ends meet with the company salary and who eventually came to be one of the leaders of the strike. Marshall and other female strikers were lauded by the *Anniston Star* as tough mountain mothers struggling to feed their families in the face of capitalist oppression.<sup>132</sup> An earlier *Anniston Star* article also lauded the "East Tennessee mountain girls" for their efforts to fight for a better wage in order to better accommodate themselves to "modern" life. [These] East Tennessee Mountain girls, who have given up their homespun and turned flappers, only wanted better wages in order to improve themselves.<sup>133</sup>

The *Pittsburgh Press* and the *North Adams Transcript* emphasized the use of tear gas and bayonets against female strikers as unbecoming of the National Guard and company supporters. Thus, among themselves and among reporters, the women of Elizabethton envisioned themselves both as mothers struggling to improve the lives of their families, and as new women, striving to improve their own lot and maintain their independence. Those newspapers which opposed the efforts of the union ignored the involvement of women, instead choosing to focus on fear mongering. The *Monroe News Star* of Monroe Louisiana chose to focus its articles regarding the

---

<sup>132</sup> Robert Talley, "Industry Moves Into Dixie: Clannish Mountaineers, Sons and Daughters Quit Rugged Farms to Take Jobs in Big Plants." *The Anniston Star*, May 2, 1929. Accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

<sup>133</sup> Robert Talley, "Elizabethton is a Cradle of Revolt." *The Anniston Star*, May 2, 1929. Accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

strike on the “Red Menace” labeling the strikers and their leadership as Communists and encouraging strikers to return to their jobs regardless of any union agreements.<sup>134</sup>

The second stage of the Elizabethton strike came to a close in the summer of 1929. The Federal government sent in as conciliator Anna Weinstock to assist in settling the matter in Elizabethton, which had become headline news throughout the nation. The terms agreed upon between the strikers and the company was virtually the same as the agreement made after the first stage of the strike. The company was to rehire all workers regardless of union involvement; address grievances put forward by the workers’ committees, and agree to a pay raise. The primary difference between the second settlement and the first settlement was that the company would employ a manager, whose employment was agreed upon by the mill hands and the union, who would handle all future labor disputes within the company. It appeared that the union and the strikers had won. However, the company launched an immediate campaign to undermine all that had been done in 1929. The company manager hired in the summer of 1929, E.T. Wilson, established company recreation activities, organized company sports teams, and a company controlled union. In effect, paternalism was used to its full extent to defeat organized labor in Elizabethton. The company opiates had the desired effects on the workers. By the end of 1930 the United Textile Workers had been forced out of the area.<sup>135</sup>

Many of the former strikers, dejected and resentful, abandoned their membership in the United Textile Workers and left their jobs. Flossie Cole left her job at the Glanzstoff mill and went into domestic service, “back to the drudge house.”<sup>136</sup> The expiration of the plants’ tax exemptions in the late 1960s, the increasing concern over environmental impact, and a faltering

---

<sup>134</sup> Associated Press, “Strikers at Mill Return to Old Jobs.” *The Monroe News Star*, May 28, 1929. Accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

<sup>135</sup> Osdell, “Cotton Mills,” 123.

<sup>136</sup>Flossie Cole in Hall, “Disorderly Women,” 362.

demand for rayon led to the American Bemberg Corporation filing for bankruptcy in February of 1974. The Bemberg and Glanzstoff plants in Elizabethton closed their doors for good in the 1980s.<sup>137</sup> The Elizabethton strike would serve as the catalyst for the coming strike in Gastonia, which would result in more bloodshed and violence than the people of Elizabethton witnessed in the entire duration of their conflict.

The women at Elizabethton embodied the struggle to personify the new independent woman of the 1920s, whilst still trying to hold onto the Victorian ideal of motherhood. By dressing in the style of flappers, and taking a direct role in strike activities by forming picket lines, protesting, and utilizing the courts, the women of Elizabethton used the image of the independent woman to assert their independence. At the same time, they appealed to the newspapers with the image of the mother struggling to take care of her family. The story of women such as Mrs. Roy Marshall and others broadcast a story to the mainstream American population of mothers simply struggling to gain a higher wage to better support their families. These two ideals combined to establish the Elizabethton, and latter the Gastonia strikes, as complex mixtures of old Victorian ideals and newer ideals of the 1920s.

---

<sup>137</sup> *Prospectus of the American Bemberg Corporation*, filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission, Washington, DC, April 22-May 6 1940, Buford J. Goldstein Collection, Accession 428, Folder 5, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN. 3.

## CHAPTER 4

### GASTONIA

The events in Elizabethton in the spring and summer of 1929 set off a chain reaction throughout the southern textile industry. One of the most important of those subsequent strikes took place at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina. In contrast to the comparatively peaceful strikes in Elizabethton, where no serious injuries were sustained, Gastonia became the site of frequent armed skirmishes, and at least two people fell victim to violence. On April 2, 1929, the workers walked out of the Loray Mill, which owned by the Manville Jenckes Company. Their demands were very similar to their predecessors in Elizabethton, Tennessee. They demanded a standard wage scale, a minimum wage increase, equal pay for women and men, abolition of piecework, better housing and working conditions, and the recognition of their union. Approximately 1,100 workers walked out of the mill, but within a month the strike concluded to no avail. Central to the role of women in the Loray Mill strike was Ella Mae Wiggins. Her work and assassination, and the public reactions to it, cemented her as the key figure in the Loray Mill strike of 1929. Ella Mae Wiggins exemplified the new woman ideals of the 1920s, representing an independent woman striking for her own independence and betterment, and after her death, she came to represent in the media the fallen mother, who died trying to gain a better life for her children. She and other women, such as Ada Howell, would be characterized in the newspapers as mothers, struggling to better the lives of those that depended on them.

The Loray Mill was built in 1900 by John F. Love and George A. Gray. The mill was the largest in Gaston County and its immense structures dominated the county seat of Gastonia.

