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This dissertation intends by contextual analysis to examine a Southern textile community and through its literature—formal and informal, and written before, during, and after the 1929 Lora Mill strike—to show how the stories of this community construct a “figured world” in which identities were formed and lives were made possible through the genres and language practices of different social groups in Gaston County. It argues that each discourse—that of the mill barons, the mill workers, and the communist labor organizers—developed primarily along lines of money and social class, and shows how each discourse defines itself and is subsequently defined, silenced, and/or given voice by the others. It studies the genres of each written discourse (histories, newspapers, dramatic presentations, songs, and other studies) from a power standpoint that each genre maintains this particular social context.

LINTHEADS AND BARONS: FILLING THE SILENCES  
OF THE LORAY MILL STRIKE

by

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## CHAPTER I

### GASTON COUNTY: THE INSIDE AND THE OUTSIDE DISCOURSES

Methods of talking and ways of seeing issues often evolve in communities along social and economic lines. These discourses require and sometimes create speaking and writing genres that define the communities and map out the power structures that further define and divide the members of the community. Individuals define themselves, define others, and negotiate power through the discourses in which they participate. This dissertation intends to examine a Southern textile community and through its literature—formal and informal and written before, during, and after the 1929 Loray Mill strike—show how the stories of this community construct a world in which identities are formed and lives are made possible through the genres and language practices of the various social groups. It argues that each of three discourses—the mill barons, the mill workers, and the communist labor organizers—developed primarily along lines of money and social class and shows how each discourse defines itself and is subsequently defined, silenced, and/or given voice by the others. It studies how each discourse employs genres in relation to the power or lack of power that each genre maintains in this particular geographical and social context.

In the early years of the nineteenth century Gaston County, North Carolina, was a quiet place, carved out of two adjoining counties, and butted against the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The seeming peacefulness of the county was interrupted in 1848



when the first pieces of textile machinery rolled into the county and the beginning industrialization divided the people into two groups; owners and workers. Within sixty years the communists arrived to start labor unions and each group established its own discourse, privileging some and disprivileging others, each with its obvious motives and its hidden motives, each with its silences. The ensuing battle of ideals became one of the bitterest of the management-labor disputes in the United States textile industry and its effects are evident in Gaston County today, nearly a century later. It is within this context that the mill barons, the mill workers, and the communist union organizers established their unique discourses. This contextual analysis follows the prescriptions set forth by Harold Bazerman and Paul Prior: a contention that “regards particular rhetorical acts as parts of larger communicative chains, or conversations” (183). The discourses of each of the three social groups act and react within the larger context of the community as a whole and define themselves and the others in relation to this community. Just as these discourses are dependent on each other, they also operate independently of each other and so demand that the contextual analysis be combined with a textual analysis to understand what Bazerman and Prior refer to as the interplay between the two (362). It is within this intertextuality that the motives of each discourse can be observed and understood most fully.

### **Terms of the Argument**

Linguist James Paul Gee argues that discourse situates us in relation to others and defines our possibilities and gives us access to live within and outside the cultural

boundaries of particular contexts, subcultures. Gee expands the definitions of Michael Foucault and Carolyn Miller to see discourses as

situated identities; ways of performing and recognizing characteristic identities and activities; ways of coordinating and getting coordinated by other people, things, tools, technologies, symbol systems, places, and times; characteristics ways of acting-interacting-feeling-emoting-valuing-gesturing-posturing-dressing-thinking-believing-knowing-speaking-listening (and in some discourses reading and writing) (33).

Essentially, then, a discourse includes the way that those in that discourse use words as well as what they do and the ways in which they interact with others (in their discourse and in other discourses), those things that George Kemberelis and Lenora de la Luna, building from Gee's definition, call "subject positions." This subject positioning is what gives each discourse its "limited" agency in how it examines issues and predisposes members of the particular discourse to adhere to certain practices and beliefs (246-247). The terms "situated identity" and "subject positions" are extended in this study to connect the discourses of the mill barons, the mill workers, and the communist union organizers to "social position" within the context of Gaston County.

The silences that each discourse encompasses seem to reflect the social positioning of the particular discourse, sometimes self-imposed and sometimes imposed by the other discourses. The writing of the barons maintains a silence about the mill workers and the labor unions. The workers' complaints about conditions in the mill villages or in the mills themselves are silenced by the power of the barons—a fear of losing a job or a place to live. The communists maintain a silence about the extent of their

proposed impact on the community. Each silence operates within the motives that are embedded in the discourses.

The definition of motives is complicated by rhetorician Kenneth Burke, who posits that motives can be within the person (intrinsic) or within the environment or scene (extrinsic), and employs a system with which to examine any individual or situation to determine the cause for action (Grammar of Motives 46-47). Motives, then, according to Burke, use “the language of one’s group” or state one’s position of what to do and what not to do in a vocabulary of “praiseworthy” and “blameworthy” (Permanence and Change 20-21), and in so doing give insight into the motives and the silences. It is in this light that this study examines literature from three discourses to determine how each discourse affects and is affected by the others, how each forms an identity of itself and of the others, and how power is negotiated among the three.

### **Situating My Interests**

I began to learn about Gaston County’s distinct and distinctly different discourses in the 1980s as a newcomer to Gastonia and Gaston County, first as a journalist, then as a teacher. I knew generally about life in the southwestern part of North Carolina, but not what I was about to discover: curious silences that surrounded obvious issues of class and labor disputes. The distinct socioeconomic lines in Gaston County allowed no transgressions: the lower and less-moneyed class lived on the westside and the upper and moneyed class on the eastside. The white economic seam might be penetrated by the self-made man, never the social seam. My first teaching position was on the westside of Gastonia at a high school that many middle class parents on the westside deemed

unacceptable for their children. School officials were adamant: westside children went to school on the westside. However, students who lived on the eastside could easily transfer from one school to another and, in rare cases, to a westside school. It was clear that privilege resided east of Broad Street. Questions about the transfer policy were met with a stony silence and further questioning of superiors probably would have led to strict reprimands or even firing of a teacher. A school board member's remark that the only literacy the children of the lintheads needed were to read a textile machine gauge and a time clock was one of the few times I ever heard the silence broken. When my teaching duties were moved to a school on the other side of Broad Street, I became more aware of the differences in expectations for the children of the mill workers and the children of the privileged. The children of the privileged were expected to maintain high academic averages in high academic courses while children of the workers were expected to maintain a docile disposition to whatever school work was given them.

I now live in a neighborhood where some of the old barons lived and some of their descendants still live. And I find myself hesitant to discuss at length the premise of this dissertation among them. As in times past, any mention of the barons and their hold on the community brings out the same old arguments about the ignorance of the workers, the barons' need to protect the workers from themselves with a joke or two about the stupidity of the workers as seen in their daily lives. In a sense, I have felt the silences, the oppression. My book, *Gaston Remembers: Weaving a Tapestry in Time*, published in 1994, was supervised by the Gaston Chamber of Commerce. They wanted, they said, a book that would show the glorious future that textiles have in the county, essentially a

bridge from the formation of the mills to the continuation of textiles forever into the twenty-first century. I was given leeway to tell the stories, but there could be no negatives about the textile industry; thus, I became a perpetrator of some of the silences. Since the book was published, my own silences have haunted me, so this dissertation is meant to examine the territories of those silences, show how they came about, and why they still exist.

### **The Intentions of the Study**

This study gives voice to some of the community silences surrounding schooling inequities between the children of the mill workers and the mill owners, explores the issues of working conditions in the mills that were for many years unspeakable within this county by investigating the Loray Mill and the strike of 1929, the workers who went on strike in 1929 and those who did not, the mill owners, the church members, and the entire community of Gastonia during that strike. This study examines some specific discourse literature—formal and informal—written before, during, and after the Loray Mill Strike of 1929. This dissertation is about how the people tell us who they are, and by extension who “we” are in relation to them through their rhetorical choices. It is also about language itself—how discourses shape actions and perspectives. An examination of the language and the motives of the discourses will show how the stories of this community constructed a world where identities were formed and lives were made possible through the language practices of the various social groups. The stories and how they are told created the discourses through which they are positioned as barons, lintheads, or communists.

### **Language as Identity and as Power**

The Loray Mill strike and its aftermath concern two domains of language practice: how language is used to construct identities and how language is used to negotiate power. Through their language, discourse models project onto the world the stance of the members of that particular group, according to Gee (88). The language of the mill barons sets forth the values that are most esteemed in Gaston County and thus began constructing a “figured world” in which their principles are identified as the norm. This “figured world,” as defined by Dorothy Holland et al., are “processes or traditions or apprehension which gather us up and give us form as our lives intersect them” (41). In this “figured world” social position matters and those who participate in them give voice from their social position (43). As their writing constructs an image of themselves, the barons necessarily relegate to a lower place the values and ideals of the mill workers, thus constructing an identity for the workers. In the workplace, the language of the owners is privileged. The workers had little choice but to adhere to the implied meanings of such words that identify their pay in chits, vouchers redeemable at the mill store, and the hank clock, a method of work measurement that determined their pay rate. In an interview, a former mill worker used the word “forced” as she described how she could not change jobs by moving from one textile company to another. The choice of that particular word and the repetition in part construct her identity as one with little or no power, which moves her to a lower social class.

In other instances, language is used to negotiate power. Through their songs, the mill workers, particularly balladeer, union organizer, and mill worker Ella Mae Wiggins,

tried to shift the power away from the barons and to negotiate a space of power for the workers within a labor union. The communists used the language of the mill owners in an attempt to equate their status with the barons and thus lead the workers out of bondage.

However, the negotiations of power in the 1929 strike also intensified the silences that engulfed the town before and during the strike and those that remain today. The strike divided the discourses of the county and created silences as the workers began to fear remembering the strike or verbally laying blame and the barons remained mum on any of the strike details, particularly as they related to the health of the business community. The barons on the eastside were represented by their mansions, their mill buildings, and their civic organizations. The lintheads on the westside were represented by the mill villages—often referred to as the mill hill, the smaller churches, and even smaller stores, where purchasing a few stock items could cost a week's pay and families lived their whole lives barely hanging on from payday to payday. For instance, a pound of bacon at 47 cents and a pound of coffee at 52 cents equaled a day's pay for many workers.

None of the silences maintained within the three discourses were alike in their origination or purpose. The barons maintained silences about labor issues and the strikes in their writing. Their writing seemed to be concerned about Gaston County's identity outside its borders and thus remained tight-lipped about any issue that did not cast the county in the best light. In most cases, the mill workers' silences were imposed by the barons. Fear of losing their jobs and/or their houses caused the workers to maintain a strict silence about working and living conditions. Long after the strike, the workers kept

silences about the strike itself. Curious strangers visiting the area received curt responses to their questions that indicated that the strike was not discussed by anyone in the county at any time. The silence that the barons and the workers have in common is the communist factor. The communists who came to Gastonia to organize the mill workers are rarely mentioned today and if they are mentioned, it is to say that they are not discussed. The communists were silent about their real motives—to replace democracy with communism—while they were setting up their union. Because they are no longer in Gaston County their silence is not as loud as those of the workers and the barons who, for the most part, remain locked in their secrets.

A curiousness about those silences in Gastonia is how within a generation between 1850 and 1900 class differences split the county and the fledgling town into two distinct discourse communities: east and west. The census of 1850 indicates that the majority of the residents of Gaston County (including the then two-year-old town of Gastonia) were farmers or slaves. Only ten men are listed as owning any type of manufacturing company. By 1900 factories, industry, and class situatedness was evident throughout the county. In the period between 1850 and 1900, twenty-nine mills were incorporated throughout Gaston County and by 1929, thirty-nine corporations dotted the county. The names listed on the mill incorporation papers often are the same. Not all of the twenty-five or so rising barons are listed on any one corporation, but they appear over and over in different combinations of president, secretary, and treasurer. What makes these differing discourse communities interesting to look at is the powerful struggle of



class positioning among the rising population of lintheads, the smaller and limited population of barons, and the even smaller group of communists.

The Roaring Twenties brought prosperity to some mill owners; however, the Loray Mill, incorporated in 1900 and designed to make products specifically for the Chinese market,<sup>1</sup> had financial problems from the start. The Loray earned the nickname “Million Dollar Mill” when it became the first in the South to attempt survival by selling stock to Northern investors. By 1924, when the mill owners had not found a market for their goods, the value of the stock they had sold to raise capital declined in value. This decline unnerved the northern investors who sold the mill to a Rhode Island company (Separk Gaston County Past and Future 124). The new owners were not familiar with Southern mill customs and failed to maintain the paternalistic language and behavior that might have warded off the anger and rebellion. What the workers heard as further denigration of their position laid the groundwork for the strike that took the lives of workers and police. Hidden motives and misunderstanding of the language can be seen as culprits in the dueling discourses as each side sought control. The installation of a new fence (to keep workers in rather than intruders out) and new regulations that cut the wages and increased the work, coupled with the arrival of communist union organizers from the North, created the final division of the two sides.

A proliferation of writing came after the strike which tried to explain (and name) what happened, each faction claiming it was victimized by the others. The owners tried to maintain their class rank by positioning themselves as heroes: fighters against Communism, promoters of Christian ideals—the good versus the evil. In constructing

identities and negotiating for power, the workers blamed the barons for low wages and poor working conditions, and with the fall of the stock market, blamed the barons for their struggle to find enough work at a decent pay to stay alive. The barons again used language to construct their identity as that of power and blamed the communists for the upheaval. This study examines the barons' language as well as the genres they employed to maintain their social institutions and their power; the "lintheads'" language and their struggle to gain power in a more commonplace discourse of songs, imaginative arts, and sometimes imitation of the barons; and the communists' attempt to use the genres of the barons to uncover the barons' motives, while hiding their own.

### **Theoretical Background**

Three theorists inform my work: Michel Foucault's concept of power, Henry Louis Gates's theories of how language is used to curb power, and Kenneth Burke's explanation of perspective and motive in language, all help to expose the varying positions and discourses.

Foucault's concept of power informs this reading of the barons' texts and the assumption of absolute power and truth that emerges, which includes the assumption that the barons essentially own the workers in the feudalistic society they imagined for themselves and the workers even away from the mill. The barons' attempt to write themselves into total power and authority over the workers, insisting on limiting even their church affiliations, domiciles, and purchasing power.

By evoking the name of God, the discourse of the church in the mill villages became an echo of the owners—the father, the god over the workers. The workers' lack

of education (knowledge) reinforces their anxiety and thus reinforces the barons' claims on the workers lives. While Foucault argues against the eighteenth-century ideas of truth in language, and insists that the idea that one discourse holds the key to truth is outdated, I find that the owners used the idea of absolute truth to their great advantage. In *Power/Knowledge* Foucault posits that power is executed by individuals and operates in such a manner that while the individuals are subject to power they also exercise power (98). In other words, the circulation of power is such that the individuals in one context may be in power while in a different situation they may be subjected to the power of another. Foucault suggests that the study of power and the negotiations of power should be directed toward how power is formed by local situations and the "techniques and tactics of domination" (102). In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault explores the manner in which the various discourses create rules—not necessarily written down, but understood by the members of the discourse. These rules cover a variety of issues including who is allowed to speak and what the members are allowed to discuss or are forbidden to discuss. Other unwritten rules pervade the area in which the discourses encounter each other and then members of some discourses are allowed privileges that are denied to those of other discourses (Foss et al. 348-349). This study examines how the rules of each of the three discourses function within the specific discourse, and how the rules function as the discourses negotiate power and space in the community.

The workers' attempts to resist the domination of the mill owners is examined through Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s conception of the signifyin' monkey, an Afro-American trickster who uses wit and language to outsmart the lion, the king of the jungle who

somewhat resembles the African trickster and messenger to the gods, Esu. Gates, reflecting Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of double-voicedness, employs the double entendre of the slaves' movements, positioning themselves as obedient while concealing their defiance in songs and play-acting. Like the slaves, the mill workers (lintheads) created ballads that depicted their dissatisfaction with the owners, who gave the songs of the workers little or no credence other than simple work ditties.

The act of signifyin', as defined by Gates, is one of metaphor and intertextuality in which one text mimics another, or as Gates says, becomes double-voiced and talks to other texts (xxv). Gates' double-voiced text relations include "tropological" revision or the repetition of a trope with differences between texts, "talking texts" how one text mimics by talking to other (previous) texts by other authors, and "rewriting the speakerly" when the writer of one text echoes the writing and style of the writer of another text. In analyzing the songs of the mill workers, this study employs Gates's definition of "Literary Signification," or pastiche and parody (107). One mill worker essentially signifies on popular hymns of the day by changing the religious message to a plea for workers to join the labor union. The worker-songstress doesn't always rewrite the song; she sometimes exchanges only the name of God with the name of the labor union. However, the worker-songstress has successfully created a double-voice in which she lays out one issue while alluding to or relating to another issue.

The barons imitated the Golden Age of Greece in pageants and plays, which were performed to celebrate the Fourth of July or a significant birthday of the county. In imitation and/or role reversal, each group was relieved of burdens of its place in society

for an afternoon or so. The echo of one voice is almost always in the work of the other one (Bazerman and Prior 212).

In the Loray Mill strike, the powerful and moneyed barons had more outlets for expressing their views and were able to deliver their discourse in genres that assume more authority and reach greater audiences than the less powerful who are relegated to more commonplace genres that assume less power and much smaller audiences. So we may assume that those such as the workers who have less power in the mill hierarchy, use genres such as letters, tales, songs, and diaries, while those such as the mill owners and the communists, who assume the top positions in the mill hierarchy, use more widely distributed methods, such as newspapers and books. In her 1984 article, genre theorist Carolyn Miller sees genres as social actions and allows that because motives have social purposes they “invited discourse of a particular type” (162). As situations recur and individuals act or react in those situations, they create patterns of response that include motives. Genre theorist Amy Devitt concurs that in composing songs rather than writing books, the workers do not operate within as powerful a genre as the biographies, editorials, and company newsletters that allow the owners to dominate the conversation. In *Writing Genres*, Devitt says, “Genres have the power to help or hurt human interaction, to ease communication or to deceive, to enable someone to speak or to discourage someone from saying something different” (1). In this case, the workers try to negotiate power through songs against the powerful print media of the barons. Genre is a form that helps to classify the writer’s information for the reader and gives direction to the roles each is to play. Within any genre are the contexts of situation, culture, and

existing genres, and it is within these factions that individuals act. But they must act within the genres of their discourse (Writing Genres 29).

The owners' situations of power, in a culture that differentiated between the owner of the mill and the worker in the mill, allowed/required them to put their arguments into slick publications and books in order to maintain their social image and to create the desired effect within their readers. The communist union leaders found that in order to be heard and/or believed, they had to imitate the genres that the barons used. They published books and pamphlets to tell their side of the story and to argue against capitalism. The audiences for the two may have been different, but the importance of using the genres of power cannot be denied. The idea that those in power assume the position of truth and have the power of the media with which to perpetuate their ideas is evident in many of the papers stemming from the Loray Mill strike. Articles and editorials in *The Gastonia Gazette*, the local newspaper, position the workers as ungrateful, "shiftless," and against the democratic principles of the United States.

Rhetorician Kenneth Burke offers a theory for understanding how motives play into this power struggle. Burke defines writing as a series of "motives" that every writer owns and draws from. In *Grammar of Motives*, he gets to the "truth" or discovery of motives that may be hidden by examining the five parts of a pentad in different ratios, seeking to establish relationships and thus discover motives by examining the act that was done, the agent or person committing the act, the agency or how the act was done, the scene in which the act resides, and the purpose. All parts are dependent on the other parts, Burke tells us, and how we view each ratio to the other is how we discover and

verify the motives. The perspective changes as the ratios change and through the change in perspective hidden motives emerge.

For instance, the barons write a brochure to entice investors to come to Gastonia. As they write their brochure they determine what they will include and what they will exclude as their descriptions of the county. They decide to exclude the workers and any issues involving the workers, but to include stories about the successful textile mills. The ratios could follow this pattern:

If the **Act** is the writing of the brochure, then

**Scene-Act:** They wrote this brochure during bad economic times when the workers are threatening to strike and the barons need more industry.

**Agent-Act:** They exhibit the good in the county.

**Agency-Act:** They include the positives but omit the negatives.

**Purpose-Act:** They want more businessmen like them to relocate in the county.

What appears on the surface to be an honest, innocent act of businessmen on close examination of the various parts of the pentad then reveals that their motive to hide the strike (potential for business failure) and show the business climate as a potential for business success when the “truth” is that the textile industry has labor issues. Before settling on one set of ratios, the analyst may change various parts of the ratios, expanding the scene to the entire town. In each case, the scene is where the action took place, the act is what happened, the agency is how the act was done, the agent is who did the action, and the purpose is why it was done. When the different parts are changed, the outcome or

motive may change; and while there is no right answer, an emerging pattern can establish some kind of recurring motive.

If, as Burke says, motive is situation (Permanence and Change 30), then from the ratios above, the situation of the barons is that they must hide the labor issues to ensure their purpose of maintaining their town. The situation of the workers, on the other hand, is that they must renegotiate the power (change the ratios) so that they show the things the barons hide.

### **Overview of Chapters**

Each chapter examines one of the three discourses—the barons, the workers, and the communist labor organizers—to show how the various discourses mask and imitate the others to form a town of like thinking separated by the power barons' perception of themselves and that discourse's denigration of others in order to maintain control. The examination of pieces of writing surrounding the Loray Mill and its strike creates a picture of a mill town, divided in itself, through the words of the participants that closely matches the anthropological and sociological studies that have continued since the strike of 1929.

#### ***Chapter II: The Barons: A Discourse of Power***

The motives we uncover in the barons' books and plays include the attempt to establish themselves as the authorities in the county, owners of the rules and the standards; establishment of themselves as the benevolent ones who created employment for the others; and later the establishment of themselves as triumphant over the communists. Histories include those histories of Gaston County written by Minnie Stowe



Puett and R. L Stowe (brother and sister), Joseph Separk's directories of Gaston County that include photographs and descriptions of the textile industry, and a celebration play written by Pearl Setzer and members of the Gaston County Women's Clubs that was performed at the fairgrounds in the mid 1920s, all depict strategies for controlling discourse and consolidate power in the moneyed class.

In 1929, before the mill strike, Jennings J. Rhyne, a native of Gaston County and a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill, completed a sociology text, *Some Southern Cotton Mill Workers*. Rhyne's quantitative analysis of 500 families examines mill houses, the workers' day, their church affiliation, and their education, but ignores cultural matters and the humanness of his mill subjects. He depicts the workers as robots; rising, going to work, leaving work, and sleeping by the mill whistle. Rhyne does not give the workers a voice; his text is helpful in determining owners' attitudes toward those workers who are seen in paternalistic terms as being cared for. His conclusions are that even though wages for North Carolina textile workers are lower than those in states to the north, "[a]ll his disabilities considered, the North Carolina mill worker has raised his economic status over that of his brother on the tenant farm" (104). As Foucault has shown, the upper class uses the power of language to define the lower class and to name their shortcomings as well as define their notions of adequacy and pleasure (Archaeology of knowledge 216-218)

Particularly important is how the barons use genre and rhetoric in their writing to construct a community in which they were the standards. In this imagined community, the barons drew up the rules, constructed narratives that included only the owners of the

mills and members of the business and educational communities as they were needed to reinforce the barons. Their narratives borrowed from the ancient Greek communities and from classical eighteenth century inventions of manners and behaviors. In becoming masters and essentially owners of the discourse, the barons learned to control their worlds through language and the practice of acting in the manner in which they have come to represent themselves. They further imagined themselves spokespersons of the community by writing their own biographies or hiring these done, positioning their entitlement as that of founding fathers. Their power and ownership were implied in the early histories of the county, which many of them published. R. L Stowe wrote a history of the county, then had Charlotte writer LeGette Blythe write his biography. Joseph Separk's four county directories that span the 1920s to the 1940s prominently list the barons and their achievements, but not their failures. Minnie Stowe Puett and R. L. Stowe situate their family as founders of Gaston County. These writers use language in the negotiation of power and the identity of themselves and others.