Because northern, rather than regional, investors funded the Loray Mill, many of the region's residents saw the mill as an interloper. This reputation deepened when in 1919, the mill was sold to the Manville Jenckes Company of Pawtucket Rhode Island and became the first mill in the area to "be owned and operated [solely] by outside capital."<sup>138</sup> Loray Mill processed cotton produced on nearby farms into fabric for automobile tires. The Loray Mill mirrored many mills throughout the North and South Carolina Piedmont in that it boasted a bustling mill village to house its workers, and also maintained various sorts of paternalistic avenues of recreation. The Loray mill village boasted a baseball team, a summer camp for employees, a company doctor, and a company bank. The Rhode Island based Manville Jenckes Company made many efforts to improve the mill village surrounding the Loray Mill. By 1927 the mill village had been improved enough to accommodate over 5,000 people, 3,500 of whom being employed by the mill.<sup>139</sup>

Despite these improvements, there were often grumblings of discontent within the Loray Mill and its mill village. The northern owners of the mill implemented policies requiring the locking of the mill doors during working hours thus forcing the employees to obtain permission before leaving. The company also employed its own police force, which patrolled the mill village, monitored the workers and ensured that workers both showed up for and remained for their shifts. Many workers in the Loray Mill simply referred to it as "the jail." The northern owners of the mill began to grow increasingly unpopular with their employees in 1927, when the company implemented policies meant to cut costs and increase production. The company hired a new mill superintendent, G.A. Johnstone. Johnstone implemented procedures in the mill which drastically cut the operating costs for his northern masters. He introduced the piecework pay scale amongst female employees, whereby they were paid not by the hour, but by the amount of

---

<sup>138</sup> John Salmond, *Gastonia 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 11-12.

<sup>139</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 13.

product they produced. He cut wages by twenty percent, increased working hours, and cut the workforce from 3,500 to 2,200 employees. The combined wage cuts and implementation of piecework amongst female employees cut the wages of the Loray Mill's workers a total of 25 percent to as high as 50 percent. For the company, Johnstone's measures cut operating costs by over five hundred thousand dollars, delighting the northern owners of the company.<sup>140</sup>

Conditions for the Loray Mill workers only worsened in 1928 when Johnstone implemented the first of a series of "stretch-outs.", a "stretch out" was when the managers of a mill decreed a quota or number of hours of work for their employees for which their employees received no extra pay. The term "stretch out" itself was born in the Gastonia mills, including Loray. At the Loray Mill, the female weavers were expected to run ten to twelve looms per employee and the male weavers were expected to do the same if not more. The employees were also told during the "stretch out" that their typical ten-minute breaks would be cut. Henry Totherow, a weaver at the Loray Mill was quoted "there just ain't no bearin it. It used to be you could get five, maybe ten-minutes rest now and then so's you could bear the mill. , but now you got to keep a'runnin all the time. Never a minute to git your breath all the day long. I used to run six drawing frames and now I got to look after ten. You jist kain't do it. A man's dead beat at night."<sup>141</sup> Another worker lamented the pay cuts during the "stretch out." "We were making thirty to thirty-five dollars a week, and we were running six to eight looms. Now we are running ten to twelve looms and are getting fifteen to eighteen dollars a week. We can't live on it."<sup>142</sup>

Finally, on March 5, 1928, workers made the first attempt to resist the company. That day all of the women weavers of the Loray Mill walked out in protest of the wage cuts and the "stretch out." "All we are asking is simple justice. A weaver cannot run ten or twelve looms at

---

<sup>140</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 13-14.

<sup>141</sup> Henry Totherow in Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 14-15.

<sup>142</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 14.



any price. It is more than a man can stand much less a woman.”<sup>143</sup> The spontaneous strike of 1928 spilled over into the streets of Gastonia. Later in the year, the workers paraded down the main avenue in town. They carried a coffin bearing the effigy of the Loray Mill superintendent. Every few yards the effigy would arise proclaiming “how many men are carrying this thing?” to which the “pall-bearers” would respond “eight.” The effigy then retorted “lay off two: six can do the work.”<sup>144</sup> The company, realizing that a major strike was eminent removed the superintendent, Johnstone, from his position. Upon learning of his removal the Loray workers displayed their jubilation. Local resident Benjamin Ratchford observed:

Several trucks loaded with workers from Loray paraded through the streets of Gastonia [tonight]. [They] were shouting laughing, singing, blowing horns, beating tin pans, shooting fire crackers, and in general staging a genuine spontaneous celebration... They [arrived at the home] of Mr. Johnstone and continued their celebration with increased volume, in the driveway, on the lawn, and around the house. Mr. Johnstone was finally forced to summon the sheriff and deputies to disperse the crowd and stop the demonstration. The crowd then returned through the city, continuing the celebration.<sup>145</sup>

Despite the removal of Johnstone, the fragile peace in Gastonia proved to be fleeting. Few attempts had been made to unionize the mills employees. In the early 1900s, there was a contingent of the Knights of Labor present at the Loray Mill, but other than that brief episode, no other major attempt had been made. The conflicts of 1928 in the Loray Mill coincided with the implementation of the first National Textile Workers’ Union southern membership drive. The National Textile Workers’ Union (NTWU) had clear ties to the Communist Party and was born out of the collapse of second wave Communism in the United States.<sup>146</sup> For nearly a decade the Communist Party and its affiliated unions had practiced a strategy of “boring from within.” In this strategy the Communists infiltrated unions such as the United Textile Workers, and

---

<sup>143</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 14.

<sup>144</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 15.

<sup>145</sup> Benjamin Ratchford in Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 16-17.