As Amy Devitt suggests, the genres in which a discourse community is identified often are not the choice of the writer, but the genre which is assigned to that part of the community (35). By assuming the position of authority and usurping the most powerful means of communication, the owners took control of the discourses of the community through written and oral texts. Other discourses were left to butt against or attempt to transgress the dominant ones with genres of lesser strength.

By its very appearance in slick publications, their discourse positions the barons as the authorities and lays down without exception the rules and order of the entire

community. Foucault posits that all self-other relationships are set up as subject-object relationships, which he further defines as “relationships of power” or “states of domination” (Moran and Ballif 181). The social acts of the barons’ writing become markers of their discourse that further establishes their position of power in the community.

In some of the barons’ writing the control or state of domination is subtle rather than direct. However, the subtext or voice of the author always can be heard and it is this “double-voicedness,” as Bakhtin calls it, that lends itself to further examination of both explicit and implied discourse that exudes the power of the writer. For those who failed to recognize the voice underneath the text (which may be complimentary or appear nonthreatening), a certain undoing was in the offing. Any accomplishment achieved by “the other” is always by the hand of the baron and the barons’ discourse is certainly clear on that.

The discourse of the barons, who had access to the pulpit—often on both sides of Broad Street—and the various printing presses as well as the money and manpower to put on pageants and performances to act out their positions, exemplifies the rhetorical power that the owners assumed and the millworkers and the communists had to transgress in order to be heard. The barons, some of whom were educated and many of whom were not, imported school men from Trinity College (now Duke University) and the University of Virginia to educate their children and to help them invent the stories that would insure their legacies. The barons have become masters of discursivity (Foucault, *Archaeology* 46)—they have learned to control their worlds through language and the conscious or

unconscious practice of acting in the manner in which they have represented themselves. Their appearance is through slick magazines, company publications, the society and business sections of the local newspapers, and the biographies and autobiographies that they were able to publish.

The Greek revival architecture that appears in the buildings they constructed and their writing suggests that the barons see themselves and their emerging towns as prototypes of the powerful Greek city states. As the 1920s brought prosperity to this Southern town and county, recitations, plays, and pageants in the Greek traditions often were performed (and published). Even though some of the barons' publications praise individual mill workers, close examination will show that the recognition is limited to specific praise for a specific act on a specific day and is not meant to encourage a step up the societal ladder or to carry further than that specific act. Those promoted to the mill rank of "bossman" lived in the mill village, some in slightly larger houses, but always in the mill village. Further, any worker accomplishments are defined and maintained by the owner. The social act of the barons' marks their discourse that further establishes their controlling position in the community. As they repeat the writing and the speech to the community numerous times an inequitable social relationship is formed and given credence.

When we write or speak, we address an intended audience and when we utter words, we exhibit conscious choices that indicate who we are to our audience—intended or not. An underlying meaning or backstory sometimes reveals more than its author has meant to reveal. In acting as the proprietors of the mills the owners become proprietors of

the lintheads as well. And so the language practices in which the barons engage to produce their texts and the ways these texts gain their meaning offer insight into the cultural setting that produces this discourse.

### ***Chapter III: The Workers Sing Their Misery***

In some cases, groups are positioned by those around them and in that positioning, allow themselves to remain in the place they were put by others. The social position of the workers (lintheads) is defined by the barons and by their acceptance of that discourse, the workers define themselves, often in a genre not claimed by the powerful. A close examination of the songs of Ella May Wiggins and others reveals that their rhetorical stance often relies on pathos—laments of helplessness. Women workers who were more plentiful, more powerless, and paid lower wages than male workers plead for time for their children, relief from the piece work rates, enough money to feed and clothe their starving children. Some of the songs directly address the piece work and the mill time clock and argue that the workers cannot know how many pieces they finished and must rely on the owner's word for their pay. Others address the 12-hour, six-day work week and its toll on the families. For the most part, their powerless position offers up pleas that often fall only on the ears of their peers. As the oppression progresses, however, the songs become more insistent that relief come soon and suggest that a union is the answer. Workers' laments over the death of Ella Mae Wiggins are softer in tone, perhaps because the workers realize that they, too, could be shot if they protest too loudly.

The poor schooling, and often illiteracy, of many of the workers demanded that their stories be rendered orally and repeated from mill village to mill village, often in song and sometimes in crude poetry. Sometimes the songs took on a position of limited power as the lintheads twisted the words and used metaphor and double entendre to ridicule the barons. As Gates (67-68) shows the relation to the black slaves and white masters, the lintheads “signify” on the barons, singing a veiled story that left the barons smiling at the happy workers, unaware of the subtext of hatred and disrespect. Sometimes the songs, poems, and jokes of the mill workers will show the occasional attempt to turn the tables and position the barons as rich and stupid and the workers as poor, and smart.

This “carnival,” in Bakhtin’s terms (Rabelais and his World 234-235), turns society upside down and for a short time can juxtapose the discourse of the power of the other. Bakhtin explains the carnival effect as,

The jocular and merry approach is opposed to the serious and gloomy one . . . The main goal of the anonymous authors was to give time and the future a different coloring, to transfer the accent to the material body life. Popular festive images were often used for depicting changes in history and time (Rabelais 234).

Just as Gates’s monkey outsmarts the lion, the downtrodden can at certain times reverse the order of the discourses and appears to be the smarter group. As this occurs in the songs, it occasionally occurs in a skit or play put on quietly to entertain small groups. In the mill churches Sundays represent a carnival of sorts as the lintheads imitate the barons, assuming roles of leadership in the mill churches, denied them on the other six days. For Foucault there are two prongs to discourse: those known or knowable to their practitioners, and that describe, prescribe, order, rationalize, render comprehensible, and

preserve knowledge-based social practices and conceivable discourses unknown and unknowable by their practitioners that nonetheless determine the forms their knowing takes and, especially when that knowledge has to do with human subjects determines these, including the knowers themselves (Herrick 248-252). The discourse of the workers transgresses the powerful as it seeks its own power and an identification of self beyond being an extension of the machine.

#### ***Chapter IV: The Communists Hide Motives in the Labor Movement***

Communist labor leaders came to Gaston County under the guise of organizing the mill workers. However, their writing later admitted that they were much more ambitious and intended to use the organization of labor as a method of infusing communism into the national government. Working through the silences and the identities of the worker discourse, this group attempts to replace the grammar of the community with their own. The discourse of the communists interrupts and challenges that of the barons.

The autobiography of Yankee, worker, communist, and union organizer Fred Beal indicates that his attempts to organize a labor union in the Gaston County mills may have strengthened the workers' complaints and demands. However, his motives go deeper as he attempts to throw off the blame assigned to him by the barons for the violence that ensued from the Loray strike. Beal's retelling of the events before and after the October 1929 shooting death of the Gastonia police chief names and accuses low-ranking members of the anti-union forces of causing the violence. However, Beal is seeking to transgress the prevailing story (that of the owners) by mimicking their prevailing view of

the communist role in the strike and at the same time contradicting it. This work, perhaps more than any of Beal's writing, can be analyzed using the theories of both Foucault and Gates. As Beal attempts to identify with the owners through flattery and agreement, he becomes somewhat the signifyin' monkey, mocking their ideas, while seeming to agree. As the other, he also is attempting to create space for his truths—a space in the genre of the barons—thereby creating a crevice for the workers' views to transgress and perhaps open a larger space.

A pamphlet, *Gastonia: Citadel of the Class Struggle in the New South*, written by William F. Dunne and published in September 1929 by the textile workers union, displays photographs of striking workers evicted from the mill houses, the taut and drawn faces of the workers, and text that denies responsibility for the shooting death of the police chief during a demonstration. The pamphlet relies on the pictures to position the workers as victims—the pictures much stronger images than the words for this group. In writing from the position of the other, the lintheads' photographs reflect their powerless position. Dunne's motives and intent become clear when different ratios of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose are examined using Burke's pentad. Burke's theory of scapegoating (Permanence and Change 14) informs the analysis of the work of Beal and Dunne as they attempt to place the blame for the strike and the police chief's death squarely on the shoulders of the barons.

#### ***Chapter V: Church Members and Mill Workers: Remembering the Hard Times***

Today the mills, save for five or six, are silent. Many of the buildings that sprang out of the earth for the glorification of the barons have been reduced to rubble, some of



the bricks retrieved by former workers and curious newcomers to become doorstops and bookends in their houses. Those who recall their days in the mills are telling their stories to historians, writers, and tape recorders. For some the anger seeps through their narrative as they tell of what they might have been had they not been chained to the mill. And for others, the story is of an opportunity to have work during the aftermath of the Great Depression. Others who talk are their children, sometimes with nostalgia and other times with the frankness of one who “knows her place.”

This chapter examines the narratives of these stories from members of Loray Baptist Church as they recall their days in the mill village or working for the Firestone Mill, formerly the Loray Mill. The Loray Baptist Church was constructed on property donated by the Loray Mill shortly after the mill and the mill houses were built. The church received a monthly stipend that helped pay the minister’s salary and upkeep of the church. During the labor uprising, some mills required their workers to become members of and attend a church and through intimidation at the church and in the workplace to have more control over the workers and these four have maintained their membership.

The discourse of the church members is the discourse of the workers and supports the argument that the workers were dominated/silenced by the powerful. A careful analysis of their language, including their hesitations and their repetitions reveals their motives for telling their stories. Harold, who retired as a bossman at the Firestone Mill, sees the mill as a place for employment and advancement. He is silent about his position in the town, only revealing his importance in the church. His daughter, Norma, sees the mill workers and their children through the eyes of the rest of the community. Others

either deny the existence of any prejudice or relate stories of being “forced” to take jobs at particular mills. Paul Gee’s language analysis helps to sort out the “truths” or meaning in these stories.

### **Conclusion**

This rhetorical examination of the discourses (past and present) of a Southern mill town attempts to show how the language indicates the social groups into which people in a community are divided and the repercussions of such divisions. In telling the stories of the people, the attempt is to take the workers out of the lump into which they have been molded. By examining the motives in the discourses it is the hope that the workers become people and not just numbers and names on time cards and economic statistic sheets. The owners have attempted to ensure their heritage by writing their own biographies and constructing themselves as prominent individuals doing “good work,” fighting communism, or pioneering in the textile field. The workers, however, were just a body of lintheads that moved into the mill when the whistle blew and out of the mill when the whistle blew. Their names were recognized by the payroll clerk and each other. Their identification was the mill in which they worked. This paper seeks to recognize their work and their issues against those of the powerful.

Through a close examination of the writing from three discourses—both sides of Broad Street and the North—this study offers a rhetorical look at an event that continues to divide county, city, and community even today. On the surface Gaston County may seem to be complacent, but a study of the discourses reveals that each group constructs and is constructed by the others and that all groups are in constant negotiations for power.

**End Notes:**

1. Descendants of the original owners of the Loray Mill related to me that the mill was built to be the largest mill under one roof in the world. Machinery in the mill was designed to make yarn and fabric that was to be purchased by manufactures in China. When the Boxer Rebellion interrupted trade with China, the mill could not find other customers for the goods. As sales decreased so did the value of the stock, which prompted the Northern investors to sell their stock to Manville-Jenckes Manufacturing Company.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CULTURE OF OWNERSHIP: BARONS CONSTRUCT THE COMMUNITY

Individuals construct their world through story and these stories reveal the power relations and ideological underpinnings of particular discourses. The stories of themselves that they create place them in communities, imagined or real (Anderson 7); and once placed in those communities they act out the behavior that they have deemed appropriate for this place. In the feudalistic world the mill owners constructed, they were the barons, who owned the castles, the rules, and essentially the people who worked for them. As their world began imitate the worlds of old European royalty, they acquired the label of barons in newspapers and in communist publications. This chapter examines the language practices of the barons, how they used language to construct their community, and how theses masters of discursivity (Foucault qtd. in Brummett 816-817) control their worlds through language and the practice of performing in a specific manner. Essentially, the barons' "truth" is in their materialistic world in which they create the visions of prosperity.

By the late 1800s the simple frame design of the early factories had given way to imposing multi-storied brick structures that resembled medieval castles. The change in the mill architecture was representative of the barons' perception of their power and themselves. The crenellated tops of the buildings and the imposing towers that guarded the entrances suggested indestructible fortresses. The buildings usually rose up on plots

of land outside the city and appeared throughout the county landscape, numbering one hundred and four by 1936 (Separk, Past, Present, Future 3). The small houses that were built around the mill for the workers—slightly larger ones for the overseers and smaller ones for the workers—gave each mill the appearance of a feudal manor and its village.

The barons built private schools and invited their idea of men of letters to come to Gastonia to educate their children. Their handbooks, designed to celebrate themselves and to recruit more like themselves to the area, displayed pictures of their own homes, great symbols of prosperity; their factories, bastions of their ingenuity; and photographs of themselves attired in business suits of the fashion of the day. Neither the four-room houses that dotted the perimeters of the mill fiefdoms nor the workers were pictured in these directories. The barons carefully chose pictures and words that reflected themselves as prosperous living in a prosperous county. The genres in which they wrote reflect the same opulence: public pageants, hardbound history books, and slick professional directories. In this constructed community, the barons had voices; others were silenced. As owners of the manufacturing companies of the New South, they constructed themselves as the entitled and the workers as those who maintained their jobs in the mills as long as they exhibited obedience. The workers were given a position of invisibility simply by being left out—othered in plain sight. As the industry grew, the workers became a part of the factory—an extension of the machine—and so lost their humanness. During and after the strike the barons' silences about the strikes further marginalized the workers.

More published work by the owners, both their own writing and that commissioned, exists than published work by the workers. As money and power control the printing presses and literacy to an extent controls who has the money and power, the barons had more publishing power with which to script the community than the workers. The Loray Mill strike of 1929 was a violent eruption that brought national attention to the area and forced the barons to use their pens to position themselves as benevolent, God-fearing citizens who saved the nation from Communism.<sup>1</sup> Their writing and their opinions were recognized as the true community knowledge and thus they maintained their power (Foucault in Brummett 817).

The barons wrote for each other and for similar barons in other areas whom they wanted to attract to Gaston County, either as residents and/or investors. After the boon years of the early 1900s, they created an idyllic scene of a prospering community in which they hid labor issues, the demise of some of the mills, mergers to stave off bankruptcy, and other issues that would cast Gaston County and/or the barons in a less than favorable position in the nationwide business community. Joseph Separk manages to put an upbeat spin on the banking community in his 1936 directory:

The financial history of the county embraces the history of the banks, trust companies, and building and loan associations that have functioned through the years. All of these institutions have been called into being as industry and commerce have developed, and industry and commerce have expanded as the financial institutions have increased their resources and their credit facilities...The chapter of today ought to be read not in terms of current facts and figures, but rather also with the thought in mind of the wonderful past, and in light of the large part our local institutions have had in the building of our industry, our county and town utilities, our schools, our churches, and our homes (Past, Present, and Future 98).

The vision of the barons is clearly evident even in the aftermath of the Great Depression; and Separk uses his baron authority to redirect the audience from the financial facts, which may be less than positive, to the baron vision of the future. The incorporation of the past—the heritage—into the future assumes that the downturn is momentary and so is not worth the reader’s time to linger on. They are the institutions of the county that Separk cites as the infrastructure: the banks dependent on industry and industry dependent on the banks—functioning in cooperation to build strength in the economy. Separk has set the financial institutions in such a framework of success that the present merges with past and future to envision a return to success. As “institutions” they hold up the county structure and will not fail.

Again, Kenneth Burke offers a method for examining motive in the literacy events of the barons. For Burke there is a difference between a motion, such as doodling on a piece of paper, and an action, such as writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper. Doodling is just that, a motion; but writing to the editor indicates a motive, a reason to write those words at that time (Herrick 228). Clearly, the barons’ intentions of hiding anything negative about Gaston County are obvious in what they chose to write about and how they chose to write it. For instance, Separk ignores the labor issues that plagued the county and the changes in mill ownership during the strike years and upbeat the staying power of employees. “. . . some, who were the doffer boys and spinners of the earlier days, are still contented operatives at the new plant as it runs today . . . The new management plans to continue the high policy of fostering only the best for operatives and for the entire citizenship” (21). The labor issues, the corporation that sold out because

of the labor issues are not mentioned. Separk carefully chooses the details to use and casts a blind eye to the rest, thus creating a scene of steady labor that is “contented” with the work and a management that is receptive to the workers. The truth is in the statement, but part of it—the ugly part—is hidden and so the directory does its job of conveying a positive view of the community. Kenneth Burke’s pentad can offer different outcomes, depending on how the ratios of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose are applied. For the barons, we may see the scene as one that threatens the economic stability of Gastonia and forces the town (agent) to publish (act) documents (agency) that attest to their truths (carry out their motives). Their act of publishing is contained in the scene as well, but the method by which the act is performed (agency) is where the act becomes visible (the proof of the act). Since the barons hold the dominant truth and the published documents show beautiful homes and stores and businesses that appear to be prosperous, their purpose is to create a scene of a stable businesses and a pleasure ready place. In his 1906 directory, Separk ends his sketch of Gastonia with “That the future of Gastonia is assured, no one of her citizenship doubts. Today her population, including suburbs, is about 8000, and our stakes are set for 16000 in 1916” (Illustrated Handbook 6). It was necessary that their mills, some of which were on shaky financial ground in the aftermath of the Great Depression, appear prosperous in order for the mill owners to sell their goods, maintain their lifestyle, and protect their self-image. This positive profitable image is contained in directories that tout their industries and civic life and histories that link the past accomplishments with the present, always with a positive outcome. For instance, they use industrial and financial growth numbers to create a scene in which the growth



overshadows (hides) the closing and merging mills, the strikes, and the workforce issues as well as to downplay any perception that a communist plot to overthrow democracy may have started in Gastonia. The barons create their scenes to suit their needs, hiding the truth in with their visions of the positive. They act as they see the best interest of the county (actually themselves) and use the power of their publications to stamp their version of the truth on the outside world. By not answering anything negative, the barons negate it.

Four pieces of writing that are significant in the understanding of the barons' world are examined in this chapter: a pageant written by Lenoir-Rhyne College drama professor and Gaston County native Pearl Setzer and members of the county women's clubs; histories written by Belmont elementary school teacher and county-appointed historian Minnie Stowe Puett and her brother, mill owner R. L. Stowe Sr.; and county directories written by educator and mill owner Joseph Separk. Each, whether written before or after the Loray Mill strike, seeks its audience in people like its authors in Gaston County and outside Gaston County. Each also offers insight into how the barons construct Gaston County and the people in it, maintaining the "truth" and thus the power.

Mill owner R. L. Stowe's history, published in 1951, sets himself up as an example of a good man doing well: "Mr. Stowe has been active in church work," "incorporated the town of Belmont," "organized the first cotton mill in Belmont," "has been listed in Who's Who of America for a good many years" (6-7). What Stowe chooses to include in his memoir/history constructs the important "truths" of his constructed world. Of particular importance to Stowe are the area legends and the business stories

that are particular to the Stowe family; and his elevated language is exemplary of the attitude of many of the barons toward the community. Stowe's formal reference to himself as well as his selections of memorabilia reveals his sense of self-importance. His sister, Minnie Stowe Puett's county history, published ten years after the Great Depression and the Loray Mill strike, omits both events. Puett's book affirms her own family connections and establishes the rules for inclusion in the barons' world. By virtue of exclusion, the communists and the mill workers do not exist (are not mentioned) in Puett's world. Rather, she chooses the positive nation-building events that exemplify the ideals of baronism and builds these tenets of citizenship with stories of the past that validate the barons' social and business practices. Joseph Separk's three directories celebrate the economic growth of Gaston County, each edition larger than the last, attesting to the health of the county's business community. The pageant celebrates the barons and their accomplishments as well as their history in the community. It was performed in 1924 as part of a celebration to commemorate the Fourth of July and the barons' successes. It is written by and performed by the barons and their families for themselves. Whether it is a defense of the barons' practices, a statement to override any other ideas, or both, the printed word of the stated philosophy of the county is that of the barons. Together the play, the histories, and the directories promote the barons as the powerful keepers of the knowledge of the county.

### **Women's Clubs Perform: A Pageant to Celebrate the Successes**

*Visions Old and New: A Historical Pageant of Gaston County*, performed July 4, 1924 at the county fairgrounds by the Gaston County Federation of Women's Clubs, and

written and produced by Lenoir-Rhyne College drama professor Pearl Setzer, is one of the barons' first very public celebrations of themselves. Gaston County had become part of the New South; changed plantations to textile plants; imported a labor force from surrounding states; and had successfully squelched attempts by the National Textile Workers Union to improve the conditions of the workers. The pageant, then, is a celebration of the barons' power as they defray the negative of labor issues with the positive: a progress report that melds the past with the present and the future. Although elaborate and held at a very public place on a significant holiday, this spectacle had an intended audience of the barons and their families, all of whom had parts to play. Each section of the drama is co-written by one of the prominent or the wife of one of the prominent and each highlights a different part of the county's history, always celebrating their own families' prominence. For the commemorative booklet, the actors are photographed in costume at different places throughout the county, including their plantation houses, an old iron furnace, pathways and walkways that are significant to them in the county's growth.

This pageant is divided into eight scenes or episodes, each announced by a herald who offers in poetic language an overview of the forthcoming scene, each scene. The episodes span a time period from 1731 to the present 1924 and include the Catawba Indians and three wars, and a celebration of the textile industry. Only the Revolutionary War episode requires two scenes: the signing of their Tryon Declaration of Independence and the Battle of Kings Mountain, a major battle in the war. Language in all the episodes positions the barons as heroes of a faith in God, willingness to fight for their beliefs, their

benevolence, and a charge to build the county to greatness. Each fades into the next as the county progresses from the wilderness of its beginning to its present boon of industrialism. The episodes that merge past and present become “visions,” as if seeing the supernatural, conflating the real with the imaginative to present the idea of the county in its present state of God-given financial profit. Their persuasive tactics exemplify what Burke calls “administrative rhetoric,” the use of persuasive devices that include operations that imply that their way of seeing must be adhered to. Burke likens it to Theodore Roosevelt speaking softly but carrying a big stick (Language as Symbolic Action 301). Each episode implants a different site of innovative thinking and bravery that has led to the progressive and prosperous scene that the barons want to portray as Gaston County. With a flourish of the trumpet, the herald announces:

Hark, ye people of Gaston County,  
Behold the visions, old and new  
Of your land, a land of beauty,  
A land of peace and quietude  
A land of forests, and sweet flowers.  
Where the great Catawba gently flows,  
And the bounding South Fork roars and splashes;  
Where birds and bees and butterflies  
Make glorious company...  
Watch the visions pass before you;  
Well consider what they mean;  
Learn from them a little more  
Of what the old has done for you;  
See the new and ask yourself,  
If you have given of your best,  
And may the future brighter be  
When you have seen this pageantry (7).

As in a Biblical happening of great importance, the audience is “harkened” to see the visions—the visions of the barons. They employ the work ethic of “doing our best” in order to engage in the celestial scene the barons have set up. The administrative rhetoric is in force. The romantic view of the flora and fauna with rivers and mountains and the “visions” of the past and the future omit the mills that are opening daily, slicing into the idyllic natural scene with the manmade scene of bricks and mortar. Also hidden are the workers who are attached to the machinery of these mills. Three blacks appear in the entire play, Aunt Liza Holland, Ned White, and Fred Farrar. They are listed in the commemorative booklet as, “Servants (colored)” in Episode IV, the signing of papers that separated Gaston from Mecklenburg and Lincoln counties. The Dallas High School Glee Club, “representing the Negro Slaves” (51) sings “the happy negro songs [that were] heard at the old plantation home” (25). Although a stereotype, the happy singing slaves become representative of labor of the county, set a precedent for workers to sing and be happy, not disgruntled and complaining. The motives of the barons are clearly to invoke a scene in which the actions are in their interests. Otherwise the warning is there: be a part of the scene created by the barons or be out of the scene entirely. The God-given visions of the barons ends Episode IV with a mystical prediction of the county’s future sealed with its emergence as a separate county:

O beautiful young Gaston  
 Thou art young, thou are fair,  
 In thy youth shall be struggles,  
 But thou shalt win.  
 Thy dwelling place shall change  
 To a newer, better place  
 Wealth and power shall come to thee,

And hundreds of souls shall look to thee  
 For life and light and love.  
 O beautiful young Gaston,  
 Thy future is bright (26).

As the herald speaks, the “spirit of Gaston” appears. This spirit becomes a godlike power that carries permission to the powerful to carry out the destiny, a foreshadowing of the responsibility and the greatness of the barons. The mystical attributes of a spirit helps to form the identity of this elite group as those whom God has chosen to carry out the business of the county, has assigned the rights to proceed in whatever they perceive as the best interests of the county. Thus the “spirit of Gaston” becomes a metaphor for “vision of the barons.”

The Civil War episode ends with an end of the old times and an ushering in of a “New South,” a place where the language of the barons is the only language that will be heard.

(The scene is a tired man in tatters, plows a poor horse)  
 O Southern heroes, tired and worn,  
 You built the land for us.  
 To your undying perseverance  
 The New South owes her all (30).

Essentially the agrarian Old South, signified by the “man in tatters” and the “poor horse,” dies to be replaced by a New South, a new Gaston County, forged in language of industrialism rather than agrarianism, machines instead of people. The truth then in the new century becomes the language of textiles, capitalism, and production as is exemplified in the next episode.

The sixth episode introduces the textile industry. This scene is shorter than others, but it is clearly the dominant and most elaborate scene. The herald announces: “Ye who would know Gaston’s development, hear the Epic of the Spindle” (31). As the hero of an epic, the spindle is thus elevated to a heroic figure of a proportion to influence a race, culture, or nation (Harmon and Holman 171-172), greater than the episodes before it, certainly its numbers are what shapes the county and the language of the spindle drowns out or silences other languages (Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge 215).

The language in the “Epic of the Spindle” loses the floweriness of the previous episodes. It turns from humanness of the agrarian world to the hard facts of the industrial world: from the first mill in 1848 to the present 97 cotton mills with close to 17,000 employees (the only time the word employee appears), a daily payroll of \$54,000, and an annual profit of \$60,000,000 (31). The word epic implies greatness—a hero in mythical terms. The machine of the textile mill has replaced the mythical heroes. The greatness is in the power of the spindles, a measure of power and production. The herald speaks of the pride: Gaston is third in the nation in spindle production and ranks high in the nation in textile development. Greatness now is measured in numbers of things, not accomplishments of people. As the herald speaks, the following scene takes place:

While the herald speaks men representing the 97 mills of the county place themselves about a table on the side. When the herald has finished, Queen Cotton appears with her court, the cotton plants, the blossoms, the bolls, the spindles, the looms, and the soldiers of the soil. As they leave the herald speaks:

O Gaston, you are rich in spindles.  
 And rich in other things;  
 We pass not by your other wealth,  
 We would not miss a single one,

But let the other industries  
 To spindles make obeisance  
 For spindles make the county known  
 To all within the nation (32).

In this scene community members play the mythical Queen Cotton and her court, but the barons play themselves, a display of power in that no one can *play* the powerful mill owners. They can only be represented by themselves. The power exhibited on the stage is reinforced with the final apostrophe. The command for deference to the spindles, however, institutionalizes the county and places its allegiance firmly in the textile mill, the machine and not the individual. The spindles are the county's fame and the language indicates that the spindle is to be protected at all costs.

Following the celebration of textiles and another episode to salute to the soldiers in World War I, the eighth episode briefly salutes religion (followed by the ministers), education (followed by the children), the welfare workers (not followed), the various clubs in symbolic costume (not followed), farmer boys and girls, and finally music and arts. Lastly, Gastonia enters to the salute of trumpets. The pageant ends with a girl representing the spirit of Gaston County flanked by girls holding flags of North Carolina and the United States. A fourth girl, representing peace, stands behind the three. They remain standing as the crowd sings "America" and "America the Beautiful," their dramatic and patriotic salute on the Fourth of July (41-43).

As the primary residents of the town and the play's agents, the barons are in control of every action, both the writing and the onstage acting and thus what the audience sees suits the barons' purpose of celebration of self. In a grand and expensive



fashion, the pageant has displayed every facet of the barons' ownership and their right to ownership. It offers no hint of marginal voices, its own booming voice overpowering any other, concealing any sign of unrest or instability. Social facts are those things that people believe to be true and therefore bear on how they define a situation. People then act as though these facts were true (Austin 312). The drama, in a sense, sets up and acts out the social facts or rules of the barons' imagined community, creating a basis for truth that gives the barons' discourse the power it has assumed. Puett's history book reiterates those social facts, although her writing occurs in a different situation. She still is perpetuating the rules of joining, which include belief in the Christian religious doctrine, patriotism, and ownership of land and/or mills.

#### **Minnie Stowe Puett: Teacher and Sister of Early Textile Giant Defines the County**

Minnie Stowe Puett, a native of Belmont, an elementary school teacher, and sister of a mill owner, lends authenticity to her work by writing in the history genre. Her work is further authenticated because she was appointed by the Gaston County School Board to write the history, as were ninety-nine other people in the state's other ninety-nine counties. The situation in which Puett's history book was written differs from the situation in 1924 when she wrote of a section of the pageant in celebration of the success of the barons. By 1939 when Puett published *History of Gaston County*, the Loray Mill strike had ended ten years before and the poor economic conditions of the Great Depression had taken their toll on the mills. The barons still imagined themselves powerful in the world and in the community they had fashioned, but like Machiavelli, part of their world had crumbled. Even though they continued to see themselves as the

authority, the need was there to shape their stories and to redefine the place so as to make clear the parameters in which others had to function. Puett's motive is in preserving the past and in influencing behavior to follow that of the past. Her writing is what Burke calls "repetitive form" in which the same elements are used until they show a particular conclusion or attitude (Foss et al. 196). In this case, Puett portrays Gaston County, particularly Belmont, as a brave group of people, hard working, who can withstand problems. She identifies with the ideals of the American Dream, the Horatio Alger effect as she demonstrates the ability of the barons of Belmont to succeed.

Puett used her social position to situate the county's history in principles that reflected the codes of the barons, crafting each story to exemplify tenets of what it means to be a good American, hence a good Gaston County citizen. Although she never mentions the strike or the communists, her principles directly oppose those promoted by the communists. For instance, in the throes of the mill strikes the barons and the local newspaper had labeled the communists as godless with intentions to overthrow the US government; Puett threads faith in God and church building throughout her history. The communists attempted to use the workers to usurp the power of the barons; Puett declares that good Americans work within the context of company rules and do not complain. Puett's stated purpose is to "preserve the county's history" by putting together the pieces of history that were "made by [Gaston's] own people who lived on her own soil" because "Gaston has a right to claim it as her own" (Introduction). But her motive clearly is to use her appointed position of county historian to preserve the ownership and lifestyle of the barons.

History, Puett says, is the geographical aspects of a region and how people got there. The historian “must know how to estimate properly the influence of man’s various environments in altering his energy and capacity and moulding [sic] his character in one direction or another” (25). Three streams of migration shaped Gaston’s history: the first is the Indians and the third came from Africa and brought the blacks. But the second “and by far the most important stream rolled at flood tide from Europe and wrested from the Indians the land” (26). Her treatment of “the other” exposes her prejudices toward persons of color and anyone else who is not a baron. Those who exhibit characteristics of the barons may be included, but those groups that do not have these qualities are not mentioned. Loyalty, in particular loyalty to the barons, is important to Puett and she exemplifies the quality in stories about the Catawba Indians and the black slaves. The mill workers do not exhibit enough loyalty to be included in her history.

According to Puett, the Catawba Indians “were always loyal and made excellent guides, scouts, and runners” and they maintained a peaceful and friendly attitude toward the whites (20). She acknowledges “savage” goodness in a story about Catawba chief King Haiglar who avenged a white man’s death by shooting the Catawba brave who had killed the white man and stolen his fiddle. King Haiglar becomes “a monarch of a savage tribe [who had] elements of justice and right in his character which must be admired by those who live in a higher condition of life” (17).

Puett also assigns the quality of loyalty to black slaves and employs stereotypes and familiarities typical of the time period. She describes one slave as “Old *Uncle Tom*, the *loyal slave with the big feet*, [who] drove the cotton or goods to the train station”

(185). The assumption of loyalty and devotion as well as the assumed familiarity that allows the comment on foot size evidences how Puett views her social class. In another chapter she describes Confederate Army Colonel John Stowe as a “handsome, courtly country gentleman whom the slaves on his father’s plantation delighted to honor as ‘Marse John’” (201).

The first importation of field workers along with a hint that the workers are slaves is handled swiftly and buried in a chapter about the invention of Gaston County as a county on its own: “About 1830 cotton began to be grown in much greater quantities. Many colored families were brought in to help in its production” (172). She does not define “family” or elaborate on the labor issue. Later, she briefly mentions what the date of the first mill (1848) makes obvious—that in the early mills the workers were (black) slaves. This first mill employed slave labor to manufacture supplies for the Confederate Army during the Civil War: “There was a wool department during the war; blankets and Southern gray for the soldiers were made by Negro slave labor. There was no longer anything with which to pay white help. Barter had formerly been used” (188). Puett does not mention slaves or slave labor anywhere else in the book, but she has established loyalty as a quality and has situated the white mill worker as unpatriotic—unwilling to work for no wages even to support the cause of the war.

Puett seems more anxious to record the marriages and births of members of the prominent families in the eastern part of Gaston County and in so doing show the qualities required to be upper class. The principles of baronism, and by extension patriotism, as defined by Puett and exercised by members of the baron community

include the intuitiveness to know how to survive: to turn to hunting, fishing, and planting for necessary food; kindness to each other: “Neighborliness was one of the firm rocks upon which the colonies grew . . . friendly advice in sickness, or death, or any emergency out of the ordinary”; and co-operation: “as necessary for progress as it had been in obtaining a foothold” (84-85).

Bravery and willingness to fight for one’s country is exemplified in Puett’s story of the Battle of King’s Mountain, one of the major battles of the American Revolution. In describing the men from her hometown of Belmont, Puett writes: “Inspired by the zeal and patriotism of their leader, they were ever ready to stand or fall by [Major William Chronicle’s] side” (107). Chronicle died leading the South Fork Boys up the mountain to defeat the British and Puett describes the fallen leader as “a ceaseless, untiring defender of liberty, exerting an effective influence in spreading the doctrine of independence . . . a young man of great promise” (109-110). Puett’s brother later named a mill in honor of Chronicle whose bravery and willingness to fight to the death exemplified another important ideal.

Puett is not as willing to give up the Old South as her co-authors of the pageant. She holds on to the images of that war as if it is the end:

. . . again the men of Gaston County buckled on their swords, took up their trusty rifles, and went forth to engage in the fratricidal strife of the War between the States. For four long years the bloody strife went on before the flag of the Confederacy was furled and the hopes of the South drooped and died (195).

She defines and lists the important family names of the members of the six companies from Gaston County who exhibited the principle of patriotism by joining the

Confederate Army, or “offering [their] services to the state (201) and includes anecdotes about the colonels, each a story of a brave act. The willingness to die for one’s country has a moral grandeur that can’t be achieved by dying for anything that one can readily join or leave, such as an organization of some kind (Anderson 142). For Puett, the idea that these young men were willing to die for the Revolutionary cause and later the Confederate cause elevates them to a high social and class status. Since some of those who fought were Stowes, by virtue of birth, Minnie Stowe Puett is elevated with them.

As the flag of the Confederacy furled, so did some of the earliest textile mills. Puett romanticizes the building of the first mills and romanticizes their demise, blaming the Civil War while extolling the exemplary virtues the owners possessed:

At first the business prospered and a large fortune was made which was mostly lost during the war. If bills were collected at all, payment was made in Confederate money which was without value. . . . Could the murmuring river speak as it flows by the deserted ruins of the mill, it would tell of enterprise, achievement, and success followed by cruel disappointments in the wake of war (184).

In establishing the baron’s ethics as standards for the county, Puett exemplifies Belmont and the Stowe families as standard bearers. Actually, although she says she is writing the history of the county, other than listing the names of some who settled outside the Belmont area, she diminishes the importance of the towns west of Mount Holly and Belmont, including Gastonia, the site of the Loray strike. She then sets a scene in which the Stowes are prominent players who have brought industry and jobs to the region, saviors in the Reconstruction Period; however, she quickly moves over the importation of whites to work in the mills and the blacks’ forceful exit from the mills.

Puett uses her authority to sentimentalize McAdenville, important to her because her brother later would save it from textile disaster: “On the east bank rise rugged and precipitous hills, lapped by the singing waters of the river” (70). The mills built there were the precursors of the textile industry and Puett sets the scene for Adam Springs and his partner to join the ranks of hero: “Running a mill of this type was a leading enterprise in the early days, and remained so until the marvelous development of the cotton mill industry” (70). Her description of the cotton mill (the word textile would come later as the development of new fibers made the mills more than cotton) connotes a miracle or excellence. Certainly the barons who created the “cotton mills” are to be seen as workers of miracles.

Puett’s book is defined as much by what it excludes as what it includes. There is no mention of the Loray Mill strike or any other worker uprisings or discontent. She omits the owners of the mills in Gastonia, makes only a brief mention of the county seat moving from Dallas to Gastonia and allows that construction of the railroad, which is prominent in the Belmont area, precipitated that move. Like the other Gastonia barons, Joseph Separk, who gained his status through marriage and lost most of his holdings in the Great Depression, is not named in Puett’s story. He, however, includes the Stowes in his publications. For the most part, Puett confines her narrative to the heroism of the pioneers and a couple of pages near the end for the “great textile industry of Gaston County” (183).

She sets up the barons as those who invented the vision of the greatness of Gaston County, what they would take as their greatness that was to come. The railroad was

coming and “[i]t was glad news for the people” because they could get their farm goods to more places. But even more important: “with the beginning of the *great* textile industry the modern brick buildings which now dot the county began to be constructed” (206). As in the “great depression” and the “Great War,” great connotes something larger than—too big to use more than a marginal adjective to describe, Puett has marked the beginning of the textile industry in Gaston County (by members of her family, of course) as one of the greatest the county has ever experienced. She continues to extol the cotton mills:

They are the outcome of the development which has made Gaston County the center of the combed yarn industry of America. Cotton mills sprang up over the county until we now have more separate corporations than any county in the world (206).

There is no mention of the mill workers or of their struggle for better wages and better working conditions. In the statements of the growth of the textile industry, the greatness of the county is extolled in such a loud voice that it commands the attention and diverts any question of the cost of the progress to the other.

Puett ends her history with the language of the Chamber of Commerce: “Gaston County, though young and small, has developed from what was little more than an American frontier when set up to a place second to none in the great galaxy of North Carolina counties, and has become one of the foremost and the best” (207). Thus Puett establishes the residence of herself, her friends, and her relatives as one of prominence ready to compete with any one of the other ninety-nine for money, social class, and ancestry. The power negotiations are in the hands of the barons as is the language. They,



by inclusion and exclusion, form the identities of themselves and other residents of the county.

### **R. L. Stowe Sr.: A Memory of Self**

The writing of Robert L. Stowe Sr., Puett's brother and a Belmont mill baron, situates himself and his family as founders of the community and validates himself as a leader and a man of goodness. The preface of his memoir *Early History of Belmont and Gaston County North Carolina*, published in 1951, tells the history of the town and county as it relates to him. Although the preface is written in the third person and the rest of the book in first person, there is no signature at the end to indicate that anyone other than Stowe wrote it. He ends the preface:

Mr. Stowe has been known over the Southland as a steadfast Christian, a man interested in the welfare of man, and always anxious to help any who might be in distress. He has loaned money to many people whom he hardly knew with little hope of ever having it paid back to him because he practices the Golden Rule. His name is beyond reproach in Gaston County, and the people of Belmont today are thankful that he was willing to stake all his material resources in building a store and starting the vast cotton mill industry in Belmont (7-8).

In this short passage, Stowe imagines the ideal man in his image. He assumes a position of royalty for himself as he refers to himself in third person with a courtesy title—not R. L. Stowe, but *Mr.* Stowe, as if the public would not know him by any other name. Stowe remembers himself in terms of goodness that closely resembles the community tenets Puett included in her history. In true baron fashion, he appropriates the voice of the workers (common people) to thank himself for his benevolence.

The book is repetitive as Stowe rambles through his childhood and adulthood with stories he has heard and people he wishes to recognize. He constructs the mill owners as benevolent, creating and offering jobs to those who wish to work. The word “opportunity” conveys the assumption of Truslow Adams’s American Dream that assumes the worker is in charge of his/her destiny and with the opportunity to work can rise in the organization. In this scene, however, Stowe hides the truth: the mill is a necessity in the face of failed farms and hunger, a place to stay in the same job at the same pay until death.

When he rewrote Stowe’s early book, newspaper reporter and biographer Legette Blythe constructed Stowe and the other early textile pioneers as saviors:

. . . what Gaston County needed, what North Carolina needed, what, in fact, the defeated and depressed South needed to lift it out of the tragic era from which it had not yet emerged after the holocaust of a civil war in which it had been the heavier loser, Robert Lee Stowe concluded was industry, an industry that would provide jobs for people who could never attain to economic salvation under a purely agricultural economy, that would afford them steady and reliable income sufficient to provide the necessities of life and even a modicum, perhaps, of its luxuries (Blythe 90).

Never mentioning any intent that the workers should rise to the level of importance as the barons, Blyth’s book perpetuates the scene Stowe has constructed by lauding the efforts of Stowe to *give* to his community: “. . . hundreds, even thousands, in Gaston alone, perhaps, in years not too distant, would be regularly employed at good wages, that in turn would bring about a raising of the standard of living . . .” (90).

The history subgenre of memoir is a fitting container for Stowe’s somewhat disorganized memories. Within the boundaries of that container he can safely recall

events in any manner that suits him and still be above reproach—it is his memory. The chapters do not follow any particular order and appear to contain random parts of his life that he decided to memorialize. For instance, his beginning chapter deals with the early settlers, but he records only people who have gained prominence—other barons, effectively narrowing the scene to hide any parts of any event that disagree with his opinion of himself.

Stowe's recollections of the building of textile mills are limited to his own, Chronicle Mills (named for the revolutionary war major who died in battle), the Imperial Mill, the Majestic Mill, and the National—all with lofty names and all with essentially the same investors as in the other Stowe mills and the rest of the county. What is interesting in Stowe's memories are what he chooses to remember about the mills. After the first stockholders meeting, the officers were told to "build the mill building and equip it with machinery; to build the tenement houses and do all work and make all improvements that they considered necessary" (56). Except by extension of the mill machinery and the tenement houses, the workers are not mentioned. Stowe does not estimate the number of people the mill will require or what the tenement houses will consist of. In another reference to the mill he says: "The mill building was constructed from the very best of heart pine . . . In fact, The Chronicle mills contains the best lumber of any mill in Belmont." The mill houses and tenement houses were constructed of the same fine wood, he says (57). The machinery installed in the winter and the mill began producing yarn. The hiring of workers, where the workers came from, any mention of the workers is absent. Not even when a cyclone blows down some of the houses does he

mention the workers, only that he had to replace some of the houses. He ends the Chronicle Mill:

If the history of The Chronicle Mills were written, it would contain many instances that would make interesting reading as it would be a history of a pioneer adventure which had to make its way with patience, hard work and sacrifice through great difficulties. In the early days money was scarce, skilled labor was unavailable and obstacles had to be surmounted in everything that was done (61).

There is no mention of a strike—not a mention of the Loray Mill or any other mills in Gastonia. He does, however, acknowledge that some of those Gastonia and Loray Mill owners (by name, not identified with the Gastonia mills they owned) were stockholders in his own Chronicle Mills. Stowe does mention the switch from steam to electric power, the expansion of the mills in the area, the stockholders and the buying and selling of stock. He is silent about the workers and about any hint of labor unrest. The Chronicle Mill began operation in 1902, twenty-seven years before the Loray strike and operated for more than fifty years after the strike, but the workers and the unions are not present in Stowe's memoir.

He ends the chapter with another tenet of citizenship in Gaston County—faith in God: “I realize that there is an unseen hand that guides us through the great difficulties and obstacles of life” (61). Stowe has touched all the tenets—set forth by himself and his sister—that make his family and his friends the stalwart members of the community. He avoids mentioning any worker dissatisfaction. Rather, he has used his memoir as the agent of the Chamber of Commerce picture-perfect world that he and his friends created and rule.

### Joseph Separk's Directories

Joseph Separk, who was a teacher, mill executive, and writer of directories, was a great promoter of the town of Gastonia and Gaston County. Over a span of forty years, he wrote four directories, all of which became in some fashion extensions of the Chamber of Commerce to encourage more businesses to move to the area and, in turn, increase the riches of the county barons. Separk was not a native; he was recruited by the Gastonia prominent as a teacher and headmaster for Oakland High School. He rose to prominence in the business world when he married a daughter of one of the Loray Mill stockholders. He then became secretary-treasurer of the Loray Mill, a title he often employed in his chronicles of the development of Gaston County. His directories were published in 1906, 1926, 1936, and 1949 and were financed with subscriptions and advertisements from the community. The 1906 and the 1936 directories are of most interest for this study as they fall within the pre-strike scene and the post-strike scene.

His first directory, *Illustrated Handbook of Gastonia, North Carolina*, published in 1906, under the auspices of the Gastonia Commercial Club, is an 84-page book that promotes the members of the Gastonia Commercial Club and their businesses. Heavily illustrated with photographs of the club members, their houses, their mills, and their churches, the book is predominantly a celebration of good men doing well.

The Commercial Club was “an organization created for industrial, commercial and social purposes” and the first big move to the “larger advertisement of the town” (3). After briefly describing how the Commercial Club was organized, Separk includes photographs of some of the 104 members, inserting his picture again as a member of the

club, who also are the barons and the owners of the ten cotton mills that have sprung up in the town. Separk describes each of the cotton mills with “full details as to equipment, capital stock, present officers, etc.” He gives much space to the mills, he says, because “the mills have largely made the town” (19). He includes a photograph of each mill, each one more like a castle than the last, and a photograph of at least one of the officers of the mill. He includes two pictures of the Gray Manufacturing Company, with which he is associated. There are no photographs of the inside of any mill and no workers are visible in any of the pictures. Rather, the pictures are of Chamber of Commerce quality designed to show the prosperity of the town.

Separk also includes photographs of the homes of the prominent. The “handsome residences” of Gastonia are a matter to be pointed out and Separk lists the prices of the “comfortable and handsome” houses at between \$5,000 and \$20,000. The beauty of the surrounding areas is enhanced by the planting of roses and numerous shade trees, he remarks. “Thanks to the aesthetic tastes of our city fathers, that they have not followed the example of many towns and laid low, with the ruthless axe, the beautiful trees, in their eagerness to make the town city-like” (16).