<sup>146</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 18.

attempted to spread Communist ideology from within. This strategy did not gain much success. The increasing conservatism of the American Federation of Labor and its affiliates, including the United Textile Workers, combined with Stalin's success in Russia led to the proclamation of third wave Communism. In this third wave, many American Communists proposed to establish alternative labor unions to those associated with the American Federation of Labor.<sup>147</sup>

On January 1 1929, the NTWU dispatched Fred Beal to North Carolina to organize the mills there in preparation for the coming worldwide revolution. At first Beal encountered a great deal of trouble organizing the locally owned mills, and was directed by a supporter to Gastonia. Union officials told him that if he had success at the Loray Mill “[he] could organize the South.”<sup>148</sup> Beal infiltrated the Loray community by obtaining a job at the Loray Mill. However, company managers soon fired Beal and several others for their unionization efforts. Beal called for a meeting to be held March 30, 1929, to advertise the union. He was supported by numerous women from the mill and their families. Despite the removal of Johnstone, conditions had not yet improved and many workers remained resentful towards the company. Some workers had remained in an undeclared strike since 1928. Many strikers and workers still on the job arrived at the meeting along with several company supervisors who began to write down the names of those workers present. The company men were harassed by many of the women present with calls of “What about the stretch-out?” and “How about God and the bathtubs?”<sup>149</sup> The latter taunt was a reference to a company sponsored preacher who had spoken against any strikes by citing biblical passages hostile to bathing. Lack of bathing facilities was one of the strikers' complaints against the company.

---

<sup>147</sup> Paul Brissenden, *The IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism* (New York: Russell & Russell Inc. 1957), 299-303.

<sup>148</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 19.

<sup>149</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 20-21.

The strike of 1929 began somewhat hastily. On the morning of April 1, 1929, five mill hands were fired for attending the meeting of the NTWU. As the day progressed, more and more fired workers began to arrive at the National Textile Workers' Union headquarters in Gastonia. At three o'clock in the afternoon Fred Beal mounted a rise along the railroad tracks leading into the Loray Mill and spoke to the mill workers. At the end of his speech, he called for a strike vote. The decision on the part of the workers was unanimous, and the strike of 1929 began.<sup>150</sup>

The next day, an NTWU delegation approached the mill manager with the strikers' demands. Their demands were very similar to those made by the United Textile Workers in Elizabethton just a few months before. They demanded a standard wage scale for female and male workers, a minimum wage of twenty dollars per week, a forty-hour week, the abolition of the "stretch out," better and sanitary housing, and a reduction of fifty percent on their rent and lighting bills, and recognition of the NTWU by the company.<sup>151</sup> The company managers decided to not even receive the strike delegation from the union and decreed that the Loray Mill owners and management "would pay no attention to the strike."<sup>152</sup>

However, the company was paying attention to the strike. From the initial attempts at organization by the NTWU the company had introduced spies into its ranks and within days of the strike beginning the company had taken out ads in the local newspapers attacking the strike's leadership. One ad in the *Gastonia Daily Gazette* fumed that "[Beal] was against all religion of any kind... [the life] of every citizen in Gaston County is threatened... if Beal and his Bolshevik associates succeed in having their way. Shall men and women of the type of Beal and associates, with their Bolshevik ideals, with their calls for violence and bloodshed, be permitted to remain in

---

<sup>150</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 21-23.

<sup>151</sup> "Industrial Disputes: Strikes and Lockouts in the United States in April 1929," *Monthly Labor Review* (June 1929): 1354.

<sup>152</sup> JR Baugh in Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 24.

Gaston County?”<sup>153</sup> The NTWU responded by accusing the company of crying wolf and stated that “the workers in the strike only know that they are fighting for a better life.”<sup>154</sup>

The strike very quickly became violent, one of the most common forms of violence being flogging. Throughout the strike, strikers and leaders would cross into South Carolina for supplies and support. During one such journey, Lee Tessenaar, an NTWU organizer was taken kidnapped by unknown assailants and taken to Buffalo Creek near Blacksburg, South Carolina. Tessenaar was flogged and told never to take part in any more union activities.<sup>155</sup>

Far worse violence was yet to come. Within two weeks of the strike’s beginning the managers of the Loray Mill evicted the strikers from their company-owned homes and called on the National Guard to keep the peace.<sup>156</sup> Unlike the Elizabethton strikes, the Gastonia strikers could count on neither the support of a unified union, nor the support of the local community. From the very beginning of the strike, Fred Beal’s efforts were hindered by bickering among the leadership of the NTWU. Some officials favored direct action and sabotage, while others favored peaceful demonstration. Dissention even arose within the strike’s leadership over how the strike should be used internationally.<sup>157</sup>

It was soon common knowledge in Gastonia that the NTWU had Communist ties. The rhetoric in the speeches of the strike leaders made the link obvious. At one point in the strike the General Secretary of the NTWU arrived and in his speeches he asserted that “Loray was, but the first shot in a battle that would be heard throughout the region... [and] make [the strike] a flame

---

<sup>153</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 26.

<sup>154</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 26-27.

<sup>155</sup> “NC Labor Troubles [Rally?] Across South Carolina Line for Brief Period. Kidnapped Man Whipped on Banks of Buffalo,” *Gaffney Ledger*, September 19, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

<sup>156</sup> Mike Millner, *From the Archives: North Carolina Workers Strike in Gastonia*. University of North Carolina. <https://lcrm.lib.unc.edu/blog/index.php/tag/national-textile-workers-union/> (Accessed December 31, 2015)

<sup>157</sup>Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 148-150.

that will spread from Charlotte to Atlanta and beyond.”<sup>158</sup> Over time, the overtly Communist rhetoric began to isolate many within the strike. Many workers began to return to their jobs, infuriated that the union directing the strike was vehemently anti-religion and anti-capitalist. The vast majority of strikers wanted reform not revolution. One local minister expressed the sentiment of the moderate workers and locals, “my sympathy is with the people; their cause is just, but their methods are all wrong.”<sup>159</sup> As much as the locals and moderates were angered by the presence of Communists, the Communist leaders of the strike were equally angered by the strikers themselves. By mid-April, many strikers had had enough and returned to work and/or left the NTWU. The nearly two thousand mill workers who had walked out in the beginning of April dropped to fewer than two hundred diehards.<sup>160</sup> The situation was further exacerbated when the Federal conciliator sent in to mediate the strike, Charles Wood, stated that “in Gastonia the committee representing the Loray employees is incited and dominated by persons who are avowed enemies of the form of government subscribed to by the workers themselves. It is not a strike as strikes are defined; it is a form of revolution created by those committed to revolutions by mass action.”<sup>161</sup>