Although Separk goes to great detail to tell about the homes of the barons and the beauty that surrounds them, he makes no mention of any houses around the mills, not even to mention that housing is included on the mill property. The Loray Mill is pictured in the book, along with others that the Loves, Grays, and Separk had an interest in. No mill houses are visible in any of the photos of the mills. The church listing includes three Methodist churches: Main Street (Separk’s church), West End, and Ozark. The latter two

are in the outlying areas where mills were or soon would be and get only a listing. The write up is reserved for Main Street Methodist only. Unlike the advertisements in the *Gastonia Gazette* and flyers made by individual mills to recruit workers to the mills, Separk's appeals are not aimed at recruiting a lower class or workers to Gastonia. His motive is to entice more people like himself to join the barons who already are there. He ends the book with "The End/is not yet/Watch Gastonia Grow" (84).

At the time of this publication, the scene was one of a growing community with no hint of the labor issues. Separk writes of the importance of Gaston County for the businessman: "There are more cotton factories in Gaston county than in any other county in the South, and there are more of these factories in Gastonia than in any other town in the county" (13). As for city government: "As a rule our town affairs have always been conservatively and impartially administered. There are very few, if any, better governed towns than ours" (15). He lists two pages of the city's amenities at the end of his directory and leaves the reader with, "Watch Gastonia Grow" (84).

Separk published his third directory in 1936, seven years after the Loray Mill strike and the stock market crash that ushered in the Great Depression. This book contains more of the same information as the first, but this time he must change the language so that it is more than listings. There is a deliberate effort to pump up the good things so as to hide the labor disputes of the late 1920s and the early 1930s that brought the area into the national spotlight. In this particular directory he lists the attributes of the county, including churches, schools, businesses, and civic and commercial organizations. In a section about Gaston County, he writes:

The development of its cotton textile industry, starting in 1848 with one factory of a few thousand spindles, has grown in these eighty-seven years to 104 textile plants of 1,200,000 spindles, giving our county the record of the largest number of cotton mills of any county in America, and in spindles placing her the first in the state, first in the Southland and third in the nation (3).

SePark makes no mention of the people who have come to the town to work in the mills in this or in any other place in the 169-page directory. They are as absent as the pictures of the houses in which they lived. He also leaves out the bankruptcy of many mills in the late 1920s and their takeover by local bankers or anxious Northern stockholders, who later sought to close the mill. Carefully avoiding any labor and financial issues that had occurred at the Loray Mill site, SePark writes:

From the day the announcement of the closing of the Manville-Jenckes Mill was made, the Chamber of Commerce took active leadership in the movement that finally resulted in the location of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Co., one of the most important industrial changes that has occurred in the South in the past several years (94).

Obviously, SePark's purpose is to grow the county through new investors so he hides the uncomfortable issues. The 1929 strike at the Loray Mill (Manville-Jenckes) that put Gastonia in the national spotlight and eventually caused the closing of the mill has been omitted. SePark hides the ten years of labor unrest and bankruptcies under the Chamber of Commerce's help in the sale of the mill.

SePark redirects the national publicity of the strikes to read:

Many thousands of pieces of literature have been distributed throughout the nation giving desirable publicity to Gastonia and Gaston County. Special articles have been written for various newspapers and trade magazines, and numerous radio broadcasts have been sponsored (94).



Separk's use of the passive voice as well as the preposition "for" rather than "by" here also indicate that the articles probably are Chamber of Commerce generated, a practice that has continued into the twenty-first century. The motives vary somewhat according to the agents, but all are concerned with power and grandeur. He does not list the articles as many of them were negative pieces about the mill strikes.

Other changes in this edition include a change of title to *Gastonia and Gaston County North Carolina: Past, Present, and Future*. This 169-page paperback edition is double the 84-page 1906 volume. The history Gaston County Textile Manufacturers' Association and the Southern Combed Yarn Spinners Association is carefully laid out without mention of any labor issues: "The purpose of the organization was to solidify the textile manufacturers in a movement altogether constructive in its nature, a movement indeed having in mind only the welfare of operators and operatives" (96). The group organized in 1908, expanded in 1925, and changed its name in 1933 and so apparently remained strong throughout the strikes. However Separk's issues for this group are price-fixing and antitrust issues. Prominent in the newspapers during the strikes, the group is engulfed in silence in Separk's directory.

The section for the mills has increased and is now entitled "Industrial," but the number of photographs has diminished. Separk divides the mills into Division A, which lists the plants that were in operation as of October 1935, and Division B, a list of all the mills that were chartered from 1848 to 1935. Without mentioning any strike or economic downturn that caused many mergers, Separk explains his reasoning for the selection: "Because of their status as the pioneer cotton textile plants, I have deemed it wise to give

a somewhat detailed history of the first five or six mills established in the county and like information on the first five or six strictly Gastonia mills” (114). This allows him to include himself and others who have lost their money but keep their status as barons. He lists in Section A Textiles Inc., the corporation that emerged from the merger of many of the smaller mills when the Great Depression rendered them financially inoperable. Separk is listed as one of the incorporators as are many of the others whose houses and wealth were celebrated in the 1906 edition. He is not listed as one of the “present officers.” Firestone Cotton Mills is listed and pictured in the A Section. It is clear from the list in Section A that Gastonia and Gaston County was hit hard by the depression—most of the entries contain the description “merger” and most bear incorporation dates between 1930 and 1934. But Separk makes no mention of hard times or of any trouble that the barons might be having. Like the feudal lords, he remains stalwart and confident.

Section B has much longer entries. Separk has included a sentimental history of all of the old mills. He also lists Gastonia Cotton Manufacturing Co. as the first mill in Gastonia, organized in 1887, after those in Belmont and surrounding areas of the county. Not mentioning the workers, Separk says, “The original building of this plant in 1887 brought a considerable increase in the population of Gastonia, and this was maintained uninterruptedly for a number of years” (121). Separk’s volume lists Loray Mills as organized in 1900 with an authorized capital of one million dollars, the most capital ever issued for a mill in the area. He relates various changes in management as “reorganization was effected” (124) and then the sale to the Manville-Jenckes Corporation of Rhode Island. Finally he lists the sale of the mill to Firestone Corporation

in 1935. There is no mention of labor troubles or of the strike that took the life of the Gastonia police chief and helped the barons label striking workers as un-American communists.

The listing of religious organizations is greatly expanded from the 1906 edition; however, only the churches of the barons are mentioned. Separk includes a couple of paragraphs on the Negro churches, but nothing on any churches outside the barons' uptown area or the prominent areas in other Gaston towns.

Separk devotes considerable space to the new Gastonia High School on York Street, completed in 1929 and in walking distance for most of the children of the barons. The building's assets include a pipe organ, a swimming pool, telephones and electric clocks in each room (53). As in any fiefdom, photographs of the school board members are the same barons that operate the mills. Separk says, "One only has to look at the names of the men who have served on the School Board to realize that they have been men whose history is interlocked with that of Gastonia" (54). The close-knit society of barons maintains their created community of royalty by tight control over the systems, making sure that their names are listed.

The only indication that times may not be so prosperous is at the back of the book and entitled "The Future":

Gastonia and Gaston County turn proud faces to a splendid past; they stand undaunted in a trying present; they look with confidence toward a bright future. Those stalwart men who long years ago, out of a near-wilderness, wrought what is now Gastonia and Gaston County were men of a fine courage and spirit. That same fine courage and spirit still live in the men of today, and the future of this community will be of no less credit to them than were the great achievements of the past to their forefathers (142).

The “trying present” of strikes, labor issues, mill closings and mergers, and the aftermath of the Great Depression will not defeat them and Separk has exemplified the barons’ attitude toward themselves. They will continue in their constructed world, holding to the planks of the past that built the present and they will continue to be the owners and the rulers of the worker serfs.

### **Conclusion**

The stories and memories are more than simple recordings of a group. Embedded in them are the tenets of the community—a way to legitimize the establishment of ownership for them and their exclusion for the others. They carefully script principles of Americanism and Christianity to exclude those principles they associated with the Northern union leaders: superiority of Russian government, socialism, social equality, free love, and atheism. Borrowing from the nation-building language that defined the United States and creating something that demanded allegiance to a specific set of rules and dogma, Minnie Stowe Puett, R. L. Stowe Sr., and Joseph Separk assumed the power of authorship to take the position of truth-teller and memory-keeper in the county and thus became the ones to create the rules. This role became very important when their acts must ignore Communist union organizers, which they accomplish by creating a space that conflates the qualities of Americans with those of good Gastonians. As they create this scene they can exclude (or hide) all union organizers and union members or label them as un-American and thus make them unimportant and unworthy for inclusion in the community.

The writer barons chose different ways to record the history of the county, but in all instances, the intent was to glorify themselves and their friends and acquaintances whom they deemed deserving of recognition. In each case, however, they alter the scene to include only the parts of the history that benefit them and leave out any part that may make the county look less than prosperous or themselves less than regal. Each writer uses the agency of the printed word to establish his/her own worth and carefully re-creates the scene to include the friends who expect to be included in such a display of royalty.

Whether or not their economic status changed, they continued to maintain the dominant discourse and thus silence the workers. In their positions as creators of the community, the barons controlled what was said and how it was said. The defeat of the unions had silenced any worker complaints and any stories of the strike. As late as 1978 questions about the strike continued to be answered with a terse, “Some things don’t need to be talked about. They are over.” The barons had established their stories and they and the community assigned the truth to those stories. To maintain their jobs the workers remained silent, admonishing any inquisitive newcomer to “leave that strike mess alone.”

#### **End Notes:**

1. The barons continue today to write about the mill strike and the workers in an attempt to convey the message of themselves as saviors in the communism struggle. From 1987 to 2008 the Gaston County Historical Society attempted to erect a historical marker at the site of the Loray Mill strike. The barons objected to the language and insisted that the language reflect the defeat of “the first Communist efforts to control Southern textiles.” In mid 2008, they gave in and the plaque, when installed, will have the original message: A strike in 1929 at the Loray Mill, 200 yards S., left two dead and spurred opposition to labor unions statewide.”

### CHAPTER III

#### DISADVANTAGED PLACES: THE WORKERS SEARCH FOR RECOGNITION

We create our identities from how we see ourselves and how we see ourselves reflected in others. Our perspectives change as our daily routines carry us from our own spaces to the spaces of others and back again. Some discourses emerge from the margins of others, transgress those of the dominant and, as subversive rhetorics, demand to be heard in their transgression. The workers in the Gaston County mills developed such a discourse when the shackles of their work tightened to the unbearable and by April 1929 some of them walked out of the mills and refused to work until conditions improved. However, the strikes ended in September of that year when a group of workers on the way to a union demonstration encountered gunmen who shot and killed Ella May Wiggins, a worker and balladeer (Cope and Wellman 172). Like the black slaves in the fields less than a century before, the millworkers use ballads and songs to tell of their misery, recount stories of their losses, and cry out for better conditions. Through the songs and an occasional speech at a union rally the workers' public voice rang out in definition, either in association with each other's situations or as encouragement to keep up their faith during the darkest days of their submission.

When they went to work or had business with the "bossman," the mill workers assumed the identities that the barons created for them, an identity of silent servitude essentially a part of and confined to the mill. In this assumed identity, workers were to

remain silent when in the barons' territory. The barons created identities for the workers that were based on their conception of obedience and work performance and rated the workers on a scale from good to shiftless. In *Some Southern Mill Workers and Their Towns*, Jennings J. Rhyne refers to the habits of shiftlessness of some of the workers (35) and separates the cotton mill workers into two, "possibly three" social levels: the highest level is the home-owning workers who are somewhat immune to the social levels of cotton mill families; those who do not own their homes, but have become part of the mill town, rated slightly lower than the first group, suffer little from exclusion (49); the drifters whose work habits of frequently moving from one mill to another along with "an apparent shiftlessness" have relegated them to work at the worst mills (41-42). However, he concludes that "[i]rresponsibility would seem to be the principal distinguishing characteristic of the [workers] as a whole" (49).

In Kenneth Burke's terms, this scene is one in which the mill owners control the workers socially and financially and are unwilling to change the conditions because changes would affect their profit margin. It is against this dominance that the workers engage in rebellious acts in either songs or protest speeches. In their act of protesting against the barons, the songs become the agency for the workers, a way to convince other workers that union membership will give them more voice in their workplace. Their motives are to get a decent wage, decent hours, and decent working conditions—what they thought they were getting when they left the farms to become part of a workforce.

The songwriters identify themselves as victims of the barons' greed and sing from the shared experiences of their children starving or dying from childhood diseases and

their own broken and worn out bodies. These workers use this authority that comes from hard experience and thus identify with all the workers as they appeal for unity among themselves and argue that their numbers can force the barons to make changes. As the strikes and rallies during the year of 1929 widened the division between the workers and the barons, the workers' appeals to their colleagues to unify intensified as did their persuasive appeals to have faith in the promises of the union.

The workers came into the towns from the mountains and foothills where their farming could no longer support them and settled both physically and rhetorically on the outside of town in company houses on the "mill hill." The Loray Mill was one of the many mills built on the outskirts of town that included houses for the workers on the mill property. The close proximity of the mill house to the mill meant that workers could hear the mill whistle summon them to the mill quickly in the morning, home for lunch or supper, and back to the mill. The barons also used the mill houses to keep their workers: adults living in the house who had to work in the mill in order to stay in the house and workers had to work in the mill that owed the house. They could not live in at one place and work in another. If finances permitted, a woman might not work in the mill as long as she performed the duties of homemaker instead of working (Rhyne 16). When the workers complained or attempted to take actions for change, their acts of defiance were performed under the threat of losing their jobs or in some cases, losing their lives, as did Ella May Wiggins. Communist union organizer Fred Beal describes the fear of a one young woman: "A girl came near us and whispered as she passed by: 'the boss-men are all here, taking the names of those at the meeting'" (Proletarian Journey 127). Beal also



describes the barons' actions when the workers protested, "From a window of one of the mills a worker shouted that the bosses had locked them in until quitting time but that they were coming out to join us" (135). Beal and other communist union organizers from the North arrived in 1927 and attempted to break the baron-imposed public silence on the workers. The struggle began in earnest to control the public discourse and to persuade both audiences of workers, barons, and the general public. The workers sent their voices high in their protests, singing against the bosses in the mills and the local newspaper, *The Gastonia Gazette*, which daily published articles and editorials aimed at discouraging the workers and maintaining the dominant discourse of the barons. On April 5, 1929, the editorial on the front page of the newspaper referenced warnings from a representative of the U.S. Department of Labor and Charlottean David Clark, whom the paper describes as "a prominent textile authority" and editor of the *Southern Textile Bulletin* with the admonition:

Both these men are telling some truths that ought to sink home in the minds of these people of the Loray Village. Mr. Wood says that the leaders of the strike are revolutionists, and that as long as the people are misled by folks like that there will be no common ground on which employer and employe (sic) can meet . . . there can be no mediation until these so-called leaders are removed (1).

Foucault tells us that the power to control discourse is the master power in any society. Some principles of exclusion are external to the discourse itself. One is prohibition of certain kinds of talk by certain people in certain places and another is a distinction between what is true and what is false. Internal principles of exclusions include the genres the speaker is allowed to use (Foucault qtd. in Brummett 817). And

while the *Gazette* allowed some letters to the editor that disagreed with its editorial stance, as part of the master power, the newspaper returned the volley with even more anti-union, anti-strike editorials. In the newspaper, the letters to the editor appeared always inside the newspaper on the editorial page, while the paper often carried its major opinion piece on the labor unions on the front page as well as on the editorial page.

This led the workers to employ a genre that allowed their own expertise and authority. Steeped in the music that flavored their mountain discourse, the workers chose “songs” as their primary method of action. Songs sung at rallies, at the looms, and in spinning rooms transgressed the dominant discourse in action and reaction. Both the occasion of the composition of the song arose from the worker’s rejection of the conditions at the mills and performance of the song at union rallies, defiant acts (reaction) from the margins, allow the workers to assume situational power if only for short periods of time. Theirs is not an effort to join the dominant discourse but to interrupt it and to create their own discourse that is equal in power and authority. Each song reflects a particular incident or grievance and invents appeals to the workers to demand remedies: a labor union, defense league, shorter hours, and fair wages. The songs became a rallying point for the workers and the songs with familiar (borrowed) melodies produced a double voicedness remembered and repeated at the looms and spinning frames inside the mills. Like the songs of the black slaves the barons owned in the years before the factories replaced the fields and the white workers replaced the slaves, some of the workers’ songs call out the barons or directly criticize them. Others employ the pathos of starving children and blame the barons as they call the workers to action. Appearing harmless on

the surface, work songs were long considered just that—creation of a rhythm of mind and body that make the work go smoother. Just as the black slaves told their stories to the world in song, the mill workers turned to the song genre to tell of their misery and to talk of hope for change. As W.E.B. Du Bois reminds us of the songs of the slaves, the message “is naturally veiled and half articulate . . . they grope toward some unseen power and sigh for rest in the end” (259). Even in hard-hitting songs of complaint or misery, the barons often mistakenly viewed them as harmless mumblings of the lower (powerless) class, until some action began to accompany the words. As a result, some of the workers’ songs took on more dangerous and risky positions and in some cases were louder about the abuses the workers suffered, blatantly comparing themselves to the barons. In the context of the mill, the singer’s position is worker with no authority; however, in the context of the union meeting, it changes to performer with agency, which makes the workers’ discourse dominant during the union meeting and heard by the outside audiences. Two of the most prolific songwriters were David McCarn who recorded some of his laments about the textile industry as a whole and Ella May Wiggins whose songs took on a religious nature and uplifted the workers at union rallies. She was killed because she wouldn’t stop singing and attempting to organize workers (*Let’s Stand Together* 5).

### **Ella May Wiggins Transgresses in Full Sight**

Ella May Wiggins, a Bessemer City mill worker who was active in the demand for a union and better working conditions, related membership in the labor union to going to heaven in her attempts to recruit workers into the membership. She was one of the

most vocal of the strikers; and was shot to death while traveling the 10 miles from Bessemer City to a union demonstration in Gastonia. An uneducated farm worker, Wiggins, her husband, and their nine children moved from Bryson City, NC, to Gaston County to work at the American Mill in Bessemer City for \$8 a week. Not long after the move, the husband vanished. Four of her children died from croup or whooping cough because she could not afford medical care and the mill boss would not let her change shifts so she could care for them. She took the occasion of her own misery and that of the other women who toiled in the mills of Gaston County to invent acts of rebellion through song.

Wiggins employs a number of rhetorical strategies as she appropriates tunes from other popular songs; incorporates the pathos of needy children, helpless parents, poverty of low wages, jailed workers; and appeals to the workers to persuade them to better their lives by joining a union. Usually she chose a tune with lyrics that underwrote or were similar to her message and inserted her words into the familiar tune. The conflation of the two songs creates powerful images as the audience hears the familiar with new words and combines former images with new ones. For instance, Wiggins sets her call for workers to join the union and a defense league that supports the union leaders' release from jail to the tune of a popular hymn about going to heaven. She titles her song "Toiling on Life's Pilgrim Pathway" and takes the tune of "When We All Get to Heaven," Eliza Hewitt's popular Pentecostal hymn.<sup>2</sup> In using the well-known hymn, Wiggins double voices the plight of the workers and the speech becomes an appeal for them to take the union path (heaven) as a means of relief from the oppression of the mill. Then what the workers are

saying connotes more than the words themselves, much like a shared heavenly glory in membership in the union and the defense league. The refrain's appeal or altar call to accept the Christian way of life, "When we all get to Heaven, / What a day of rejoicing that will be! / When we all see Jesus, / We'll sing and shout the victory" (Hewitt) acts as a direct appeal to her audience to accept the union as the way of life and hope: "Come and join the ILD<sup>2</sup> / Come and join the ILD/ It will help to win the victory /If you will join the ILD." For the workers the original words "clouds [that] o'erspread the sky" become their own as they sing, "When the bosses cut your wages / and you toil the labor free" (186). The appeal to "be true and faithful, / Trusting, serving every day" carries with it the idea that the "unsaved" should get right with the union (Jesus). It is more than a cursory thing to serve the union is every day and believing that the union is the way to worker salvation. The first verse of each song is below and shows how Wiggins conflates Jesus's love with the blessedness of the union. Hewitt's original hymn is on the left.

Sing the wondrous love of Jesus	Toiling on life's pilgrim pathway
Sing His mercy and His grace.	Wheresoever you may be
In the mansions bright and blessed	It will help you fellow workers
He'll prepare for us a place.	If you will join the ILD (186)

The elusive heaven where the tired worker can at least find rest becomes available one earth. Peace and goodness comes from joining, contributing to the ILD.

Each of Wiggins's songs addresses a specific part of the overall scene and suggests acts to remedy the situations. In a ballad written shortly after Gastonia Police

Chief O. F. Aderholt was shot and killed during a union-police confrontation,<sup>3</sup> Wiggins's motive is clearly an appeal to the workers to remain strong even though the shooting that erupted may have cost them precious gains. The police chief had accompanied some Gastonia police officers to the Loray Mill where the disputes between the strikers and the mill guards had become more frequent; and the tents that housed the displaced workers and the union office that had food and supplies for the strikers had been vandalized. Each side blamed the other for the trouble, but there was fear that the unrest would erupt into fighting, which it did. The tune of Wiggins's song, set to the popular ballad "Floyd Collins," underscores Wiggins's ballad of "Chief Aderholt," thus conflates Aderholt's death with that of a Kentucky spelunker who died when no one could free his pinned foot. However, Wiggins implies double meaning in this appeal to the workers to stand strong in the face of trouble and compares Floyd Collins's death not only to the death of the police chief but as a warning of the possible death of the union and subsequently the hopes of the workers. Wiggins double voices the importance of remaining strong in the strike and joining the union as the workers in the cave promise "We'll never, no we'll never let Floyd Collins die" (Dalhart), but then cannot save him. Sixteen workers and union leaders were jailed after the police chief was shot, which left the union hall without their leadership, a move that could lead the local union members to fear defeat, abandon the union effort, and return to their jobs. It is necessary for Wiggins and the staunch supporters to rally the troops and keep the spirits up so that the spirit of the union remains strong.

The first line of the Kentucky song calls “all the good people,” directing the appeal in a differentiation between her audience of the “good workers and those who support the union” from that opposing (not good) audience of the *Gastonia Gazette*, the local newspaper that immediately accused the union of making incendiary statements at a rally, that started the gunfire that caused the deaths. The old folk tune command “listen to what I tell” signals the telling of a different version, the union’s side that opposes what is told in print. The admonition to listen signals the story and the ballad’s moral. This song is a very important one because now that the strike has become violent the appeals must be more than just joining up or supporting a union; they must render pathos in the audience. Wiggins must command attention to the differences of opinion and use the song to combat the fear of retaliation in the work place, a move that could signal the demise of the union. It is important that in singing the song the workers recast the newspaper story and the editorials that call for a forced dissolution of the union into a hope that all is not lost and for the worker audience a song is the best method to communicate.

Wiggins is acutely aware that while the union leaders are jailed, their absence at the union hall could cause disorganization in the ranks if the workers do not “stand together, and to the boss reply; / We’ll never, no we’ll never let our leaders die” (Lomax 130) The promise is the same as the workers in the cave declaring that “We’ll never, no we’ll never let Floyd Collins die,” (Dalhart) and must be met with strength to ensure that neither the leaders nor the union is allowed to die. Again what the workers are saying connotes more than the words themselves when they sing, “get right with you Maker (the

union) before it is too late.” The importance of support while the leaders are jailed could mean the difference in keeping and losing the union and the workers’ voice.