When the diehard strikers refused to give in, many anti-strike Gastonians decided to disperse them by force. On April 18, 1929, an armed mob attacked the relief supplies stockpiled in a building used by the NTWU. The mob succeeded in destroying or absconding with most of the supplies the remaining strikers needed.<sup>162</sup> On the night of June 7, 1929, a force led by the Gastonia Chief of Police, Orville Aderholt raided one of the striker tent colonies on the outskirts of Gastonia. The anti-strike force was met by armed guards loyal to the NTWU and an

---

<sup>158</sup>General Secretary Weisbord in Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 35.

<sup>159</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 149.

<sup>160</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 153.

<sup>161</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 151.

<sup>162</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 155.

altercation ensued. In the confusion, shots were fired and Aderholt was killed.<sup>163</sup> A total of sixteen strikers, including Fred Beal, were arrested for the death of Aderholt and the following trial quickly became a media sensation. Held in nearby Charlotte the trial drew press from virtually all the newspapers in the region, and also drew in newspapermen from the North and the labor press. Collections were taken up throughout the labor community to fund the defense. Demonstrations were held as far away as New York protesting the alleged kangaroo court in North Carolina.<sup>164</sup>

The trial of the Gastonia strikers was as much a trial of Communism as it was a trial for murder. The lead prosecuting attorney, Clyde Hoey, spent the vast majority of his cross-examinations inquiring into the religious and political beliefs of the defendants. In questioning one female defendant, Amy Schechter, Hoey asked point-blank if she believed in God. When she replied in the negative Hoey boomed “you [must not] regard the oath you have just taken on the Bible to [hold] any meaning!”<sup>165</sup> Although the local press, clergy, and anti-Communist locals hailed Hoey’s tactics as brilliant, many northern journalists and labor activists labeled the trial as a “heresy trial,” likening it to the Scopes Monkey Trial.<sup>166</sup> Despite the best efforts of the prosecutors however, they were unable to prove that strikers had intentionally shot Aderholt. The altercation had taken place at night and a scuffle had ensued, and no witnesses were sure of what had happened. Fearing that their case might be lost the prosecution turned to “a flamboyant trick borrowed from the trial of Mary Dugan (a film at the time).”<sup>167</sup> At one point during the trial the prosecution brought a life-sized effigy of the police chief into the courtroom dressed in the blood stained uniform and covered in a funeral shroud. The stunt did not have the desired effect. One

---

<sup>163</sup> Wehunt-Black, *Gaston County*, 88.

<sup>164</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 79.

<sup>165</sup> Hoey quoted in Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 87.

<sup>166</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 87-89.

<sup>167</sup> Osdel, "Cotton Mills," 159.

member of the jury “fell into a violent insanity” and the judge declared a mistrial.<sup>168</sup> One of the jurors was quoted in the *Charlotte Observer* saying that “the state failed to prove that any of the defendants killed the Gastonia chief. I would have voted to turn them loose.”<sup>169</sup> There were many besides the juror who had doubts as to the killing of Aderholt. Mareda Cobb, who worked in the Loray Mill and knew the police chief personally, maintained that he was not killed by the strikers. She maintained that “Addie Holt (her nickname for Aderholt) didn’t get killed by the strikers; he got killed by the cops. Greedy. Somebody wanting a job...”<sup>170</sup>

Throughout the Loray Mill strike of 1929 women played a very prominent role. Many accounts of the early days of the strike, when it numbered in the thousands of strikers, attest to the tactics used by women during the strike. The National Textile Workers’ Union officers in the area encouraged striking women to flirt with the National Guards and company guards. The young women were instructed to ask the guards if “[they] mean to shoot us down and stab us and our children?”<sup>171</sup> The NTWU urged women to “soften” the guards and attempt to sow discord within their ranks, essentially exercising the “boring from within” strategy during the strike. Many women strikers participated in acts of civil disobedience during the strike. Gastonia’s city council had passed ordinances banning public demonstrations, and it was primarily the women of the strike who violated those ordinances.

Perhaps due to the more militant rhetoric of the strike, women in Gastonia were far more likely than their Elizabethton sisters to partake in violence with the National Guard and the Committee of the One Hundred, the special police force formed by the Loray Mill to counter the

---

<sup>168</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 159.

<sup>169</sup> Osdell, "Cotton Mills," 158.

<sup>170</sup> Mareda Sigmon Cobb and Carrie Sigmon Yelton, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, June 16 and 18, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0115, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC.

<http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>171</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 32.

strike. Women frequently became embroiled in clashes with both the National Guard and the mobs of anti-strikers who harassed the union supporters. Throughout the strike women took a major part in the marches, protests, and bore the brunt of the company's violence. One of the more saddening instances was the beating of Ada Howell. Company police assaulted the fifty-year old weaver while she was on the way to the NTWU relief store. The company guards, wrote John Salmond in *Gastonia 1929*, "set about her with enthusiasm, severely bruising her head and face, and cutting her with [a] bayonet."<sup>172</sup> Howell became one of the female faces of the Gastonia strike due to the coincidental presence of journalists at her beating. Photographers captured the image of her walking down the street dazed and bloody and plastered newspapers with the image, an image which infuriated many readers. Ada Howell was not the only woman to suffer such a beating. During one altercation between the company police and strikers, nine women were dragged from the NTWU relief store. The women were arrested along with twenty men and charged with parading without a permit and public drunkenness.<sup>173</sup> *The Charlotte News and Observer* stated, "The textile interests of North Carolina must not feel called upon to make common cause with the Loray Mill in this situation, and [we] demand that the governor put a stop to displays of lawlessness on the part of the law."<sup>174</sup>

Perhaps the most notable female figure to emerge from the Loray Mill strike of 1929 was Ella Mae Wiggins. Born in Sevierville Tennessee in 1900, Wiggins grew up in an East Tennessee logging camp. She eventually married a Piedmont North Carolina textile worker who left her with eight children when he abandoned her. Wiggins moved from mill to mill struggling to support her family, losing four of her children to disease and hunger, before settling in

---

<sup>172</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 46.