Situated in the ongoing battle between the union and the mill, the ballad outlines the issues, essentially recreating the battle between the police and the union in issues. The dire straits of the Loray Mill, “Manville Jencks [is] in pain,” is pitted against the dire straits of the communist union leaders: charged, jailed, and on trial for the police chief’s death. The emotional appeals are to stave off the death of the union by losing the fear of retaliation, jail, no bail, trial, and any other impending doom. Rather, just as the major rescue units of the town in Kentucky could not save Floyd Collins and no one could resurrect Aderholt, the institutions of the barons and the town will not be able to rescue the Manville-Jenckes Company. The prediction of the death of Floyd Collins is changed to a prediction of the triumph of the union.

We’re going to have a union all over the South,  
 Where we can wear good clothes, and live in a better house.  
 Now we must stand together, and to the boss reply:  
 We’ll never, no we’ll never let our leaders die (180-181).

Material dreams are wrapped in this stanza with the implication that if the union dies, so do the dreams. The demand that all *stand* together, solid, and find the voice to talk back to the bosses exacts a promise that if repeated often enough becomes a mantra: *never* let the leaders die, a vow of protection, solidarity. At the same time there is the implication of never dying or living forever through the union.

Wiggins maintained the authority of a mother, worker, and union member until she died and she continued to write songs for the workers that encouraged membership in



the union by listing the grievances and depicting the injuries to the children that occurred because the barons refused to allow workers any leeway in shifts or work weeks for the care of sick children. Wiggins, a white woman, was sympathetic to the black people who were, for the most part, not allowed to work in the mills except for sweeping, lifting, and sorting rags for wages at less than a dollar a day. To the chagrin of the barons who had not had black labor in the mill since the slaves were freed, Wiggins worked to include the black workers in the union and she organized union rallies in Stumptown, where many of the Bessemer City blacks lived (*Let's Stand Together* 9). Her actions flew in the faces of the barons who had previously threatened white strikers with being replaced by black workers.

Wiggins's songs incorporate recurring themes: low wages and poverty, jail, the union, hungry children, and the bosses or barons—all themes that resonate with the workers and rally them to the union cause. One of the many forms her songs and chants take is one well-known among members of the black community, that of signification. Theorist Henry Louis Gates Jr. contends that Signifyin', a fundamentally black form that becomes "second nature" to its users, employs intertextuality and repetition as well as phonetic substitutions to create songs or chants that either make fun of the other out in the open or veiled so that the meaning is clear only to those who understand the play (Gates 65-68). Invoking the bossman is equivalent to invoking the devil and Wiggins uses this invocation to incite her audience to action by listing the infractions of the devil bossman. Wiggins chooses a method of direct signification on the bosses (both the barons or owners and the immediate bosses in the mills who had been promoted from the ranks of

the workers). In “The Big Fat Boss and the Workers” she sets up a comparison of the bossman and the worker, essentially a signification on the boss man. She seizes the continuing tension between the barons and the workers (some of whom are jailed) as an occasion to lay out their differences:

The boss man wants our labor, and money to pack away,  
 The workers want a union and the eight-hour day.  
 The boss man hates the workers, the workers hates the boss  
 The boss man rides in a big fine car and the workers has to walk  
(Let’s Stand Together 22).

The dichotomy imitates the signification that black slaves used on the masters: “We raise de wheat / Dey gib us de corn/ . . . And dat’s de way / Dey takes us in.” While it may appear to be a ditty in which the workers are jokingly comparing themselves to their bosses, Wiggins is directly signifying on the bosses or using a form of “troping” to make fun of them (Gates 67). Where the slave lyrics end with a “joke” as to how the white owners trick them, Wiggins ends with a trick for the bosses: Fred Beal will get out of jail and continue to organize the workers and the union and International Defense League will reign over the bosses. The differences in the delivery of appeals in her songs indicate that Wiggins knows her audience. She uses each situation to create a song fitting to the new dilemma and carefully chooses a popular song to merge meaning so that one reflects the other.

In “All around the Jailhouse” Wiggins takes not only the tune of a song that was popular at the time; she takes chunks of the words. This ballad recounts the story of a striker whose attempt to get out of jail is thwarted because s/he has no money to pay bail.

It is sung to the tune of Jimmie Rodgers's "Waiting for a Train," a story of a man who is far away from home, doesn't have the fare for the ride home, and is thrown off the train.

### All Around the Jailhouse

All around the jailhouse,  
Waiting for a trial;  
One mile from the union hall,  
Sleeping in the jail.

I walked up to the policeman,  
To show him I had no fear,  
*He said, "If you got money,  
I'll see that you don't stay here."*

*"I haven't got a nickel,  
Not a penny can I show"*  
"Lock her back up in the cell," he said,  
As he slammed the jailhouse door.

He let me out in July,  
*The month I dearly love,  
The wide open spaces all around me,  
The moon and the stars above.*

Everybody seems to want me,  
Everybody but the scabs,  
I'm on my way from the jailhouse,  
I'm going back to the union hall.

Though my tent now is empty,  
My heart is full of joy.  
I'm a mile away from the union hall,  
Just a-waiting for a strike (Wiggins 185).

### Waiting for a Train

All around the water tank,  
waiting for a train  
A thousand miles away from home,  
sleeping in the rain.

I walked up to a brakeman,  
Just to give him a line of talk  
*He said, "If you got money,  
I'll see that you don't walk"*

*"I haven't got a nickel,  
Not a penny I can show."*  
"Get off, Get off, you railroad bum"  
and slammed the boxcar door.

He put me off in Texas,  
*A state I dearly love.  
The wide open spaces all around me,  
The moon and the stars up above.*

Nobody seems to want me,  
Or lend me a helping hand.  
I'm on my way from Frisco,  
Going back to Dixieland

My pocketbook is empty  
And my heart is full of pain.  
I'm a thousand miles away from home  
Just waiting for a train (Rodgers).

Wiggins applies the situation of separation from the union workers because of money issues to a situation of not being able to get home because of money issues. The song places Wiggins (and the members of the union) in a position of membership or

community and excludes from that community those who have taken the jobs of the striking workers, the “scabs.” When she wrote this song many of the striking workers had been thrown out of the mill-owned houses and were sleeping in tents at the union hall across the street from the Loray Mill. The calls for strike in March 1929 after the union leaders arrived in January set up the opposition and in an attempt to quickly quell the strikes the barons set up ropes to keep the workers from entering the mill and evicted them from their houses, causing a tent city in front of the Loray Mill (Beal Proletarian Journey 109-173). So what Wiggins is saying connotes more than the words. Threading through her lyrics and joining the community that she creates are the hobo, the displaced worker, the homeless—everybody but the “scab” who represents all that the others are not. Wiggins also implies that the workers are going to go to heaven or experience a heaven on earth. “My tent is now empty” references the empty tomb of Jesus—a flying up or flying out of the dangers and hatefulness of the mill to rise to a better place.

One of Wiggins’s earliest songs is arguably the most quoted and the one that caught the attention of folksinger Pete Seeger who recorded it.<sup>4</sup> “The Mill Mother’s Lament,” appeals to every mother who can’t give herself or goods to her children, laments the situation, and makes a strong appeal for all workers (male and female) to join the union:

We leave our homes in the morning,  
 We kiss our children good bye,  
 While we slave for the bosses  
 Our children scream and cry.  
 And when we draw our money,  
 Our grocery bills to pay,  
 Not a cent to spend for clothing,

Not a cent to lay away.  
 And on that very evening  
 Our little son will say:  
 'I need some shoes, mother,  
 And so does sister May.'  
 How it grieves the heart of a mother,  
 You every one must know,  
 But we can't buy for our children,  
 Our wages are too low.  
 It is for our little children,  
 That seems to us so dear,  
 But for us nor them, dear workers,  
 The bosses do not care.  
 But understand, all workers,  
 Our union they do fear.  
 Let's stand together, workers,  
 And have a union here (184)

Wiggins becomes the voice of and is one with all working women whose jobs demand separation from their children but does not compensate them with a wage that equals goods for the children who were deprived of their mothers. In Wiggins's world the babies and children who were too young to work in the mills were left alone, but the mothers tended each other's jobs and took turns going home to tend the children. One complaint that precipitated the strike at the Loray Mill was the chain-link fence that kept the workers inside, consequently prohibiting the mothers from periodically checking on their children. There was no question about why the fence was installed: the posts above the chain link on which the barbed wire rested were pointed to the inside to prevent workers from leaving rather than to the outside, which would keep intruders out. The fence then made the workers more like slaves, chained to their jobs and locked in the mill with no hope of getting out until the whistle blew, as Wiggins references twice in her song: "we slave for the bosses" and "you toil the labor free."

Evoking the image of “slave” parallels the situation of the blacks who were possessions of the barons and toiled in the fields before the fields were turned into mills. The connotation of “slave” in relation to the workers exacerbates the conditions: workers living in quarters owned by the barons and on the property of the mill, enduring the inhuman cruelties of leaving their children alone, putting them up for adoption when there is no money for food because they are not making a living wage, hence “slav[ing] for the bosses.” Wiggins’s song performance of a scene that “everyone must know” in which the child makes the mother painfully aware of inadequacies firmly establishes her authority as it binds the audience to her in the shared experience of facing one’s children without hope of providing for their needs—the slave who owns nothing.

It is at this point that Wiggins expands her rhetorical authority from mother and worker to union organizer—leader/advisor and, drawing on the pathos of the children, appeals for the audience to support the union. Early on she has pitted the bosses as slave drivers. She continues with the declaration that “the bosses do not care” for workers or the children and have turned a deaf ear to such stories as Wiggins has told in this song. It is logical, then, that Wiggins connects an improvement in the children’s welfare to the necessity of a union, a combining of hundreds of voices to address the inequities her sole voice has outlined in the song. She suggests that the agency is in the act of joining together many workers into a union that the bosses will fear. She shares the authority of the subversive discourse with the audience: “Our union they do fear.” The act of placing the word “union” before “they” (the barons) takes authority in that the barons are in a subordinate position and the word fear is linked with the barons, not the workers. Further,

the fear that an individual worker may have disappears as the workers become one in a union and transfer their fear to the barons. Membership in the union by the use of the word “our” includes all the audience and implies that the union gives the workers power over the barons. By the sheer numbers of the workers compared to the number of barons there is power and the uniting of the power under one organization affords authority.

Wiggins’s appeal becomes more personal and more inclusive as she travels through her song. She is aware that another union had been in Gaston County several years before and, intimidated by the barons, the leaders had taken the money the workers had contributed and left town. Selling a union in this climate will be tricky business. So one of her major rhetorical challenges is to keep her audience with her by continuing to make herself part of them, to address the audience in endearing terms that personalize her message.

Strategically the first word of the song, “we,” indicates that she is including herself. The phrase “you every one must know” again makes her one of them, a story that is hers but belongs to all—a shared story. The implication that all the workers have experienced the same story leads to the common cause, “our wages are too low” and suggests that a remedy is coming. The remedy, of course, is the union and Wiggins appeals directly to the workers three times in the remaining lines of the song. The first, “dear workers,” precedes the accusation against the bosses, an endearment as she shares a shocking piece of knowledge. Her appeal to “all workers” as a body—those who share the parental story and those who do not, those who are in favor of the union, those who are not in favor of the union, and those who are undecided—all as strength, united and

none divided out. Wiggins's use of "all" unites the audience into a body of one, slightly different from the "everyone" that recognizes that each individual has a singular experience that can be lumped into the shared experiences group. Finally, she repeats a phrase often seen in her work, "Let's stand together, workers," Wiggins's altar call for unification. It is here that she assumes that the workers will take the same agency that she has assumed; hence the appeal to assume a power position, "stand." "Let us" and "together" imply the group force. This phrase recurs in many of Wiggins's songs. The connotation of standing up (Stand up for Jesus; Stand up for the union; Stand up in numbers larger than the number of barons) has been reiterated in many different situations and Wiggins issues the call to the audience to take the power that she offers and "stand" with her.

Since the occasion for the performance of the song often is union rallies, defiant acts from the margins that allow the workers to seize power or at least feel powerful for the duration of the meeting and sometimes until their return to work in the mill, Wiggins gains a greater audience sympathetic to the transgressing of the dominant discourse. During the performance of the songs Wiggins's position as worker with no authority changes to performer with agency. As she has appropriated the authority of leadership reserved for the discourse of the barons, she can use it to direct the other workers to take up the cause, and with her, transgress the authoritative dominant discourse. In an invention of self outside the self assigned to her by the barons, Wiggins has seized a method of disrupting the discourse of the powerful. One might look at her daredevil approach to the barons as one of desperation: a single mother who has buried four of her



nine children and is working harder than ever under new regulations imposed by the barons, including a technique the workers called the “stretchout,” that was brought to the Southern mills from the North that required workers to complete more pieces of work for the same pay. There is a transformation here from mill worker to leader every time she gets on the platform and sings the rallying songs. Wiggins invents her appeals through the genre of song and is herself invented by (receives power from) the genre. Anis Bawarshi argues that genre “organizes and generates the conditions of social and rhetorical production” (7). Its power, she says, is partly in how the pressure to act from the outside becomes internalized as the desire to act. The context in which Wiggins invented and performed her acts of song certainly can be seen in the pressure (burden) of the work in the mill as well as close contact and conversation with others who shared her burdens. Thus she is invented as a singer-protester as she invents the songs that give her that position. The song genre arises as the perfect vehicle for carrying her message and thus the message of hundreds of others. Since ballads often become the genre of protest movements Wiggins gives the barons ample opportunity to name her the enemy. The subversive rhetoric that was an attempt to save her own life and the lives of her remaining children becomes her identification. She seems to raise her voice louder in her fight after the Loray strike and the arrest of communist union leaders Fred Beal, Albert Weisbord, Vera Buch, and others as she sings about the death of Police Chief Aderholt and demands that the union members be released from jail and the barons recognize and employ the union demands.

Wiggins sings about children as a pathetic reminder of the strike's aftermath in "Two Little Strikers." She creates the picture of a little girl and a little boy crying as they sit alone outside the door to the union hall. This time the dialogue is between the singer (herself) and the children. She sets up the situation with a familiar question, "Why don't you go home to your mama." The response, "We have no mother, no home" and the father "never came home any more" (Let's Stand Together 22) speaks to the violence of the strike. The song addresses the issues familiar to the audience: mothers jailed and fathers injured in violent altercations between union members and mill guards or police. The little girl's response includes the accusatory "they," which encompasses the barons and their extended authority, the police. The mother is "locked up," as the workers' voices and protests are "locked up."

The identification of the children and their parents (a girl, a boy, jailed mother, Union Guard father) juxtaposed with the anonymous "they" as the perpetrators of the violence against the family sets up a situation where the children become all workers as they "come here to sleep in the tents tonight," with other men and women, former workers, evicted from their mill houses for their attempts to strike or organize other workers. Wiggins's pathos in a direct appeal to her audience that is the retelling of an event of children essentially orphaned by acts of the barons disputes the *Gastonia Gazette* stories that portray the barons as kind owners who have given workers a place to live and work and now are victims of rebellious workers who carry guns and shoot without warning.

After the April 1929 strike at the Loray Mill, Wiggins maintained her position of defiance and continued to write songs that disputed the stories the barons told to the local newspapers—an in-your-face transgression that would cost Wiggins her life. While Beal, Buch, Weisbord, and other union leaders—many from the North—were in the Gastonia Jail, Wiggins's songs maintained the innocence of the jailed leaders, demanded justice for them, and pleaded with the workers to join the union and the labor defense. Wiggins continued her chameleon-like performances—mill worker, song writer, union organizer, protestor—until September 14, 1929, when she was shot as she traveled from Bessemer City to Gastonia for a union rally. It is a widely held belief in Gaston County that she was singled out by a gunman. The truck that she and other workers were riding in was forced to turn around and then forced off the road. As many of those in the truck ran across a field, shots rang out. Wiggins, who remained in the truck was the only person killed. Five people were charged in the killing, but no one was convicted. It has been widely circulated that the shooters were Loray Mill employees (Pope 292-293).

Although Wiggins was the most prolific of the strike balladeers, there were others who wrote and performed songs. Other songs that were sung around the mills during work have been lost or conflated with surviving ballads. While Wiggins's songs are the ones that blatantly cry out for change in the working conditions, those written by children and by other workers decry the plight of the mill worker. Some list the problems of the workers; others simply lament the life and early death of the workers, particularly in the Loray Mill. All, however, exhibit the need for change in the working conditions and the salaries of the mill workers.

### Children Write

According to Alan Lomax, “Up in Old Loray” was written by Odel Corley, a young girl in Gastonia (83). Written to the tune of the ballad “On Top of Old Smokey,” the mountain covered with snow easily becomes the six-story cotton mill “all covered with lint.” The words of the folk song, a plea from a young girl to beware of men who do you wrong easily conflate with a young girl’s warning about cotton mills (specifically the Loray) that will do them wrong. The word “bosses” seems to connote the supervisors in the mill rather than the owners. However, “bosses” becomes much more than just the man who signs off on the time card. It is the system that has been adopted by most of the mills, one of paying the workers in chits (coupons) that can only be used at the company store and the “hank clock,” a system of work measurement that paid the workers by the amount of work done in an hour rather than a set rate for an hour’s work. This practice, which had become common in Northern mills, was started at the Loray Mill when it was purchased by Manville-Jenckes Company.

Corley the songwriter clearly is aware of the problems of the mill worker and may even be one herself. Through the use of “us” she becomes one of the workers and thus gains authority to make the pleas to her audience for the union. She also becomes one with the workers when she recounts the lint in the mill and alleges that “our shoulders / Was crippled and bent” as if she personally has been injured. The folksong’s warning for young women to stay away from “falsehearted lovers” becomes the pathos of a child warning about future physical indemnities. This betrayal of the bosses and the owners makes a powerful appeal for the union. Her accusations of abuse by the bosses include

“The bosses will starve you, / They’ll tell you more lies” and “The bosses will rob you / They will take half you make, / And claim that you took it up / In coupon books” (Corley 183). In using the well-known folk song, Corley double voices the plight of the workers in rephrasing the loss of a lover for “courting too slow” to being “ready to die” if they move too slowly in joining the union. The repercussions of staying in the mill are that “[I]t will carry you to your grave” the same as trusting in a false lover. Corley’s song is clear warning that a life in the mill is a short and heart-breaking one.

### **Dave McCarn Sings about the Mills**

While the ballad form of song seems to have been the perfect vehicle for some of the worker-singers, old Appalachian songs were turning into a form of blue grass country music that garnered its own listeners. The songs were those of the common people who might have at one time been able to manage financially but found themselves in dire straits during the Great Depression. Whether they worked in the coal mines, were part of the Dust Bowl farmers, had lost their cotton crop to the boll weevil, were homeless drifters, or worked in the textile mills, they told their stories with guitar, banjo, and fiddle, stringed instruments that brought the same pathos to the music as did the piano and saxophone to the black man’s blues.

Radio stations began to broadcast the music live when the travelling country music bands were in town for shows; and at other times the stations played recordings, some of which were made at the radio station. Some enterprising textile mill workers seized the opportunity to make money outside the mill by writing songs and pitching them to the local radio stations. Dave McCarn, a second generation mill worker who was

born in Gaston County, is one of those who formed country music bands, wrote songs, and traveled around the Southeast in an effort to tell the conditions of the mills rather than promote a particular union or organization (Rosigno and Danaher 80). McCarn's songs "Cotton Mill Colic" and "Cotton Mill Blues" thus garnered a much larger audience than that of Wiggins because they were recorded at a Charlotte radio station in the 1930s, sold, and played on radio stations throughout the South. The Great Depression was in full swing and McCarn certainly found sympathizers outside the mill—people who worked or had worked hard for the money that seemed in the depression's hard times to never be enough to cover the expenses. Men and women played and sang in the bands that toured the area in the Depression years. After the depression, when times were better, people were working again, and the wages were on the increase, the songs and the bands lost their appeal.

The refrain of "Cotton Mill Colic" reflects the cry of most of the workers, "I'm a gonna starve and everybody will, / Cause you can't make a living in a cotton mill" (McCarn 120-123). Like Wiggins, McCarn's ethos is his experience in the mill. Lomax validates it this way: "You can tell by the way its wrote up that it aint [sic] 'put on'—I mean its [sic] the real thing" (120).

Use of the word "colic" in his title to compare working in a cotton mill to a severe abdominal pain, McCarn double voices the workers' physical pain of hunger and the pain of not making a livable wage, which he claims is because after the rent is paid to the barons, "you ain't got a cent to buy fatback meat, pinto beans, cook up a mess of turnip greens" (120-122). His cotton mill audience and many who are poor in the extended

audience identify with the menu because it is theirs. Other more affluent audiences may not understand the desire for the same monotonous menu, particularly fatback and pinto beans, but they do understand colic and hunger. The appeal to the larger audience is for public outcry that would change the workers' plight. Colic was common for mill children left at home unattended with a "sugar tit," (baking soda and sugar mixed together and tied in a rag) to abate the empty feeling in their stomachs.<sup>5</sup> By lunch time their cries often came from hunger as well as the gaseous effect of the food placebo and while McCarn makes it seem as something that is "no use to colic" over he knows his mill worker audience identifies, understands the subtext that there is no hope for relief from the situation. It is useless for hungry worker parents worrying over hungry crying children, McCarn says, because the situation is so hopeless that "I'm a gonna starve and everybody will / You can't make a living in a cotton mill" (121). McCarn's song connotes more than the words themselves in that during the Great Depression starvation had become a reality rather than a figure of speech and so he appeals to the public for sympathy for the workers' conditions and the imminence of starvation because layoffs and low wages make them unable to pay their bills. And through his song he portrays mill work as a kind of indentured servitude where the worker takes the job in desperation and never makes enough money to move to another job. The worker always is indebted to the mill owner for the house and sometimes to the mill store for food and other necessities. McCarn is speaking past the worker and to the general public as he employs pathos to tell the story of workers who pay a dollar down for clothes, stay up all night worrying about debts. The worker, he says, is treated like a "measly worm," not human when he attempts to

purchase goods and later when the “collectors [are] at the door.” The repetition of the phrase, “I’m a gonna starve, and everybody will / cause you can’t make a living in a cotton mill,” underwrites the hardships of the worker and creates a sense of hopelessness with which the workers identify and garners sympathy from the wider audience, calling attention to the sad state of the cotton mill worker.

In “Cotton Mill Blues,” McCarn verbalizes the plight of every worker: in the winter heating costs make the bills increase, but there is no increase in the pay. “If you see the boss you’ll have to say: / ‘I want a load of wood and I want a ton of coal, / Take a dollar out a week—I’ll go in the hole” (123). Again “in the hole” connotes more than an economic deficit. Far enough into economic disaster puts the starving worker in the grave; and if not death then the worker becomes so indebted to the owner that he can never get out of debt and thus gives his life to the mill. Either way, the worker is on the losing end. McCarn conflates the boss man and the rich man as he reflects the plight of the workers: “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, / Let the rich man live and the poor man bust.” The complaint is somewhat the same in “Cotton Mill Colic”: “The poor getting poorer, the Rich a getting rich, / If we don’t starve, I’m a son of a bitch” (123). The veiled appeals to the rich to share some of the profit with the workers differ from Wiggins’s demands.

McCarn’s audience widens as he conflates the textile worker and the poor man, including every worker in every profession who is not making a living. Those who treat them like worms in “Cotton Mill Colic” become the merchants who worry themselves



gray contemplating methods to separate the poor man from his money and the store clerk who doesn't speak to the poor man who can't afford to buy expensive goods.