<sup>173</sup> "29 Strikers Arrested in Parade Riot," *Kingsport Times*, April 23, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/>

<sup>174</sup> *Charlotte News and Observer* in Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 46-47.



Bessemer City, just a few miles from Gastonia. The mill in Bessemer City had a reputation just as bad as the Loray Mill in Gastonia and when the National Textile Workers' Union came to the area, Ella Mae Wiggins was one of many from Bessemer City who signed up.<sup>175</sup> Wiggins served in various capacities and quickly became known as one of the strike's leading orators. She traveled to Washington D.C, during the strike where she met with several senators in efforts to gain support, and she also attempted to speak at several AFL meetings and a meeting of the Women's Trade Union League, all to no avail.<sup>176</sup>

Ella Mae Wiggins also made her place in the NTWU and the strike known through her singing. At many rallies and marches throughout Gaston County she could be heard singing numerous union and textile ballads. Her most famous and popular ballad was "Mill Mother's Lament," which told of the struggles of a female textile worker striving to make a living and raise a family, and described much of the aspirations of the union and strikers.<sup>177</sup> Even when the number of strikers dwindled, Ella Mae Wiggins continued to serve in her function as spokeswoman and minstrel of the strike. "[Her songs] sustained the beleaguered band when most everything else seemed lost."<sup>178</sup>

In September, 1929, Ella Mae Wiggins place in labor history would be sealed. The NTWU had planned a rally in Gastonia for three o'clock in the afternoon on September 14. Anti-strike forces had received notice of the planned meeting and sought to stop it. Approximately two thousand, mainly armed, men proceeded to block the roads into town. Most of these men were members of the Committee of the One Hundred and the American Legion. Several NTWU members and supporters were "arrested" by the mob and taken to jail in Gastonia. At the same

---

<sup>175</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 50-51.

<sup>176</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 61-63.

<sup>177</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 62.

<sup>178</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 63.

time a group of Bessemer City strikers, including Ella Mae Wiggins, were also making their way to Gastonia. There were twenty three in total, with most riding in the open beds of pickup trucks. Upon reaching the anti-union roadblocks the convoy of Bessemer City NTWU members turned around and headed back toward their camps. After turning around a group of anti-union vehicles followed the Wiggins party. One of the anti-union vehicles cut the Bessemer City truck off causing a collision. Many of those in the bed were thrown into the highway. According to accounts Ella Mae Wiggins remained standing the back of one union vehicle. A group of anti-union men exited their vehicles and began unloading their shotguns and pistols into the NTWU members. F.H Ellis, a local dry cleaner, described the scene “I saw the truck in which Mrs. Wiggins was riding come up the road. An automobile ran in front of it and stopped. The truck hit the car and then the shooting began. There was also some shooting from another car nearby. I saw Yates Gamble shoot a man running across a cotton field after folks in the truck jumped off and scattered. Troy Jones had a pump gun (pump action shotgun) and was cursing.”<sup>179</sup> Ella Mae Wiggins, who had remained in the truck during the shooting, was shot in the spine. According to witnesses she fell exclaiming “Oh Lordy, I’m shot.” She was carried to a nearby house where she died approximately fifteen minutes later.<sup>180</sup>

The death of Ella Mae Wiggins had its most important impact in the newspaper articles published throughout the United States that used her death to garner support for the NTWU’s efforts or at least garner support for a peaceful conclusion to the conflict. Newspapers throughout the country expressed astonishment at the violent death of a woman. *The Robesonian* of Lumberton, North Carolina referred to the assassination of Ella Mae Wiggins as a “disgrace to

---

<sup>179</sup> “Witness Names Strike Slayers.” *The Maryville Daily Forum*, November, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

<sup>180</sup> United Press, “Arrest of Seven Men in Woman’s Death,” *Altoona Mirror*, September 16, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

Gaston County.”<sup>181</sup> Many newspapers focused on Ella Mae Wiggins’ status as a woman and mother to sway public opinion in favor of a peaceful conclusion to the strike. *The Anniston Star* of Anniston Alabama stressed that Ella Mae Wiggins was “a textile striker, and a mother of five fatherless children,” who died simply trying to obtain a better life for them.<sup>182</sup> *The Bee* of Danville Virginia heralded the coming trial of Ella Mae Wiggins’ murderers as a trial of the killers of “a young mother of five children who took part in strike activities there (Gastonia).”<sup>183</sup> *The Call Leader* of Elwood Indiana described the assassination, “when the smoke cleared, Mrs. Wiggins, mother of four children (it was actually five) was found lying dead in the road.”<sup>184</sup> The image of Ella Mae Wiggins’ funeral, with her orphaned children standing next to her coffin, was published in numerous newspapers across the country. *The Belvidere Daily Republican* of Belvidere Illinois captioned the photograph with “[the five] children of Ella Mae Wiggins bid farewell to their loved one and must face the world as orphans. Innocent victims of a finger too quick on the trigger and the intolerance of political hatred. Mrs. Wiggins had been in charge of the union strikers at Gastonia, North Carolina and was killed when an anti-Communist shot into a truck in which she and other workers were riding to a meeting. Yet the person guilty of the crime is unpunished and five little ones must suffer.”<sup>185</sup>

The assassination of Ella Mae Wiggins not only caused a national outcry for an end to the violence, but also elevated her in the public eye and popular memory from supporter of the strike, to leader of the Gastonia strikers. Widespread newspaper coverage of Ella Mae Wiggins’