But McCarn does not offer a remedy for the misery of the workers. He simply tells the story. He chooses to make his appeal through the story and with no demands, just the pathos of the everyday life of the mill worker families. The two songs are subtle in that they appeal to those in charge through fast-paced music that point to the rich boss man as the devil for the workers.

### **Conclusion**

Unlike Wiggins, McCarn does not appeal to the workers to join a union. In fact, he never mentions a union at all. He is aware that to do so would possibly alienate his wider (radio and record) audience. During the times of the Depression the laments of the textile mill workers echoed the laments of many other workers: if they weren't fired, they were laid off or the work had slacked to a few days a week, leaving them without enough money to pay their bills. In the South attempts to organize the textile workers had essentially failed. The barons were in control and the workers could do little more than write songs about their sorry lot. The time to seize agency and stand in protest was over and the time to employ pathos and bow in submission had come.

Each songwriter/singer employed different rhetorical methods to achieve his/her goal. Ultimately each wanted a livable wage, decent hours, and some dignity. They transferred their misery to song that would resonate with their audiences. The various methods of persuasion that Wiggins and Corley used differ from those of McCarn partly because the times were different. More importantly, the audiences were different. The

new radio audiences wanted to hear the plights of others and identify with them as fellow workers in any job hurting from the economy. They were not interested in revolting, but they were interested in knowing that they were not alone in their despair. The Great Depression had changed the landscape and the listener. Once the union was smashed, it was necessary for the worker spokespeople to change their tactics if they wished to ever regain any credibility with the barons, who essentially held the workers welfare in their hands. And so the workers continue to speak from the margins, occasionally transgressing the dominant discourse, but for the most part maintaining their position of hope that someday conditions would change. The financial situation of the worker changed little. What did change was the workers' perception of power. As long as they had the union behind them, they felt freer to speak out. But once the union's true intentions to use the workers to replace capitalism with communism were known and their plans were quashed, the workers returned to their work and their silence.

### **End Notes**

1. "When We All Get to Heaven" was written by Elizah E. Hewitt and was first published in 1898 in *Pentecostal Praises*.
2. The ILD is the International Labor Defense, which helped pay legal expenses for workers and published a monthly magazine, *Labor Defender*.
3. Controversy about who killed Aderholt still abounds. The union leaders were charged with the murder, were tried and convicted, but they continue to claim that Aderholt was shot by a policeman or one of the mill guards.
4. Sung by Pete Seeger on his album *Industrial Ballads*.
5. The term "sugar tit" is one I first heard when I moved to Gastonia. The people who worked in the mill seemed to delight in using terms that the newcomer didn't know and then using a one-up-manship to explain. When they heard my children cry, they often would laugh and say, "Give that kid a sugar tit." The definition I

give here is the definition given to me by people who were at the time working at the Firestone Mill, formerly the Loray.

## CHAPTER IV

### AGENTS OF REFORM: UNION LEADERS SPIN THE STRIKE STORY

In a community of competing discourses, when the dominant discourse, in the power position of “truth,” attempts to ignore, shut down, threaten, or disqualify the other discourses, the others seek ways to cross the boundaries. The communist union organizers used the Gastonia textile workers and their silences in an attempt to replace the practices of the community with their own—to transgress the dominant discourse with *their* “truth,” change the rules of who could speak and who could not speak, and in so doing become the dominant. They promised that membership in the union would bring improvements in the low wages, long hours, and poor working and living conditions; and some of them identified with the workers by taking jobs in the Loray Mill, weaving, spinning, and doffing. In public they were workers living among the other workers. But in private they were communists waiting for the chance to seize the power.

These communist labor organizers reconstruct the community, the workers, the barons, and their own identities in an attempt to indict the barons and thus upset the power structure. In their pamphlets and books, the communist/union organizers switch places within their own community, sometimes becoming the victims of their colleagues as they vie for a leadership position, and in so doing imitate the barons’ capitalistic methods in their quest for power. The communist union organizers disrupted the town’s

discursive structure, altered the identities for workers and barons, and used the redefined identities to vie for the power position.

The barons wrote for themselves to celebrate themselves, recounted each other's prominence and included pictures of themselves, their mills, and their large fashionable houses in a way of exemplifying their wealth and exhibiting their power. They extended their audience to those in other towns like them only when they needed to recruit business or acquire something else the others had. The union organizers transgressed the barons' idyllic textile town scene with photographs of the workers and their meager belongings in front of flimsy mill houses, and later in tents, set up near the Loray mill as shelter for the fired and evicted workers. They told the workers' stories and identified them as whole people, not just as the barons' synecdoche, "mill hands."

In the barons' discourse the workers are part of the machinery of the mill; the barons the benevolent industrialists who create jobs for the other members of the community. In the communist/union discourse, the workers' identities change to human beings who deserved decent wages and decent housing; and the barons' identities change to slave masters. The barons saw the union organizers as communists who intended to overthrow democracy. The union workers chose to write in the same genres as the barons—in books and pamphlets that would reach an audience greater than Gaston County. Some wrote immediately after the 1929 strike and others were written later, but all meant to vindicate the union organizers and through their redemption to indict the barons in the labor uprisings.

Kenneth Burke's pentad offers a way to examine how the communist union organizers negotiate power and form identities within their own discourse and within other discourses, in the context of the Loray Mill and in a larger context—the whole town. The act of recruiting workers for the union is to improve working conditions at the mills and redistribute the wealth through better wages for the workers. Some union organizers hide their whereabouts and use the publications to absolve themselves of blame by indicting the barons for the violence. The attempt of self-purification exposes other motives, including the intent for complete social and government reform, a motive the union organizers hid during the first months of union organization attempts.

In terms of Burke's pentad, the ratio that best describes the communists' actions is the scene-act ratio. They see the scene as one ruled by the barons who want to keep things in the town as they are—a capitalistic society in which the barons are in charge. The union organizers' acts are then extrinsic, brought on or caused by the capitalist scene that they are fighting against. This is in opposition to the barons' position which would be more of an agent-act ratio in that the barons see the agent or individual as the most important in a capitalistic society and contend that the individual can make his own destiny—he just has to work to get what he wants.

This chapter examines the writing of three communist/union organizers: Fred Beal, Vera Weisbord, and William F. Dunne. Each was present at the strikes and two of the three, Beal and Weisbord were charged with murder and put in jail after the June 7, 1929, confrontation between the workers and the police that ended in the death of Gastonia Police Chief Aderholt. Each has a different purpose in relating the story,

however, and while each relate the historical events in much the same fashion, their purposes differ and in some cases the motives change. All, however, have one purpose in common: to indict the barons in the labor troubles of the South.

Gaston County most remembers Beal; and his name is most often linked to stories about the strike. His biography *Proletarian Journey: New England, Gastonia, Moscow* was published in 1937, ten years after the Loray strike and shortly after Beal returned to the United States from Russia. He writes out of disillusionment for governments and systems, denouncing Russian communism, but not embracing American democracy.

Although Vera Weisbord's biography covers a lifetime of travels across the United States for the communist cause, her work with the National Textile Workers Union in Gaston County is of interest for this study. Weisbord's book is the most distanced from the strike; published in 1979, it coincided with a 50-year anniversary celebration for worker balladeer Ella May Wiggins who joined the union and was shot and killed while on her way from Bessemer City to Gastonia to participate in a union rally. Weisbord humanizes the mill and the union as she tells the stories of the workers.

William F. Dunne's pamphlet, published two days before the 1929 Labor Day holiday and two years after the union arrived in Gastonia, was the first to emerge after the April 1929 Loray strike. Of the three it is the most inflammatory in its accusations of toward the barons and its demands to free the workers and union organizers from jail. In photographs and in story, Dunne uses the 60-page pamphlet to garner sympathy for the workers, to indict the barons, and to promote the communist cause.

### **Laying Blame: William F. Dunne Reverses the Roles**

William F. Dunne uses the June 1929 strike scene, in which the Gastonia police chief was killed and union organizers and workers were jailed on murder charges, to identify the labor issues in Gastonia, and subsequently, the United States, often couching his arguments in terms of communism. His purpose in publishing the pamphlet is two-fold: first to gain the release of the sixteen union organizers and workers who were jailed after the strike and secondly to set up a comparison between communism and capitalism where the former is the truth and the latter is the exploiter. The strike, he says, stemmed from a class war in which the barons increase their profits at the expense of the workers. In his pamphlet, *Gastonia: Citadel of the Class Struggle in the New South*, Dunne declares that neither the workers nor the union can be held responsible for the strikes or the violence. Rather, he says, it is the denigration of the workers in a town ruled by capitalist greed:

The watchword of the new southern capitalism class is 'Prosperity.' The assumption is that it includes 'the people as a whole' . . . The wealth of the southern ruling-class increases at a tremendous pace. *The southern working class lives at the subsistence level* [italics Dunne's] . . . 'southern prosperity' is built on the shoulders of the lowest paid workers in the United States (14-15).

In the world constructed by the mill owners' the workers are part of what Foucault calls the "mechanics of power" in which the power of the body is turned into an aptitude or capacity and through the dehumanization takes away the power and subjugates the body (Foucault Discipline 138). Dunne's metaphorical removal of the workers from the machines in placement of the mill profits on the "shoulders" of the workers changes their



position from a mill hand or extension of the machine to a position of power: the foundation of the textile industry—owners of the production.

Gastonia is situated as part of the new South, all with similar labor structures, all part of the South's changing identity from agrarianism to industrialism, and all leaving the worker out of the prosperity, placing him in the position of the new slave. Gastonia's labor situation gives Dunne space to expose the town's underbelly and to build his case against the barons and the police. What the barons have hidden in their pamphlets and stories is exposed in Dunne's vision of Gastonia:

Here is another picture of the new Southern proletariat—the type of workers who face the electric chair in Gastonia because of their militant struggle against just such wages and working conditions as the labor agents of the Southern bosses put forward as a selling argument to Northern capitalists. Machinized [sic] industry, mass production, the speed-up, the stretch-out—rationalization—wage cuts bringing the low standard of living still lower—the power of the government in the hands of capitalists who drive him and rob him—this is “the new South” the Southern worker sees (53).

In this picture, the idyllic scene of beautiful homes and stately textile mills the barons create in their directories and brochures changes to one of mistreated workers and squalid living conditions. The perspective switches from the barons' impersonal, serene exterior of the mill building to the personal (human) interior of the mill, a place where the hidden workers come alive. The picture of Gastonia changes from the Eden of the barons to a hell for the workers and sets up the argument for labor unions. Where Joseph Separk's directories count mills and spindles, Dunne's pamphlet lists industries and salaries and compares the wages paid in different areas of the country. In his comparisons, he includes the Loray Mill and the low wages. The profits at the Loray Mill, he adds, finance “the

slush fund with which to hire a special corps of spies for the prosecution of the members of the National Textile Workers Union and to pay the 16 attorneys enlisted in the holy cause of textile capital” (17).

Spurred by the need for money to defend the jailed Gastonia 16, Dunne uses the Loray Mill strike to expand Gastonia’s labor issues to the whole southern region and to show the ills of industrialism (capitalism) throughout the South and to show the disparity between the labor defense team and that of the barons. The “lords of textiles” (8) have a staff of seventeen attorneys, one of whom is the governor’s brother-in-law and great amounts of money to use for the conviction of the Gastonia 16. The workers’ defense is a smaller group of lawyers who call themselves the International Labor Defense and appeals to the public to join against the “murderous offensive of the textile barons, their government and the capitalist class as a whole” (9).

Portraying the union members who are in jail as innocent and the barons who put them there as guilty is one of many places in which Dunne reverses the roles of the barons and the workers and plays with the words, using them in a manner unfavorable to the barons. He often reverses the rules of the barons as to legalities, arguing that the mill owners, their lawyers, the mill guards, and the police are performing acts that in mill owner language are legal, but in the language of the union and the workers are illegal. In that frame he refers to the police as the “legal shock troops,” who invaded the union headquarters and opened the way for the “Committee of One Hundred, the strongarm squad of the Loray mill, composed of superintendents, foremen, specially privileged employees, professional thugs, and special police deputies.” The mill owners, he says are

the “robbers” and the workers as the “robbed” (7-8). Dunne’s epithets give insight into his motives as he assigns a character to the groups he implies a action in its regard (Burke Permanence 57).

Dunne sets up a conspiracy theory in the arrests against the Gastonia Sixteen, offers two reasons for the charges: the “legal reason,” that the union organizers defended the National Textile Workers Union headquarters against the police and the “*actual* reason,” [italics Dunne’s] that they organized the NTWU and led a strike against the Loray Mill (7). He writes: “Against these men and women of the working class who led their fellow-workers in struggle against the bosses of the Loray mill—the fortress of anti-unionism in the Gastonia region—is mustered the full force of the textile capitalists and the press which they control” (9). And so he pits the local newspaper, *The Gastonia Gazette*, the barons, and the police against the workers, whose side he widens:

It is the task now—and a task needing the greatest energy and speed—to rally the whole American labor movement and the whole working class in a solid battleline which will oppose an unbreakable front and advancing ranks to the murderous offensive of the textile barons, their government and the capitalist class as a whole (Dunne 9).

Dunne pits the language of the Manville-Jenckes Corporation, “efficiency system,” against the workers’ terms: the stretch-out, a method of doubling the work load for each worker but not doubling the pay; the hank clock and piece work where the owner determines the amount of work completed; and low wages and long hours. His argument that the state of North Carolina is a culprit, too, is that Governor Max Gardener (a resident of Cherryville in Gaston County) is president of Cleveland Cloth Mills and thus

sympathetic to the owners (21). This, Dunne asserts, is another reason that workers should get behind the union and support the effort to get the leaders out of jail. In another reversal of roles, he declares the injustices of the law in that the “legal” people are not acting in a “legal” fashion.

Dunne takes on the *Gastonia Gazette*, which he calls the “organ of the mill owners and the chamber of commerce crowd,” (22) and paragraph by paragraph, story by story refutes the newspaper’s claims. He accuses the paper of lashing out against the workers in retaliation for the union exposing North Carolina’s Governor Max Gardner’s ties to textiles and adds, “No more open incitement to wiping out the ‘insult’ to the governor with the blood of some of the strikers can be conceived” (22).

The conspiracy against the textile worker goes all the way to President Herbert Hoover, according to Dunne:

But the federal “conciliator” sent down from president Hoover’s department of labor, managed by James J. Davis, its secretary placed the seal of Hooverian approval, carrying with it the full endorsement of Wall Street government, upon mill-owning Governor Gardner, his fellow mill owners and all their works (22).

Dunne includes pieces of affidavits of workers who allege they heard police officers say they were going to the Loray Mill to shoot the workers as well as a letter to Governor Gardner from the strike committee that details intent to build and operate a union headquarters in place of the one that was destroyed. These inclusions are meant to show that the workers were highjacked and maligned by the news media, the police, and the barons.

The barons' claims of a happy workforce living in idyllic conditions are refuted with pictures and text of a different Gastonia—an evicted family sitting outside the mill house surrounded by their few possessions. The accompanying text further indicts the barons:

An evicted striker's family, belongings and all. This is but one instance of a series of evictions of strikers from the company-owned homes carried out in an effort to break down the strikers' resistance to wage cuts, speed-up and non-recognition of the National Textile Workers Union (28).

Dunne and the union have re-visioned Gastonia not as the idyllic town on the waters of the Catawba River, but as a roaring hell where the working class struggles to stay alive. He also has again linked the NTWU with the cause of the workers—nonrecognition of the workers demands and nonrecognition of the workers' union.

Dunne contrasts the work of the barons—firings and evictions—with the work of the union: the Workers International Relief brought food, erected tents for the evicted strikers, established a relief store, and “won the undying hatred of the mill bosses and the respect of the mill workers” (27). A chapter of statistics in the NTWU pamphlet mimics/revises Joseph Separk's publication for the Chamber of Commerce. In a chapter entitled “Gastonia's Place in the Industrialization of the South,” Dunne points to the increase in the number of spindles and looms, but he also adds the increased pressure put on the worker to produce more goods in the same amount of time for the same amount of pay as a part of the reason for the increase in textile profits (12-13). He juxtaposes a worker's \$12 pay for a 50- to 60-hour work with the profits of the mills and points out the disparity in pay between Northern (organized labor) and Southern workers. The spindles

the Chamber of Commerce counts as progress Dunne counts as more work for less pay for the workers.

The union uses the bloody aftermath of the strike and the arrest of the workers and union members to show the injustices of the textile barons. Dunne piles up evidence in the argument: disparity between wage and profit, lack of justice, false accusations. The motive becomes apparent when he expands the issue from that of one strike in one community to a class war throughout the United States. Dunne sets it up here:

It is the task now—and a task needing the greatest energy and speed—to rally the whole American labor movement and the whole working class in a solid battleline which will stand between these workers and their would-be executioners, a battleline which will oppose an unbreakable front and advancing ranks to the murderous offensive of the textile barons, their government and the capitalist class as a whole (9).

Dunne concludes his treatise with a call for action from the workers. His book is intended for more than the workers, however. He calls to account advertisements for investors in Southern mills that are placed in Northern journals: “the cheapest labor in the world” and “no labor trouble,” which he says are great attractors for the Northern investors (49). He nails the claims of the Southerners that all labor problems that exist come from outside agitators (49) and he insists that the multi-millionaires in the North are just as cutthroat as those in the South.

With more degrading name-calling, resorting to “slave owners,” and promises of continued action by the union, Dunne ends the book with a demand for the freedom of Beal and the others in the Gastonia Jail. He has attempted in fifty-eight pages to write the

story (tell the truth) of the strike in Gastonia, demand justice for those who are jailed, and demand a union and better living and working conditions for workers.

### **Fred Beal: Reaching Understanding through Symbolic Death**

Fred Erwin Beal, one of the first communist/union organizers to come to Gaston County in 1927, intended to organize workers into the National Textile Workers Union—his stated purpose—and ultimately through the labor movement, to expand the communist doctrine in the South (the hidden motive of the NTWU). In the aftermath of the June 1927 Loray Mill strike he escaped to Russia to avoid prison in North Carolina, later returned to the United States to avoid prison in Russia. In his memoir, *Proletariat Journey: Massachusetts, Gastonia, Russia*, Beal puts on trial the communism/labor union and barons/capitalism, revisits the strike story, rewrites the evidence in his own court trial (in which he was convicted of murder in the police chief's death) in an attempt to exonerate himself. Beal foregrounds himself against the background of the strike and the trial. He prefaces the book with his position:

I am a fugitive from two worlds, the world of capitalist justice and the world of Bolshevik justice. The darkness which I have known is deeper than that of any dungeon; it is the darkness of civilization in eclipse. The cruelty which I have witnessed is more terrifying than that of any heartless keeper; it is the cruelty of putting mankind in chains.

In the hemisphere in which I was born, to the accompaniment of an industrial order propelled by greed and piloted by exploitation, I was framed by a power greater than that of the State of North Carolina. In the hemisphere to which I fled in search of the new freedom, I was crushed by a dogma more soulless than the walls of any penitentiary.

My lifetime was dedicated to the ideals of a new democracy, a new freedom, a new justice. Almost from my childhood, from the day I went to work in the mills, I was captivated by the vision of a new order of things. I joined the bands of rebels whose eyes seemed to be fixed upon a new dawn for man. I believed that our little legion would grow into an invincible army. I gave all I had

to my faith. But my comrades-in-arms bartered their dreams for new idols, new in their war paint only. Nothing is left of their rebel spirit. My early vision remains with me (xi-xii).

Beal declares his place as “Nowhere,” which, rhetorically, becomes a scene that, in Burke’s dialectic, can be reduced to a scene of small location, or by seeing “nowhere” as its opposite, “everywhere,” the scene can be expanded to the whole world or the place that coincides with Beal’s stated purpose to deliver truth to the world, whatever he discovers that truth to be (Grammar of Motives 77).

“Nowhere” also indicates Beal’s stance as he goes into the world to preach the “truth,” neither capitalism nor communism, but a convergence of the two, which Beal describes as the “light of the real brotherhood of man” (xiv). “Nowhere” then identifies with mysticism, which Burke places as “purpose” on the pentad (Grammar of Motives 128). In Burke’s terms, Beal’s work becomes a ratio of purpose-scene or message-world—that Beal’s purpose motivates the scene and it is his intent to change the world scene from hatred to love. And so through his exoneration of self, Beal intends to extend his new knowledge to the world and through his experiences convert the opposing ideologies to one that embraces the love of each other. Beal relates his philosophical rebirth in the preface to the *Proletarian Journey*.

Beal positions himself both as a scapegoat, the one on whose back the barons placed most of the blame for the strikes and the murder of the police chief, and by virtue of symbolically drinking the cup of sins, a savior. In so doing he accepts the mantle of blame for the Loray Mill strike and related transgressions, becomes the bearer of any uncleanness the persecutors—in this case the barons—wish to cleanse from themselves



(Burke Grammar of Motives 406-407). In a mythological sense, from the sins Beal gains knowledge and self-realization. Kenneth Burke likens the experience to a tragic hero who in his dying moments realizes his flaw. But unlike the tragic hero of a drama, a real person may die symbolically many times and each time is reborn with more knowledge. The scapegoat in embracing the sins embraces the opposite of the sins and through understanding and death returns with more knowledge and in a new form—savior (Burke, Grammar of Motives 39). He has moved himself from the ungodly in a place to the godly that exists without a specific place—everywhere—and posits that he is the vessel in which the ideals of communism and the ideals of capitalism are blended into a new ideal of love. Beal's self-identification moves him symbolically from fugitive to the power position of savior and he identifies with Jesus: "The greatest Rebel of all time said: 'They shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make them free'" (xiv). In his new position of power, Beal retells the Loray Mill strike story. His book, then, becomes an agency of his truth and a vindication of self.

Beal rejects the barons' Chamber of Commerce publications that picture the mill buildings from an outside view, carefully crafted photos of large brick buildings, perfectly symmetrical and void of any people on the outside. He situates his story inside the mill and essentially opens up the barons' silences about mill conditions. He situates the workers as separate from the town, socially and physically.

Beal conflates northern and southern mills, expanding the scene to conditions in the industry as a whole, as he carefully crafts stories of worker anguish to reveal the universality of the work scene. He includes incidents of physical danger—universal

dangers of working in any mill: moving gears “bite off” fingers and as an example, “Once a girl . . . caught her hair between two gears and oh . . . what a mess: it just naturally pulled her hair out by the roots” (20). The violence of the machines and the pain inflicted on the workers directly confronts the barons’ business language in which the workers are dehumanized (hidden) and counted with the spindles. Beal’s word pictures inside his “unlocked” mill are of domination of the workers: cursing mill owners and bosses; ethnic prejudices among the Irish, Portuguese, and Italians in the North and racial prejudices of the white mill owners against blacks in the South, all forced to do more work for less pay. The vignettes become icons for worker abuse in the mills and help Beal’s argument for reform, previously the National Textile Workers Union and now, in Beal’s new religion, something else, possibly Beal as the leader.

He recreates a scenario to depict the impersonal status of the worker when a woman, “who addresses the boss-man as ‘suh,’” and asks to go home to medicate a child with croup and is told that at 14 her older daughter is old enough to quit school and stay home with the baby. The boss-man tells her, “Education is the snare of the devil. What do mill-hands want with education no how?” (116). This story closely resembles a story workers related about Ella May Wiggins, a Gaston County worker whose children died of whooping cough because she couldn’t leave work. She joined the union and was shot and killed as she traveled to a union rally.

Beal reduces the scene from universal to local by citing a challenge issued to him by a worker: “If you succeed in organizing the workers at Loray, you’ll organize the South” (120), a direct opposite of the barons’ scene that silently assumes good working

conditions and through the silence hides the workers. He butts his story against the barons' idyllic scenes of Gastonia and its mills to expose the dichotomy of the Loray—how it is identified by the barons and how it is identified by the workers, heaven and hell.

He intrudes on the barons' published tranquil scenes of spacious houses and wide streets by describing the remoteness and societal disconnectedness of the mill village: "Then came the usual red, muddy road of the mill village . . . No one with a good car travels through a mill village . . . Rivulets of red trickled over the black polished surface of the car. Now and then rickety Fords passed us, driven by men in overalls" (112). And the houses: "On either side of the street were rows of one-story houses, all alike. Their corners rested on bricks piled two feet high, giving an appearance of houses on stilts. On the front porch of every house burned a small electric light" (112).

In contrast to the formal diction of the barons' publications, mill worker Beal weaves the mill worker's language into his story, describing his own job and worker situation. He was a "doffer," a person who removes the finished product from the machines and places empty bobbins on the spinning frames. Others were "jackspoolers" or they worked "trucking rovings." The spinners tie the "ends" for the new spools and the process of filling the bobbins is repeated. Spinners work for less pay than doffers and weavers because the job is considered unskilled. For the most part, he leaves the terms undefined; and the jargon becomes another means of keeping the worker in the mill setting and separate from the town where residents' identities are not confined to their mill job. Beal further sets the millworker apart from the community by the workers' peculiar dialect and in so doing indicates that the worker's self-identification is through

the lens of the barons: “The people in the city looks down on us mill-folks. They can always tell us mill-folks from other folks because we’s chalky-faced and skinny” (116). Through his vignettes Beal sets the workers apart from the mainstream—others them—and as they accept the place the barons have given them and the identity the barons have given them through their otherness, the workers accept a position of powerlessness. Their language and their identities are tied to work, hence the mill.

The language of the barons, Beal says, was always geared toward finding some way to control the workers by stirring up the North-South issue.

As the propaganda of Manville-Jenckes constantly played upon southern prejudice by emphasizing that the leaders of the strike were Yankees and foreigners, we pointed out that all the mills around Gastonia were owned or controlled by northern bankers and capitalists, a telling argument.

He cites a letter from F. L. Jenckes, a Rhode Island owner of the Loray, praising the local boss for improving profit by decreasing worker pay and increasing the required production (144).

For those who chose to defy the mill owners and join the union as well as entertain work stoppage, the action was swift. Couching the language in a disciplinary tone, he sets up scenes of what he sees as particular insensitivity, evictions:

The evictions began one afternoon without warning. Thirteen of the mill-shacks were entered by the deputies, the people forced outside, the humble furnishings and cherished possessions thrown out into the street. The strikers offered no resistance but stood passively by, some women weeping, some speaking bitter words. For two families these evictions were a very grave matter since a member of each was seriously ill; but the officers’ hands were not stayed by any considerations of illness or possible death.—And we were supposed to be the people whose purpose it was to ‘kill, kill, kill!’ (152).

Beal's construction of the deputies as killers in their refusal to spare the gravely ill sets them up as little more than eviction machines. The deputies, in a position of power, perform acts of violence and their lack of sympathy removes their humanness so that they become an extension of the "machine" of capitalism. The workers, with no voice and having been trained in passive acceptance, remain in that capacity. In Beal's portrayal of the evictions, the bosses/deputies are the threat, the workers are the victims, and the communist union organizers are not there. The absence of the communist organizers is how Beal supports his argument that the communist union organizers are not the violent ones. Further, he says, these acts of violence led the union to build headquarters from which the union will perform benevolent acts such as feeding the evicted workers (153).

Beal switches the positions of the legal and the illegal as he relates stories from the "campaign of terrorism" in which mill guards, "the Committee of One Hundred," beat union organizers and workers and the police ignored the acts of violence or turned their heads: "The helpless [union] guards prayed that the police or the militia who were camped within a short distance of our headquarters would be attracted by the noise of destruction. But for some reason the guardians of law and order could not be roused that night though people from many blocks away came running to see what was happening" (149-150). Again Beal positions the communist union leaders and the workers as being acted upon—victims—and the bosses as the aggressors. He hides the scene where the barons are the victims and the union is the aggressor in the ideology war.

Beal describes June 7, 1929, the day that the skirmishes between the workers and the police ended in the death of the police chief as "the fatal Friday" (164), and positions

the workers and union members as victims. He puts himself in the scene when the gun was fired, uses his authority as truth:

I was about to go on and give them the instructions regarding the march to the mill gates when from the rear I saw a pistol pointing straight at me. Before I had time to duck or do anything else, someone in the crowd pulled the arm of the gunman. The shot went into the ground. The bedlam broke loose. (165).

With this he does more than blame the bossmen and militia for the violence, he continues to set up his image as one of nonviolence. In the ensuing gun battle, Beal acknowledges that police were shot, but he went to the hospital with a wounded worker so he was not on Second or Franklin avenues when the police chief was killed. Essentially Beal's recollection of the event that set off the gunfire in the Loray strike becomes a metaphor for the universal power struggle between the union/workers and the barons/police. In all of his retellings, it is necessary for Beal to position the barons' representatives as the antagonistic element and thus the more violent to validate that he has been placed in the undeserved position of scapegoat.

Beal represents himself as the scapegoat as he re-creates the courtroom scene: the prosecution brought into the courtroom a life-size dummy of the dead police chief in his uniform and smeared with "blood"—more propaganda from the owners to discredit the union (185), he alleges that they are threatened by the barons and their representatives. When the judge declares a mistrial, He continues to construct his scapegoat-savior image as he recounts a failed attempt to kidnap and lynch him. Beal relegates the power to the anti-union mob members, juxtaposing their power with the lack of power of the union

leaders: “Of course, nothing was done to these mobsters. But three days later a raiding party searched the rooms of union organizers and arrested seven of them” (192).

Beal also includes the violence of the anti-union mob against the union members and the workers. He retells the story of Ella May Wiggins’s death:

The workers went unarmed. At the border line they were met by the Gastonia outlaws and turned back. They obeyed. A carload of the gangsters followed and forced the truck off the road. Most of the people in the truck jumped out and scampered across the cotton fields. Ella May remained on the truck. The mob recognized her as one of the union leaders. How they hated her! They fired straight at her unprotected breast. She gasped: ‘My God, they have shot me,’ and dropped to the bottom of the truck—dead (193).

The use of derogatory language—outlaws, gangsters, the mob—indicts the owners as the criminals. The unprotectedness of Wiggins further adds to the criminal nature of the barons, with whom Beal has previously associated such behavior. He sets up the victimage of the workers at the hands of the barons. Beal uses Wiggins’ death in an ambush to continue setting up the victimization of himself and the others. “We knew no one would be punished . . . It’s no crime in the South to kill a mill worker” (193).

Just as Beal sees that the union leaders had been set up to be killed, his version of the trial is one in which the prosecutors did not have evidence that the union leaders committed the killings. He has already set up the conditions in Gaston County and the hierarchy, in which he can place the convictions of the union leaders as another part of the barons’ victimization of the union. Each time he constructs the situation as a power struggle in which the other side has the power and he and his union members are the powerless victims.

Beal's recollection of the labor issues in Gastonia seem to revolve around him and his attempts to gain power in the town and in the union and neither worked. His stay in Russia is equally troubling, he says, and he returns to tell the story of the Loray strike as a means of self-vindication, the final stage in his rebirth.

### **Communist Woman: Vera Buch Weisbord Personalizes the Workers**

Vera Buch Weisbord, married to a communist party executive, arrived in Gastonia on April 5, 1929, several weeks after the first strike at the Loray Mill and two months before the June 1929 strike in which the Gastonia police chief was killed and she and fifteen other party members and workers were arrested and charged with murder and/or assault with a deadly weapon. In her autobiography, *A Radical Life*, she disputes the barons' implied good working conditions and prosperous community by reporting working conditions inside the mills as she and the workers saw them. Her ethos is one of a peer of the workers; she lived in the Loray Village in various mill houses and dormitories and was locked in the Gaston County Jail with workers, women who told their stories to pass the time. Unlike Fred Beal, Weisbord does not claim to be a victim nor does she use her story to praise or dismiss the union. Rather, she gives meaning to the workers' condition by personalizing the strikers, through their stories separating out from what the newspapers called the "mob," some of the men, women, and children who worked in the mill. Using her descriptions of the mill village and the workers' voices Weisbord unleashes the workers from the mill machinery and presents them as individuals instead of a faceless pulsating thing, disrupting the barons' discourse and opening up the silences. She describes her first meeting with the workers:



I mingled for a while with the crowd of strikers, close to them, smelling their sweat and my own there in the full sunlight. We shook hands, I listened to their stories of the mill and of their life in the Loray Village. What stories I heard that day, poured out as though they'd been long held in restraint, waiting for a sympathetic ear. For a moment each man or woman became individualized, detached from the crowd, though there was a uniformity in their poor clothes, in their common look of toil and age, even though some were not old at all. I noted also what poor teeth they had; a dentist was probably unknown here (179).

Weisbord both individualizes (their stories) and institutionalizes (their common physical appearance, work, and housing) the workers. Symbolically, Weisbord's view of the physical mill and buildings is the scene in which she and the workers operate. What she sees, however, disputes the scene constructed by the barons. She tells of her first view of the mill—a closed (standing) mill, closed because of the strike, imparting power to the workers who have stopped the capitalistic production and profit. The mill and the machinery are silent, a testimony to the importance of the workers. The implication in the closed mill in the barons' photographs is that machines (the spindle power of Gastonia's textile industry) are operating inside the mill, producing goods and making profit. In the barons' pictures, the mill stands alone. Weisbord, however, expands the view to include the mill houses that are just outside the frame in the barons' photographs and thus exposes a part of the entire mill scene that the barons have omitted:

There loomed the mill, a huge long rectangular building, five stories high, of dull red brick with tall narrow windows, fortresslike as most textile mills were. It sat on a slight eminence so that it dominated the scene. Behind it and around it were the many mill workers' cottages (173-174). In back of the mill was something of a hill. Here and beyond the farther end of the big building were straggling, unpaved streets lined with cottages rented by the mill to its workers, little one-story shacks elevated on brick piles or wooden posts some three feet high. All were of the most minimal construction. The houses contained generally three or four rooms; a few may have had five . . . Many of the cottages held two families

or even more; this was generally the case where there were many small children to support (177).

The juxtaposition of fortress and shack, eminence and hill, is symbolic of the distribution of power in the town in which the workers, who have no ownership, are “loomed” over by the barons. Extended, the worker is never free of the mill—the bossman that looms over the workers during work time becomes the building that “looms” over the workers when they are not at work. The individual becomes lost in the collective view of the mill and when the process is complete the workers have so identified themselves with the mill that they have become another part of the mill and, in so doing, invisible. They live in the mill houses and so are identified by their location on the “hill” looking up to (intimidated by) the “eminence.”

Weisbord finds these conditions: 14-18 year old children were working more than eleven hours, sometimes sixty-six hours and paid less than \$5 a week; girls under the age of 16 were in fact working at night; and some wages for skilled workers were less than eighteen cents an hour (170). Other complaints included: the “hank clock” that measured the yarn each worker spun, which created higher quotas and thus required that workers take no breaks in the eleven-hour shift, and requirements that both husband and wife work in the mill—if a man’s wife couldn’t work he was fired (179-180).

She takes issue with an advertisement in the *Gastonia Gazette*: “Let every man and woman in Gaston County ask the question: Am I willing to allow the mob to control Gaston County? The mob whose leaders do not believe in God and who would destroy the government?” (183) by giving names and descriptions to members of the mob:

Kelly Hendricks, commonly known as “Red” . . . Tall and very thin, with a shock of red hair, he remained pale in spite of sun exposure . . . He had gone to work at the age of eleven as a gear-wiper. Lewis McLaughlin was in complete contrast. A short, stocky young man, he had a thick head of straight black hair. His family came originally from Georgia, where he had gone to work at age ten. He never earned more than \$17. Then there was John McGinnis, a lusty fellow with coarse black hair, broad cheekbones, and swarthy skin. John had a fiery temper and if you really provoked him you were in for a fight. Russell Knight, tall and good-looking and more equable in temperament . . . All these young men, in their early or middle twenties, had gone to work as children. John McGinnis had practically no schooling; he could neither read nor write. Robert Allen was the only one who gave evidence of being very religious. He quoted the Bible so often we used to say he knew it backwards. In general, while there seemed to be little churchgoing among the people, there was much quiet religious feeling, which showed itself in the hymn singing after the meetings or in the evenings . . . (183-184).

Weisbord also pulls the women out of the “mob” and personalizes them: Binney Barnes “said she was fourteen and had been working for two years, earning \$4.95 a week for sixty hours work. Fourteen was the legal minimum age for employment; Binney looked no more than ten.” Ella Mae Wiggins, she says, “[h]er rather gaunt face would light up and soften as she sang; her hazel eyes would shine; she became for the moment beautiful.” “Gladys Wallace was a short woman in her middle twenties, fat, and sallow, she was generally sure of herself, blunt and direct.” Mrs. McGinnis was “a skinny, bent little person,” but “still full of vitality” (184-185). The recognition of the individuals unlocks them from the machines and the mill and directly contradicts that of the barons: real people instead of spindles and machines.

Weisbord’s recollection of the living conditions in the Loray Village also butts the barons’ tranquil wide-street view. In full view of the barons, Weisbord lived in the dormitory and rented a room in a mill house. Two of the communist union organizers shared a room in “the big mill boardinghouse near the mill” and Weisbord rented a room

from the occupants of a “company cottage”—the sitting room that this family customarily rented to a “millhand” (211). The language of the millworkers, in which their sense of self is implanted, slips into Weisbord’s language even though she sets herself apart when she rents a room that is “customarily” rented to workers. Weisbord’s narrative recalls the daily union leader meetings; Fred Beal’s hiding out in Charlotte for fear of being killed in Gastonia, failed efforts in High Shoals to organize another Manville-Jenckes mill. It is from Weisbord that we get a picture of Gastonia Police Chief Aderholt: “a very tall, very lean and lanky man, strong-featured with the hard-bitten look of the South. He always wore a black suit and a big black ten-gallon Texas hat” (195). This description precedes a dialogue between Weisbord and the chief in which he tells her the town has passed an ordinance against “paradin” and she responds that she and the others are have a legal right to quietly walk up and down the street after which the chief orders his men to arrest the picketers:

The scene was a confused one, with shouts and screams as the women and children ran quickly back toward the headquarters, the troopers after them, pushing them, dealing blows, using their guns as clubs... We were all herded into a waiting paddy wagon, driven into town, and taken into what we learned later was Gaston County Jail (195).

The women spent the night singing and telling their stories. Her composite retelling of the stories of the working women reveals that the workers have indeed relinquished the power they brought with them from the mountains and have donned the subhuman millhand identities given them by the barons:

Those who were mountain-born retained some of the pride, vigor, and independence of their origin, but a generation or two as millhands—low paid, sick, degraded, and ignorant—had reduced them to a sense of inborn inferiority . . . ‘I’m nothin’ but a millhand.’ This was said with quiet humility and resignation as though such a fate were inevitable (196).

The authority suddenly rests in the personal testimony of the women workers. For one night they have the power of their stories to change the barons’ story: the stretchout with so many frames to tend they needed “roller skates,” begging for the night shift with longer hours so they could be with their children during the day and do their housework on the weekends, how “every single young woman or young girl that wanted to get a job in Loray Mill had to sleep with the bossman first” (196). Weisbord uses this collection of stories told from the margins to transgress the dominant discourse, butting against the baron’s scene with a conflicting one—the bucolic transformed into roiling misery. Weisbord is aware of the transgressions as she describes a cartoon in the *Gazette* “on the front page of which in livid red and black was a cartoon depicting a devil with horns; this was our union invading this peaceful Southern community” (175).

As a publisher and distributor of leaflets for the strike, Weisbord’s position is different from Beal’s; while he complains and attempts to wrest the power away from the barons, Weisbord never allows the barons to have the power. She writes of her time in jail as an adventure, always trying to outguess her captors; she criticizes the food and the treatment, at all times belittling the jailers and maintaining her position as superior.

Weisbord also is quick to assess situations and lay blame squarely on the barons. She used a mimeograph machine in Charlotte to put out leaflets with the demands of the workers and leaflets about children working eleven hours for less than five dollars a week

and women working twelve hours on the night shift (176). When Beal and Albert Weisbord published the workers demands for higher wages and shorter hours as well as some shift reforms, Weisbord writes, “And then all the local mill owners met in Gastonia and raised a fund of two hundred and fifty dollars to fight the strike. That was their answer [to the demands of the workers]” (176). The money, she says, was used to purchase full-page ads in *The Gastonia Gazette*, signed by “anonymous citizen,” headlined “Mob Rule vs. Law and Order” and accused the organizers of Bolshevism, “which does not believe in religion, which does not believe in the sanctity of marriage” (Gastonia Gazette 12A).

Embedded in her accounts of the strike and the turbulent years are labor issues that she says must be resolved by establishment of labor unions in the South. She writes from years of radical thinking and in a style tempered with age. Her tone differs from Beal’s in that while she retells the story in favor of the union and the workers, she has not accepted the scapegoat mantle and often takes issue with Beal (as he purports to be the savior or the only one right in given circumstances). Weisbord writes to lay her version of the history and like so many history writers, that the next wave of revolution is coming. While Beal’s demands for reprieve come through his text, Weisbord agency seems to be recollection of the story, the women, and the warning.

Weisbord sets herself apart from the Southerners: a foreigner in geography (from the North) and a foreigner to capitalism (communist and union organizer). Her foreign status allows her to create scenes of Southern flavor in her observations as she explains snuff dipping, tobacco chewing, and spitting contests (180). Her Gastonia is a place of

ordinary folks exploited by the barons, in 1929 and despite their efforts has not changed in 1979.

### **Conclusion**

The fiery language of Dunne, the blame-laying of Beal, and the personalizing of the workers by Weisbord find their place in the history of Gaston County and the strike that made the county famous. The barons themselves did not answer the claims. The newspaper took the side of the anti-communist, anti-strike, anti-union faction and so the communists did not directly confront the barons, who remained in their place of power. Rather, the communists found themselves attempting to reverse the language and reverse the identities, attempting to fight out a war of ideologies without dialogue. Dunne's rants serve the immediate purpose of garnering support (financial and moral) for the incarcerated workers and union organizers, but fail to create an argument strong enough to change the town's make-up. Beal, the leader sent by the communists, eventually loses heart for the fight and goes out to vindicate himself. Weisbord's book came at a time when the barons are beginning to see the end of the textile dynasty in the South. Her belief in the communist doctrine and her celebration of the workers as individuals—real people with real stories—offers us the opportunity to see the strike as more than generalities.

Through the construction of identities of the workers and the identity of self, the communist union organizer/writers present a different scene of Gastonia and of the strike. We see the town, not through those who own the mills or through those who work in the mills, but through the eyes of outsiders, with a different doctrine and motives that are

hidden. The workers are exploited, this time not by the barons who want to enslave them in the mills, but by the communists who want to use them to disrupt the dominant discourse in the county, to transgress the barons, and install their own ideology. The incendiary language, the threats, the communists' appearance of identifying with the workers all become methods of changing the scene in Gaston County. When they left, their ideas went with them, the workers went back to work, and as Weisbord shows us, nothing has changed.



## CHAPTER V

### ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF STORIES: VOICES AND SILENCES

For the most part the mills in Gaston County are silent now. In the heyday of textiles the term for a mill that was not in operation (running), whether for vacation or cancelled shifts because of layoffs, was that the mill was “standing.” Mills, for the most part, were “standing” the weeks of Christmas and the Fourth of July. Owners used this time to let inventory catch up with orders in slow times or to change machinery for a different product or customer in good times. In this twenty-first century textiles as a source of financial income is nearly dead for workers. The barons have either sold out their interests or moved the work to another country. The term “standing” has become a misnomer since many of the mill buildings have been torn down and the refuse hauled away, leaving grass-covered lots or fresh new condominiums and patio homes where the old buildings were. Except for the development name being the same as the former mill, all evidence of a mill and the workers is gone. The background hum of the mills that permeated Gaston County is silent. When the first days of lay-offs began in the 1990s, when the machinery first stopped for days longer than the customary vacation, the silence became an uncomfortable stillness, the absence of a heartbeat. For those of us who had become accustomed to the hum, the silence connoted bad economic times; the workers would have no money and the county’s economy would grind to a silence as well. Over the years, however, as the silences of the machinery have stretched into months and

years, the residents have gradually become accustomed to the silences as well as clear drinking water with never a tint of fabric dye and the absence of lint particles darting like small bugs in the atmosphere. The language, spoken across the discourses of the mill town—doff, doff buggy, tie up ends, frames, tending sides—is never heard; their meanings are locked in the minds of the old and the middle aged, but not the young. Children in school look at a speaker of the terms quizzically as if hearing a foreign tongue.

In 1995 Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, formerly Manville-Jenckes Corporation, formerly the Loray Mill, ceased all operations in the mill and put the buildings up for sale. The structure that once loomed over West Gastonia as a mighty force, its machinery's seven-day, three-shift hum heard as many as eight blocks in each direction, was silent. The stillness loomed like death over much of the west side of Gastonia and the financial impact, felt throughout the west side, trickled into the east side. Fourteen years after it ceased operation, this mill stands—empty of the frames that held countless spindles for twisting yarn that eventually was woven into tires and bullet-proof vests. Vandals have thrown rocks through the painted windows; the barbed wire that fenced in the workers stands as a sentinel for nothing but the guardhouse door that, missing its hinges, hangs askew. The voices of the workers that yelled greetings over the loud clacking of the spinning frames are silent—dead, moved to other places or jobs, or retired to sit on front porches of the remaining Firestone mill houses. In the shadow of this gargantuan structure the voices of faithful church members rise up every Sunday morning in praise of the God they have served for generations. The Loray Church,

affiliated with the Southern Baptist Association, is no longer associated with or receiving operating capital from the mill. The church, which sits across from the Firestone Mill, was established by workers at the Loray Mill on land donated by the first owners of the Loray Mill. When the mill wanted to expand to the land occupied by the church, it negotiated a land swap with the church members and a new church was built at the present location. The demise of the mill has meant a loss of membership and the church hopes for some revitalization project in the old mill building that will bring more people and business to the westside and, in turn, increase church membership. Some members of the church worked at Firestone; others worked at a nearby mill, the Trenton, located on Main Avenue about a half mile from the church. Since the Trenton Mill did not have a church on its property, many of its workers attended the Loray Baptist Church. The church's name is the last memory of the mill that was the scene of so much turmoil.

The demise of the mills and the death of some of the most powerful barons have given workers, some of whom have maintained their silences for decades, some voice. The workers are aware that even though textiles are no longer the main source of employment in Gaston County the money and power of the textile magnates are still present. The physical locations of the mills have moved out of the United States, but the owners of the mills have not changed. The residents are very aware that the remaining barons still hold the dominant discourse. However, they also are aware that their transgressions of that discourse are not dealt with as severely as before; and some are willing to tell their stories to an interviewer and a tape recorder.

To learn whether the old taboos remained and to hear firsthand how the older residents of the mill villages recall days of working in the mills and/or living in the mill villages, I interviewed five members of Loray Baptist Church. I chose to interview members of this church because it bears the same name as the mill where the strikes occurred, was established on the property of that mill, received subsidies from the Loray Mill and later the Manville-Jenckes Company, and is still the church of many former workers for those companies as well as the Firestone Mill, which took over the property.