---

<sup>181</sup> “Seven Alleged Mob Members Bound Over to Superior Court,” *The Robesonian* (Lumberton, NC), September 19, 1929, accessed March 16, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

<sup>182</sup> “Wiggins Probe Opened Under Special Order,” *The Anniston Star*, November 9, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

<sup>183</sup> “Trial of 8 Officers for Murder Begun,” *The Bee* (Danville, VA) December 10, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>

<sup>184</sup> “Fire of Mob Kills Woman Striker,” *The Call Leader* (Elwood, IN) September 16, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

<sup>185</sup> “Intolerance Claims Another Victim,” *The Belvidere Daily Republican*, September 26, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

death also led to a collection drive for her orphans. After her death, Ella Mae Wiggins' children were housed at the Barium Orphanage. Supplies and collections began to be taken up for their benefit. *The Statesville Record and Landmark* of Statesville, North Carolina noted one case. In October, 1929, one Joseph Waxlaw of Lawrence, Massachusetts sent a package to the orphanage for Ella Mae Wiggins' children. The package consisted of a straight razor, shaving mug, boots of various sizes, vanity cases, and talcum powder.<sup>186</sup> The article from the Statesville newspaper was fittingly entitled, "*Strange Gifts.*"

The backlash over the assassination of Ella Mae Wiggins forced the local government to take action. North Carolinians demanded justice. *The News and Observer* newspaper stated "the state of North Carolina stands shamed and disgraced by this inhuman crime."<sup>187</sup> The assassination aroused deep sympathy even with those opposed to the strike and the NTWU. Franklin Porter Graham, the president of the University of North Carolina, and later gubernatorial candidate stated:

and to think that those who killed her rejoiced in their Americanism....Americanism was not riding in cars carrying men and guns...barring the common highway to citizens of the state. Americanism was somewhere deep in the heart of [that] mother who went riding in a truck toward what to her was the promise of a better day for her children. If she had flirted with alien doctrines and false promises it is we who are responsible for the void of leadership into which they came.<sup>188</sup>

The Civil Liberties Union offered an award of \$1,400 for the capture of those involved.<sup>189</sup> Seven men were arrested for her murder, and all but one were Loray Mill employees. The day they

---

<sup>186</sup> "Strange Gifts," *The Statesville Record and Landmark*, October 7, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>

<sup>187</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 129.

<sup>188</sup> Franklin Porter Graham in Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 129-130.

<sup>189</sup> "Woman's Death is Probed," *The Lincoln Evening Journal*, November 4, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>

were arrested the mill manager, J.A Baugh, arrived at the jail to make bond, \$1,000 each, for them all.<sup>190</sup>

The death of Ella Mae Wiggins aroused ire of many North Carolinians, but it also reflected the exhaustion with the strike and the violence that accompanied it. At her funeral only a few NTWU leaders spoke, the rest resigning themselves to defeat. As her coffin was being lowered the assemblage sang a stanza from “Mill Mother’s Lament”:

*It grieves the heart of a mother,  
You everyone must know,  
but we cannot buy for our children,  
Our wages are too low.*<sup>191</sup>

Most of the seven accused of murdering Ella Mae Wiggins never saw trial. Conflicting eyewitness accounts and the dismissal of several NTWU witnesses sealed the case as a sham. During the court hearing one NTWU witness was harangued, as in every trial involving the union, about his belief in God. Upon answering “no” the defense attorney for the accused turned to the judge and cited an outdated North Carolina statute (which had never been repealed) which stated that non-belief was grounds enough for the dismissal of a witness’s testimony. In July the Aderholt trial of the NTWU leadership and camp guards finally concluded. The trial which had been a media sensation just months earlier was now barely mentioned in the newspapers, unless those newspapers held Communist leanings. One resident referred to the trial as “an anti-climax” since all NTWU activity in Gastonia had fallen apart after the death of Ella Mae Wiggins. The jury found the defendants guilty of conspiracy to kill Chief Aderholt. The verdict was barely mentioned in the United States, but labor groups in the US and across the Atlantic raised protest.

---

<sup>190</sup> “Fire of Mob Kills Woman Striker,” *The Call Leader* (Elwood, IN), September 16, 1929, accessed March 7, 2016. <https://www.newspapers.com/>

<sup>191</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 133.

In London, England, police had to be called in to disperse a crowd of Communists who protested the verdict outside the American embassy.<sup>192</sup> Not until sometime after the trial did evidence emerge showing that Aderholt had been shot with a blast from a shotgun carried by one of his own officers.

In the aftermath of the Loray Mill strike of 1929, unionization efforts effectively collapsed in North Carolina. For years afterward North Carolinians remained wary of any attempt at organization. “It tore [us] (the mill community) up for a good while” lamented Mareda Cobb. There was another strike in 1934, but it met relatively the same end as the 1929 strike. Mareda Cobb refused to take part in the “Wildcat Strike” of 1934, “I always knew that North Carolina would never stick. You’ve got to stick together to win anything and they (North Carolinians) won’t do it.”<sup>193</sup> Regardless of the outcome of the strike of 1929, the Loray Mill strike remains a vital part of North Carolina’s history, due in a large part to the role of Ella Mae Wiggins. She became the great minstrel and martyr for all of the Piedmont’s mill workers. Her death and the image of her being an independent new woman, actively demonstrating and organizing, , but also a mother striving to earn a better living for her children cemented her place as one of North Carolina’s great folk heroines. Even today there are efforts to erect a monument to her memory at the old Loray Mill grounds. Ella Mae Wiggins’ “Mill Mother’s Lament” became one of the anthems of the American labor movement, eventually being recorded by such noted musicians as Pete Seeger. Today the mill has been renovated into loft apartments. Jimmy

---

<sup>192</sup> Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 149-150.

<sup>193</sup> Mareda Sigmon Cobb and Carrie Sigmon Yelton, interview by Jacquelyn Hall, June 16 and 18, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0115, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical collection. Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC.  
<http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>, accessed February 23, 2016.