One of the interviewees worked at the nearby Trenton Mill and always attended Loray Baptist Church and says that when her family was in dire financial straits the church provided for them. I wanted to know what remnants of the violent times in the early twentieth century remained, how the workers saw themselves in relation to the mill, and whether they would talk about the violent times. Three of those interviewed have been members all their lives and two joined the church in their early twenties when they moved to Gastonia and went to work in the Firestone Mill. Two were 78 years old at the time of the interviews, one was 77, and two were 57 years old. Three are related: mother, father, and daughter. None currently resides in the mill village, but three live less than a mile from the dilapidated mill building. Three worked at the Firestone Tire and Rubber Co.; one worked at the nearby Trenton Mill until it ceased operations in 1972; and the other never worked in the mill but was reared in a house of three generations who worked for several mills in the vicinity. They represent boss men, workers, and children of mill workers. I asked each one to “tell me the story of your life and Loray Baptist Church,” and tape recorded their responses. I did not ask any questions, nor did I ask them to

clarify anything they said. I then studied each response for similarities, silences, and slippage. None mentioned the strike. Only one, Bertha, who was born two years before the strike occurred, made any mention of it at all and that was after the tape recording was finished. As I was leaving her house, Bertha said she hoped that something positive could come out of these interviews and not more “stuff about that old strike.” She said that most people who are not from Gastonia are interested only in the strike and not in what she called the “good things about Gastonia.” Although some of the stories are laced with images of hard times and, in at least one story, downright poverty, the interviewees collectively exhibited hope for their church and for their community. None had such hard feelings for the mill hills of Gastonia, where they either grew up or spent most of their working lives, that they never wanted to go back there. In fact, they do return to the mill village for church on Sundays and Wednesday night prayer meetings and choir practice. They expressed hope that the church could return to former times when every pew was filled. All of them were aware of efforts by the North Carolina Foundation (a group of mill owners, former mill owners, and other members of the wealthy in Gaston County) to revitalize the old mill building by turning it into condominiums, shops, and businesses. The hope for revitalization of their church and the mill village is reminiscent of Ella Mae Wiggins’s songs that expressed hope that a union would bring better working conditions and higher wages to the Loray Village.

Those I interviewed hold fast to the Protestant work ethic and the idea that lives have purpose even though some slippage indicates they may accept, but are not always happy with some controlling factors that appear to have dictated their life choices.

Bertha's constant reminder that she does not regret the more than twenty years she "was forced to" spend working in the mill could be construed as a regret or at least curiosity about the life she might have had had she been allowed by the Trenton Mill owners to accept a different and less physically stressful job at another mill. John repeatedly talks about what a "great life" he had growing up in the mill village even though his family's low income limited his education and career choices. Teacher expectations, he tells us, were not as high for the children on the mill hills as for children who were not affiliated with the mills. He repeats the phrase "It was a great life," when he transitions from one part of his story to the next. Norma, who attended high school with John, reminds us that the children of the mill hill were not accepted into some activities at the high school. Each tells a different story, but similar threads weave through them, particularly their religious faith and their sense of place.

Paul Gee tells us that we can use narratives to make sense of situations (150). In the case of the Loray narratives, some of the interviewees imbed problems with which they are or have been concerned. For some of these interviews there were indications of how the barons had created situations that dictated to an extent the life paths of the workers. Choices and silences indicate what the storyteller sees as important or unimportant. They may not talk about the Loray per se, but the Loray strike sometimes influences what is told or how it is told. Some distance themselves from work at the mill. For instance, Bertha mentions that none of her family ever worked for Loray or Manville-Jenckes, where the majority of the strikers worked, and Bertha is the one who wants to hear no more talk about the strike.

All of those interviewed started their story with when and where they were born and moved through their lives. Some talked about school; some did not. Where they lived affected many of their choices; and their stories are situated in those contexts. According to Gee, the language that those interviewed use as well as the things they choose to emphasize offers an idea of what they see as unchangeable and what they can manipulate (61, 115). Through her story, Bertha indicates that she could not choose where she worked. She had to make the best of the situation. John's situation dictated that he would be a carpenter. These members of Loray Baptist Church offer a unique look at how some things have changed, but some have not.

### **Bertha**

Although the Great Depression brought financial problems to the barons and to the workers in particular, the barons were able to keep tight control on the workers even during and after their own corporate reorganizations and when times seemed to be improving for some in Gaston County. Bertha, 78, recalls the hard times.

My life began in 1927. I was born June 6, 1927. I was born on the Trenton Mill Village. The house is not standing any longer, but I know exactly on the street where I was born. And we had—ah—we had a very rough life when I was growing up because my father died when I was 10 days old and there was—there was—actually seven of us and they sent one of my brothers to the orphanage and the rest of us stayed home and were raised by my mother and my 14-year-old brother.

The passive voice pervades Bertha's language as if she were never in charge of things. Bertha's use of the preposition "on" the village rather than "in" the village reflects the barons' references to the mills' housing sections as "mill hills." The term village was

seldom used in Gaston County. Therefore, one would live “on” the hill rather than “in” it. And if one is not “in” then one is out and there may be community, but not off that hill.

Bertha was in the first 12<sup>th</sup> grade graduating class at Gastonia High School, the school the barons built for their children and later reluctantly allowed the mill children to attend. When she turned 16, she attended high school in the winter and worked in the Trenton Mill during summer vacation. She knew she would go into the mills when she graduated high school, but was hoping to use her high school diploma to get a better job than tending spinning frames in the plant.

I had about three job offers, but my mother lived on the Trenton Village and you had to have so many people working in the plant or you had to move and I knew that we could not afford to pay rent anywhere else. We got the house almost free there at the plant. But anyway I was forced to go back into the plant after I graduated from high school even though I had about three good job offers. I-I-I don't regret it—and I worked twenty-nine years there in the mill.

Twice Bertha says that she had more than one job offer after high school. The hesitations in her story appear again as do the word “forced” and the phrase “had to.” Bertha talks about her situation in passive voice; however, she voices authoritative representation in her inability to make her own decisions about her future, her trapped situation directly related to the barons (Gee 157). The stammering, repetition of “I” as she speaks of regret indicates again her anger at being forced into a job she did not want and forced to leave a job she wanted.

One of the three jobs that I had after I graduated from high school was at Firestone [formerly the Loray]. John Jones gave me a job in the laboratory and I was told if I—if I—took that job we would have to move. And so we couldn't



afford to move so I had to—I had to go back to work in the Trenton Mill in order to hold the house—to help hold the house—because it really wasn't anybody at that point in time but me and my mother really. And so I was actually forced to go to work . . . And I'd still been there if it'd still been running. It was closed down in 1972 I believe the Trenton plant closed.

Again, she uses the passive voice, “was told” and the verb “forced,” an indication that Bertha was not in any way in charge of her working life and that once controlled, she remained in that control even after she could have gotten away. The hesitations after each part of the work story again show how difficult it is for her to talk about the turn her career took because of her family's dependence on the mill.

While she was working at the Trenton Mill, she met and married her husband and they moved out of the house owned by the mill. She no longer was obligated to that mill, but she stayed. Bertha still inserts that she has no regrets. She hesitates as she says it, repeating “I” three times as if searching for the right word or phrase and settling on the one that the barons would want to hear. Bertha's story is told more in the hesitations and the repetitions than in what she actually tells us.

Bertha credits Loray Baptist Church, where she has been a member all her life, with getting her family through the hard times. Even though her mother and brothers worked for the Trenton Mill, they chose to attend the church in the Loray village. The church was the social life: valentine parties, Christmas parties, picnics. And the church members—mill workers themselves—offered financial and spiritual support to those who were in worse straits than they. Bertha recalls:

I will say this: had it not been—been for the community that I was raised in and for the church I don't know how my mother would have made it back in those days because raising all of us herself ah she was ah. We didn't—she didn't have any insurance money. The bank closed on Daddy's insurance money. And ah naturally there wasn't anything like social security and—and—welfare back then. And so had it not been for Loray Baptist Church and for uh and for the neighborhood in which I lived I don't know how my mother could have survived.

Again, the stammers come every time she brings up unpleasantness even though she never complains. The pauses as she chooses pronouns, shifting between “we” and “she” and finally leaving survival to the mother. Bertha also remembers that the church was indebted to the Loray Mill because the mill subsidized the preacher's salary and the general upkeep of the church, another reason that the church members have been silent about the work in the mills. In a sense the owners bought silence with the donations to the church. The power that the barons exercised with their money extended to the spiritual lives of the workers and continued the workers' silences. To speak out against the mill would risk the loss of much-needed funds for the church and its outreach programs. One could say the barons bought the workers' silences, but it is more complicated than a simple donation. The workers remember the discipline they have been subject to over the years and, having had the energy of their power reversed for so many years, continue the subjection that has become a way of life (Foucault Discipline and Punish 138).

I think it was once a month they [the Loray, Manville-Jenckes, Firestone corporations] paid us—they gave us—one thousand dollars and I don't know whether you know or not, but they gave us the property to build the old church on and they also when we tore it down and rebuilt the new church, well they just swapped properties with us. We just went across the street and they still gave us—gave us all that property.

Bertha's story of the mill's donation seems to have an element of surprise in the mill's generosity, perhaps a comparison to her employer's (the Trenton Mill) apparent control and stinginess. She does not seem to be aware of the coercion that the church's members (including herself) have endured because of the gifts.

Bertha recalls that the Loray Baptist Church conducted services in mill houses before the church building was completed; one was her grandfather's and it was in that house that the church name and denomination were decided. But none of her family, she says, ever worked for the Loray Mill or the Firestone. Trenton Mill families, she said, often attended the Loray Church. She does not say whether the Trenton mill supported a church or whether it contributed to the Loray Church. Her silence speaks volumes in terms of her attitude toward the Trenton Mill in that we see an affinity to the Loray and the Firestone that is not there for the Trenton. She had to work there, but she puts her allegiance somewhere else. When the Trenton Mill closed, Bertha went to work as a sales associate at a local department store and retired from that store more than twenty years later.

Harold, a deacon and later treasurer of the church, tells more about the 1948 land swap and the finished construction of the new church building in 1952. The mill needed to expand and wanted to use the land the church had, he says. The church also needed to expand so the swap was made without either side appearing to have to acquiesce to the other. It would appear that times had changed somewhat and the mill supervision was more willing to negotiate with the workers than in times past.

### Harold

Harold was born the same year as Bertha; his wife Margaret is a year younger. They lived in the Loray Mill Village and he recounts their lives in part in their progression of houses. Harold came from neighboring Rutherford County to work at the Firestone Mill when he was 20 years old and he worked at the mill for more than thirty-eight years. He came, he said, because the farming life did not yield a living. However, his early life on a farm gives him a different self-image from many of those who were born into the mill village—especially second and third generation mill workers who have made passivity a survival skill.

We set up housekeeping in Gastonia on Fifth Avenue and I was working at the Firestone at that time—living in a three-room bungalow type house that was furnished first of all by Firestone then later sold to the employees there so we purchased our first home in 1950 and lived there ten years, sold it, and moved to another location [within the Firestone Village] in 1960 and lived there until 1983, then moved to our present location [still on the westside, but not in the Firestone Village]. Many winters we would have snow and I would probably walk to work or either if the snow would get gone or part of it get gone maybe drive the car to work. But most of the time I was close enough to my work to walk if necessary. But the twenty-three years that we lived in one house—it was just there on Ransom Street so it was almost at—almost at the mill door.

Absent from Harold's address is the preposition "on" and neither the noun "hill" nor "village" designate where his house is located. Unlike Bertha, Harold apparently never had any idea that he would do anything other than receive promotions in the mill. After twenty years, he was promoted to supervisor. He kept that job four years and made a lateral move to another part of the plant as a supervisor. He never mentions the work he did at the mill and he never mentions the workers he supervised. He does not talk about

being a boss man; just that he was a “supervisor,” what Fred Beal would have called a “straw boss.” His conversation indicates that he never saw himself in any position less than management. He also took on management roles in the church.

Harold also does not talk about the management at Firestone. He says he “was promoted,” making use of the same use of passive voice that is in Bertha’s conversation. Even though Hamrick uses the verb to indicate his success at the mill, the verb tense indicates a certain passiveness in that someone else performed the action of making him supervisor. Rather than taking responsibility for the action and saying he worked up to supervisor, Hamrick assumes the mill worker position of being acted on. The workers have more position in the mill, but again that authority is given to the barons.

We have been members of Loray Church [since 1947]. The church was located kindly on the—on the—let’s see west side of Franklin Boulevard until 1952 and in 1952 we moved into a new building on the north side of Franklin Boulevard. And that was in 1952 and the church is still a part of that area around Firestone and West Gastonia very much part of the spiritual life of the community . . . I will always be a part of the church and the community around West Gastonia.

Because Harold chose to live and work at the Firestone, the resentment does not show in his story as it does in Bertha’s. He does not go into detail about the mill swapping land with the church so that the mill could expand where the church stood. For him, the swap offered the opportunity for the church to grow. What it does tell us is that as late as the 1950s the mill was still offering financial support to the church. But now he worries about the decline of the church as the mill stands vacant.

We had 94 in Sunday School Sunday and with a church our size you know how big the building is. We’ve got room that’s not even being used in church anymore.

We need to get our people back. See at one time you—when you worked at Firestone—well actually when it was at Loray—Loray more than Firestone—the church almost had to recommend you for you to get a job there. But your work and church was closely knitted during those days. Course, you know how times have changed. But that’s what people tell me and they expect if you worked at Loray Mill or later became Firestone. They almost expected you to go to church. Church life was a part—a part of you more so then than it is now. Now businesses can’t tell you if that’s not the right work. They can’t even insist hardly that you do a certain thing and you know I can understand that to a certain extent but I still think that they could insist or at least recommend that you do certain things. They can’t dictate to you and that’s that.

Harold appears to lament the demise of businesses requiring church attendance for employees, a mill practice that became popular after the strikes and intended to control the employees. As treasurer of the church, Harold worries about the finances and about doing the church’s work if the membership drops. Both he and Bertha seem to think the development of the mill building will help their church to survive.

### **John**

In the 1950s when John attended Ashley High School, formerly Gastonia High School, teachers’ and administrators’ expectations for students, often based on the family occupations and home addresses, remained one of the important factors in the course of study offered to particular students. John recalls that he was told to take vocational courses. He did what he was told.

In telling the story of his family, John uses the barons’ synecdoche to describe his grandfather: “He finally came over to Loray and was a *mill hand* there for many years until . . .” He first refers to his grandfather as a mill worker, then a hand. These references, however, identify John’s grandfather, hence his family’s social status, with the mill. If one worked in the mill, he took the label that had been given him by

generations before and he learned his place. Synecdoche, in this case the use of the word “hand” for a person, was common in Gastonia, as common as “linthead.” The words often were used interchangeably by the barons; but the workers preferred “hand” to “linthead.” John does not elaborate on his grandfather or give him any characteristics that would separate him from any of the other faceless millions. The Gastonia audience understands the significance just as it understands the living conditions that John describes: “We lived—Mom and Dad lived with Granddaddy there on Mill Street. Matter of fact, I think the whole family lived there. Mother’s brother and his wife lived there with their first child.” He recites the members of the family in the house in a matter-of-fact manner, not complaining about the number of people in the house, just simply stating that they were there—the same as in many other mill families.

John recalls having difficulty in school and by the time he reached high school, he knew he was not going to college. There was no money for college and he did not see himself as college material because he believed that he could not remember lessons: “I would learn the multiplication tables at night and recite them to Mama and the next morning they were gone.” So in his eleventh-grade year he took Trade Carpentry I and in his senior year, Trade Carpentry II.

I went on in summer time to a summer class so I could receive a certificate of vocational graduation which turns out, you know, would be a degree like you would get from Gaston College technical today. So I took technical carpentry instead of—a lot of my friends took auto mechanics. We couldn’t afford the fifty-some dollars it was gonna take to get auto mechanics tools, but I had a hammer and saw that’s all I needed to take trade carpentry and praise God I did because I enjoy woodworking and I been in the building trade for a long time now—the electrical trade—so it gave me a good background. I graduated from high school in 1965.

John gives important information here in that he graduated high school and received an “equivalent” college degree; he had a trade; and he could get out of the mill, which is what he did. Shortly after graduation, John joined the Navy and thus avoided becoming a third-generation mill worker. As he continues his story, John describes the different mills in which his father worked, finally coming to Gastonia from Charlotte via Lowell to settle at the Firestone Mill. He recalls a childhood of playing in the woods near the mill and again shows us how the workers were tied: “See, it’s all connected to the mill. Everything was connected to the mill.” The woods were shared by the children of the Firestone (Loray) Mill and the Trenton Mill. The common woods made playmates of children from various mills.

During his interview, John repeatedly remarks as he finishes one story and moves to another one, “But it was a good life” or “It was good times, really good times.” These statements follow statements about being part of the “working poor,” “grammar school,” and his high school class. Each time he talks about something that might be seen as not good by his audience, John negates it with “good times,” as if he does not remember the incident as bad, but as part of the times. He jokes about his divorce from his first wife, “She decided life wasn’t as good as she wanted it to be.” And he makes another joke about his adopted daughter: “If we can get her out of college, life is going to be even better.” Through his jokes and his insistence that life is good, John works to show that his upbringing in the mill village has been good for his life.



### Norma

Norma was in the high school graduating class with John. Her father, Harold, was a supervisor at Firestone and Norma is a high school teacher. Her story has fewer hesitations than Bertha's or John's and she seems more confident in her telling. She recalls her early childhood in a duplex, where they lived until her parents could buy a house.

All this was called New Town and, of course, all this was around Firestone Mill and they bought the house—it was a three-room house—and we all slept in you know—the same bedroom—you know. I don't remember how old I was when we moved there, but I do remember that my brother was born—he's three years younger than I am. So I remember that his crib was in the same room and then I had a twin bed and then Mama and Daddy's bed. Our house was heated by a gas heater which of course was in the living room and that's the only heat we had in the house. As we got older, Mother and Daddy took in the back porch and built a room and then of course the bathroom was off the back porch. But anyway it was the typical mill house. And everybody, you know, that lived on that street worked at Firestone Mill.

Norma's story may be told with more confidence than the other two, but she marks her story as she repeats "of course," as in what is expected—everything just like the others. The phrase marks what she assumes her audience will know, but she has added anyway. She identifies herself and her family as part of the mill in that everybody on that street worked at the Firestone. She also knew where she stood socially when she attended high school. Social activities among the mill folks were in the church. For the mill children, there were no country club dances or parties as there were for the children of the owners, who attended the same high school. The church building was the clubhouse for children of mill workers.

Our whole lives revolved around the church. That was our social life. We didn't—a lot of us weren't involved in clubs at school. We might be—I think I was involved in the Bible Club at school—I think maybe I was in the Drama Club one time but we didn't—we weren't in—we weren't the rich kids. We weren't in Civinettes and Keyettes, anything like that. Our parents worked in the mill. We weren't movers and shakers in the community but our life revolved around the church and my boyfriend was at the church and I met him and we would go on—there was a lot of social things planned for the kids.

Norma hesitates when she talks about the social life at school—the exclusion of the mill children from the clubs that the mill owners' children belonged to. The rest of the time her voice is strong and there are no hesitations when she recalls snowfalls, church outings, moving to new houses, and Bible School. The hesitation comes as she recalls the differences in the activities the mill children could enjoy and those the “rich kids” could enjoy. She did not register a complaint or give examples of the differences, just a hesitation.

She is confident when she talks about the Girls Auxiliary at the church, which became the equivalent of the debutantes on the other side of town:

Now, the girls in our church were members of the GA department, Girls' Auxiliary and what we would do is we would pass off steps. Start out with I don't even remember what the first one was but it would probably be like Maiden, then Lady In Waiting, and then Princess and all the way up to queen and queen with a scepter and queen regent and queen regent in service and when we passed these steps off to the ladies who were the leaders of the girls auxiliary then we'd have a coronation service and all the young girls in the church were involved in it and we all wore white dresses and the stage would be cleared and we'd march down and be recognized and receive our little badge or whatever it was we received—our certificate—and I remember passing off all those steps and I made it up to queen—queen with a scepter I believe it was and if you made it to queen you got to wear this long white dress. And we always wore white because the colors of the Girls Auxiliary were green and gold and we'd wear white and we'd have sashes like a green sash or whatever. So queen with a scepter got to wear a long white gown and you had two little attendants—little boy would carry a pillow with

whatever you were going to get and a little girl kinda like a flower girl and we would march down and they would be in front of us and we would march down and go up on the stage and it would be a real impressive ceremony and then with the scepter-the little boy would carry the scepter on the pillow—and then the regent queen regent would get the cape and it was a real impressive ceremony. It was always done on a Sunday night and everybody came and there would be a reception and it was a real big thing for us. Now a lot of girls might be in Girl Scouts, but many girls in our church were not Girl Scouts, that I remember. They would go to be involved in the Girls Auxiliary.

The specifics of the dress and the colors are important as this is a sort of rite of passage among the young girls of the church. Norma devotes a lot of space to describing the ceremony that rewarded the young girls and gave them the recognition that they would not get at the high school.

The stories indicate a change in the lives of the workers in Gaston County and some change in what they are willing to share with outsiders. However, there are still incidences of omission of story or avoidance of issues. And even though some have left the village and the mill work far behind, the memories of being a lesser class remain. The silences, too, remain, even though some have tried to make inroads over the decades.

### **Conclusion**

This study was meant to examine some of the discourses of a textile town during the early twentieth century when the South was changing from an agrarian to an industrial economy. Each discourse represented a group of people who wanted to be a part of the New South and each discourse acted within the context of the whole community. Only that of the barons was dominant at any time and that has not changed. The discourses that were a part of Gastonia and Gaston County during much of the twentieth century are no longer vying for position. The communists left after the death of

Ella May Wiggins and the trials for the police chief's death. The workers went back to work and said little, afraid that they would lose their jobs.

The barons maintain their silences about the strikes and about any unpleasantness connected with the days of labor unrest. Today, the silences are about the loss of textile jobs in Gaston County. The barons do not talk about where the jobs went, but the workers silently know that they are overseas. In Gaston County there is no industry left that has enough workers to organize. The powerful and dominant textile barons have silenced all the discourses but theirs.

At the end of the twentieth century, the bitterness of the workers remained as did their silences. As always, they relied on their religious faith to help them over the hard times of life and to give them some hope for the future. But the workers and many of the newcomers to Gaston County keep a healthy silence about all things involved with the mills. The power of the barons is still felt throughout the community and as one lifelong resident said, "The mills may be gone, but the men who owned them still have money and that money still rules this community. You do well to be careful what you turn over."

Accustomed to taking charge of the lives of their black slaves, they simply moved from one type of ownership to another. Whether they actually "owned" the person in outright slavery or owned the person through intimidation, their discourse has been the dominant one and has created the silences in the other discourses. By enclosing the workers in houses owned by the mills during their off-work hours and in the mills with little or no ability to leave the premises during the workday, the barons successfully controlled the workers. Because the barons essentially owned the major communication

outlets they have had the freedom to write history to their liking. The words of the workers have been submerged or silenced for years under threat of job loss or, in some cases, loss of life. Through analysis of the writing of each discourse and a study of the genres that each is allowed to use the motives of the barons become clear. The voices of the workers are heard more often now, but still in the guarded silences of the other. The county that became an industrial center and Gastonia, known for years as Spindle City, maintain into the twenty-first century the same dominance of discourse by the rich even though the mills are no longer the major employer. The intimidation remains and it is the outsider who comes in to tell the story, as Bertha says, to stir up that old mill mess again, in the hopes of equalizing the discourses.

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