Gray, a member of the Gastonia committee on the old mill's fate was quoted as saying "there wouldn't be a Gastonia if it wasn't for the Loray Mill. That's the thing that really put us on the map."<sup>194</sup>

---

<sup>194</sup> Jimmy Gray in Salmond, *Gastonia 1929*, 190.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Although both the Elizabethton and Gastonia strikes of 1929 ultimately failed, they remain a vitally important part of labor history in the American South. Both strikes presented a clear challenge to the industrial status quo forced upon the South by the industrialists. They also presented a major challenge to the popular conceptions, then and now, of southern labor. Both southern aristocrats and northern industrialists assumed that the rural southerner, whether in Eastern Tennessee/Appalachia, or in the Piedmont of North Carolina would be a cheap, submissive laborer. The industrialists assumed that the southern worker could be lulled by paternalism into a state of passivity. The strikes of 1929 proved the industrialists wrong.

Within this history of labor unrest in the industrial South there stands an enigmatic and inspiring figure, the woman of the textile mill. Despite being maligned in Elizabethton as “wild men of Borneo” or even being shot down in Gastonia, the women of the southern textile industry presented a wall of steadfast resistance, resilience, and at times humor to the company. The women of Elizabethton proved that women could instigate and maintain a strike through their own fundraising efforts. They proved that women, using their own humor and dress, could hold fast in the face of company machine guns and indignation. The women of Gastonia and Loray reinforced the image set by the women of Elizabethton, perhaps even augmented it by adding in the sacrifices of such women as Ada Howell and Ella Mae Wiggins. The strike at the Loray Mill shows the tragic side of women in labor, when a songstress and mother was shot down.

The women of Elizabethton and Gastonia utilized the ideology of the 1920s new woman to fight for their independence, better wages, and conditions, and combined that ideal with the old Victorian notions of motherhood to garner support for their cause with the national media. In



both cases, the combination of ideologies led to an interesting paradox, 1920s conceptions of womanhood, independence and direct involvement used in the struggle for better conditions in conjunction with the Victorian ideal of motherhood, the image of the mother struggling for a better life for her children. These two competing ideals combined in the strikes of 1929, and were both used to gain publicity and support for the strike efforts in Elizabethton and Gastonia. The women of the two strikes both espoused and challenged the image of Victorian motherhood, while championing the ideal of the new woman of the 1920s.

The issues of unionization and labor would not be solved by the strikes of 1929, but the strikes did bring national attention to the problem. Newspapers throughout the nation spread the word of Elizabethton and Gastonia to the rest of the country. In 1934, another wave of strikes shook the industrial South. The General Strike of 1934 ended much like the strikes of 1929. However, the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the implementation of new labor laws would improve the state of labor in the United States. The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 guaranteed the right of workers to unionize and in 1935 the Roosevelt administration instituted the Wagner Labor Relations Act, a part of the New Deal which abolished the guard system within industry, basically outlawing the private police force or army used so often in the past to quell labor unrest. Moreover, the rights of workers to organize and bargain was strengthened more so than in any previous administration or legislation.<sup>195</sup> Struggles over unionization and working conditions persist into the present day, , but the strikes of 1929 helped to pave the way for better conditions, better pay, and equal treatment. The contribution of women to those strikes should not be overlooked. In both strikes, had it not been for the women, the strikes might have well be snuffed out at the very beginning and thusly had little to no impact on the cause of labor, or the history of their localities. Both the women of Elizabethton and Ella

---

<sup>195</sup> Rexford Tugwell, *FDR: Architect of an Era* (New York, NY, The Macmillan Company, 1967), 123-124.

Mae Wiggins have become legends in their respective areas. Both have become the heroines of labor because of their struggle to gain a better living for themselves and their families.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Newspapers

*Altoona Mirror, The*  
*Anniston Star, The*  
*Bee, The*  
*Belvidere Daily Republican*  
*Brownsville Herald, The*  
*Call Leader, The*  
*Decatur Herald, The*  
*Elizabethton Star, The*  
*Gaffney Ledger, The*  
*Kingsport Times, The*  
*Lincoln Evening Journal, The*  
*Maryville Daily Forum*  
*Monthly Labor Review*  
*Monroe News Star*  
*North Adams Transcript, The*  
*Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*  
*Pittsburgh Press*  
*Robesonian, The*  
*Statesville Record and Landmark*

### Interviews

Cobb, Mareda Sigmon and Carrie Sigmon Yelton. Interview by Jacquelyn Hall, June 16 and 18, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0115, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>. Accessed February 23, 2016.

Cole, Robert. Interview by Jacquelyn Hall, May 10, 1981, transcript, Interview H-0311, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>. Accessed February 23, 2016.

Dugger, George F., Sr. Interview by Jacqueline Hall, August 9, 1979, transcript, Interview H-0312, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>. Accessed February 23, 2016.

Galliher, Christine and Dave Galliher. Interview by Jacquelyn Hall, August 8, 1979, transcript. Interview H-0314. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/sohp>. Accessed February 23, 2016.

## Manuscript Collections

Buford J. Goldstein Collection. Accession #428. Folder 5. Archives of Appalachia. East Tennessee State University. Johnson City, TN. (Contains Prospectus of the American Bemberg Corporation, and various other papers related to the finances and operations of the Bemberg and Glanzstoff Plants in Elizabethton, TN).

Edwin C. Alexander Collection. Accession #466. Box I. Archives of Appalachia. East Tennessee State University. Johnson City, TN. (Contains various newspaper clippings and records of the Elizabethton Bemberg and Glanzstoff plants. Alexander served as county manager of Carter County and was instrumental in locating the plants to Elizabethton, TN).

1929 Strike at American Bemberg Plant. Film. Accession #123. Archives of Appalachia. East Tennessee State University. Johnson City, TN.

## Secondary Sources

Berkin, Carol. *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2005.

Black, Rita-Wehunt. *Gaston County: A Brief History*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2008.

Blee, Kathleen. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1991.

Boyer, Richard & Herbert Morais. *Labor's Untold Story*. Pittsburgh, PA: United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, 1955.

Brissenden, Paul. *The IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1957.

Brody, David. *In Labor's Cause: Main Themes on the History of the American Worker*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Brown, Dorothy. *Setting a Course: American Women in the 1920s*. Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Publishing, 1987.

Campbell, Patricia, "Portraits of Gastonia: 1930s Maternal Activism and the Protest Novel," Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 2006.

Carlton, David. *Mill and Town in South Carolina 1880-1920*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1982.

Chitwood, Michael. *The Weave Room*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Cox, Annette. "The Saga of Ella Mae Wiggins." *Southern Cultures*. 21, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 111-115.

- Clemete, Deirdre. "Striking Ensembles: The Importance of Clothing on the Picket Line." *Labor Studies Journal*. 30, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 1-15.
- Davidson, Michael. *Cuprammonium Rayon Fibers*. Florida State University. 2015.  
<https://micro.magnet.fsu.edu/primer/techniques/polarized/gallery/pages/cuprammoniumrayonsmall.html> (Accessed January 3, 2016)
- Eller, Ronald D. *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.
- Fink, Gary, and Merl Reed. *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994.
- Foner, Philip. *History of the Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor*. New York: International Publishers, 1982.
- Freeze, Gary. *North Carolina: Land of Contrasts*. Atlanta, GA: Clairmont Press, 2009.
- Freeze, Gary. "Patriarchy Lost: The Preconditions for Paternalism in the Odell Cotton Mills of North Carolina: 1882-1900." In *Race, Class and Community in Southern Labor History*. Edited by Gary Fink and Merl Reed. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994.
- Green, Elna C. *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Green, James. *The Devil is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Miners and Their Battle for Freedom*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015.
- Green, Hardy. *The Company Town: The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills that Shaped the American Economy*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
- Hall, Jacquelyn. "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South." *Journal of American History*. 73, no. 2 (September, 1986): 354-82.
- Icenogle, David. "Rural Nonfarm Population and Settlement in Upper East Tennessee." Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1970.
- Kohn, August. *The Cotton Mills of South Carolina*. Columbia, SC: South Carolina Department of Agriculture, Commerce and Immigration, 1907.
- Kraditor, Aileen. *The Radical Persuasion 1890-1917*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1981.
- Lee, Tom. *The Tennessee-Virginia Tri-Cities: Urbanization in Appalachia, 1900-1950*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2005.
- Lefler, Hugh, and Albert Newsome. *The History of a Southern State: North Carolina*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1954.

- Lougee, Kenneth. *Pie in the Sky: How Joe Hill's Lawyers Lost His Case, Got Him Shot, and were Disbarred*. Bloomington, IL: I-Universe Inc., 2011.
- McCracken, Duane. *Strike Injunctions in the New South*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1931.
- Millner, Mike. *From the Archives: North Carolina Workers Strike in Gastonia*. University of North Carolina. <https://lcrm.lib.unc.edu/blog/index.php/tag/national-textile-workers-union/> Accessed December 31, 2015.
- Mitchell, Broadus, and George Mitchell. *The Industrial Revolution in the South*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1930.
- Montgomery, David. *The Fall of the House of Labor*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Osdell, John Garret van. "Cotton Mills, Labor, and the Southern Mind." PhD diss., Tulane University, 1966.
- Reed, John Shelton. "'Millways' Remembered: A Conversation with Kenneth and Margaret Morland." *Southern Cultures*.1, no.2 (Winter 1995): 167-214.
- Pudup, Mary, Dwight Billings, and Altina Waller. *Appalachia in the Making*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.
- Salmond, John. *Gastonia 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.
- Savage, Lon. *Thunder in the Mountains: The West Virginia Mine War 1920-1921*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990.
- Scott, Anne Frior. *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970.
- Straw, Richard, and Tyler Blethen. *High Mountains Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Tugwell, Rexford. *FDR: Architect of an Era*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967.
- Tullos, Allen. *Habits of Industry*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.
- Waldrep, G.C., III. *Southern Workers and the Search for Community*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Watson, Bruce. *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream*. New York: Viking Publishing, 2005.
- Ware, Norman. *The Industrial Worker 1840-1860: The Reaction of American Industrial Society to the Advance of the Industrial Revolution*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee Inc., 1924.

Wheeler, Marjorie Spruill. *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Williamson, J.W., and Edwin Arnold. *Interviewing Appalachia*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1994.

Wilson, Charles Reagan. *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980.

VITA

STEVEN KELLY KNAPP

- Education: B.A . History, Catawba College, Salisbury, North Carolina 2013  
M.A. American History, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee 2016
- Professional Experience: Intern, Smith-McDowell House Museum, Asheville NC, 2008-2010  
Intern, Vance Birthplace State Historic Site, Weaverville NC, 2010-2013
- Publications & Conferences: Knapp, Steven, *Meeting on the Level, Parting on the Square: A History of Asheville's Masonic Lodges*, Western North Carolina Historical Association, July/August 2010. P.3.  
Knapp, Steven, *Loyalism in the Carolinas During the American Revolution*, Ohio Valley History Conference, Austin-Peay University. October 17-18, 2014  
Knapp, Steven, *Freemasonry During the Civil War*, Phi Alpha Theta Regional Conference. February 2015  
Knapp, Steven, *The Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge*, Appalachian Student Research Forum. April 8. 2015  
Knapp, Steven, *A Short History of Anti-Masonry*. Ohio Valley History Conference. East Kentucky University. October 1-3, 2015.
- Fellowships & Awards: Jarrell First Family Scholarship, Catawba College, Salisbury NC, 2010-2013  
First Place, Oral Presentations, Arts & Humanities. Appalachian Student Research Forum. April 8, 2015. *The Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge*.