

**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #542
WILLIAMS, Jr., Samuel Saye
INTERVIEWEE**

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*This is an edited transcript. Our transcription guidelines are available upon request/on our website.

Subject: Race Relations and work experiences at the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company, and his time as a mechanic at South Carolina Department of Transportation.

Interviewer = Alex Windham (AW)

Interviewees = Samuel Saye Williams Jr. (SW)

00:00:00

AW: This is an oral history interview with Samuel Saye Williams Jr. for the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections by Alex Windham on 5/16/2017.

00:00:16

AW: Mr. Williams lets go into our debate about the Bleachery and how you worked there in your years. First of all let's start with what was your background, what did you do before you worked in the Bleachery?

SW: Well when I was coming up raised, I was really a farm boy, so I farmed for several years and that was hard work. We had a little bit of everything as far as animals. Then I left there and went to a produce farm, which was Cameron's and worked there a while. Then I went to clean up in the Bleachery and I can't remember just what years it was 1961 or 1962 and it sure didn't pay nothing but it got me by and from there they finally hired me on in the Bleachery and so then I was making fairly decent money, I thought at a dollar and a quarter an hour.

00:01:35

AW: So you mentioned that you had family members, did you have family members working there?

SW: My mother, my father, three aunts, and two uncles that I know of...

00:01:58

AW: Did they influence you, push you saying “Go get you a job at the Bleachery” or was it something else?

SW: They were making pretty decent money because they paid a lot of these people bonuses, and I said “Man I can do that work,” so I said “I’m going to the Bleachery.”

00:02:20

AW: So the Bleachery was easier work than farming, in your opinion?

SW: Yes, a whole lot!

00:02:28

AW: So you said your first job was clean up, what exactly did you do in the clean-up?

SW: Well you go in there on a Saturday morning, usually and you would get you a hose, an air hose. You blow everything off and make sure you got all the lent off of everything and then you would get a water hose and wash everything down, floor and all and then they had mops and you would mop the floor up. It was fairly clean after we got done course that was some of them that didn’t do half a job. Them was the ones that wouldn’t be there the next time.

00:03:15

AW: So management kind of pushed for hard workers all the time?

SW: Yeah, all the time.

00:03:20

AW: So, with that being said, how controlling when you first got there was management on ya’ll’s day to day work life?

SW: When I first went in there, it was a wonderful place to work! I mean the management wasn’t hard or nothing. I mean they let you learn the job and do the job and made sure you was doing it right and if you done a good job they wasn’t no problem advancing. I mean you could move on to other jobs.

00:04:00

AW: As a far as your reaction with other people when you first got there, your family members and also your coworkers? Was it pretty cordial?

SW: Oh they loved it! Most of the people that was working there I knew in some form of a way or another. Worked with them or met them outside, but Lord it was nice. I mean I really enjoyed working in there.

00:04:35

AW: So it was pretty close-knit all the way through?

SW: Yeah, yes it is, and it was rather... I hated to see it all go down it just... It was a big place a pretty place inside. Now I will say it was a little dusty and dirty, whenever you was running some foreign material in there but you never did pay it no attention. I worked anywhere from eight hours a day to twelve hours a day. I did work one time thirty six hours before they caught on to it and made me go home [laughing]

AW: Thirty six hours straight? Wow! Alright do you remember any of your coworkers like how when you first got there how they treated you? As far as did they help you learn the job immediately where there some that, some of the older fellas...

SW: All of my coworkers that I had in there they helped me tremendously and I probably wouldn't have stayed there if it hadn't been for them, but they was really good people. The women and then finally the blacks started to come in and they were super good people, I mean they worked hard and they worked beside me and I'd teach them and they done real good, I mean I didn't have no problem with none of them.

00:06:10

AW: So, like you said you started in, taking it decade by decade, in the 1960s. What was the environment like as far as antiunion, how women were treated, how the African Americans were treated during that time period and how you responded to it?

SW: Everybody was treated pretty equal. I mean I never had no problems come out of it. Sometimes the boss man came out and got onto some of them, and then they'd want to file a grievance. I was the shop steward and I had to do the filing and had to follow it up. We would meet with the mediator and they'd decided exactly what to do, but other than that there was no problems, I mean the people worked good together, the blacks the whites. I had one little black girl, and she could run just about everything there was in the departments. She did not mind getting in there and getting dirty with the men, and she worked and she worked hard and then she finally got laid off. She left there shortly after I did.

00:07:24

AW: So, when did you first start seeing African Americans in the production jobs with ya'll actually inside, do you remember that?

SW: I'm going to say it was in the middle 1960s and late 1960s it started to get more and more. The blacks were not as dumb as people were thinking they were. They were some really smart people, I mean they run the machines and they'd keep up the productions like they was supposed to and they helped one another and they'd help the white people. We just more or less were one big family. It worked good.

00:08:13

AW: That seems to be a common theme with a lot of the textile industries, that it was like a big family and that the interactions ya'll were all very close-knit. So whenever there would be an issue there would people there to back them up?

SW: Yeah,

AW: You mentioned that you saw management prodding sometimes...

SW: Oh yeah!

AW: Can you think of a specific time this happened in the 1960s, do you remember one? Like maybe when someone was not doing what they were supposed to be doing and then management stepped in or fired someone, how was that interaction?

SW: Well the sixties we didn't have too much of it, we stayed pretty calm, but now you got on up in the seventies it got a little rougher and rougher. You had dope and all that coming in...

AW: So drug testing and a lot more along of those lines?

SW: Yeah.

00:09:20

AW: Did you notice, like you said in the sixties there were not too many people getting fired or leaving..

SW: No.

AW: So it came around in the seventies that there was kind of an attitude change and people were leaving and then people were getting fired...

SW: Right.

AW: What do you think caused that other than dope? [Laughing]

SW: I think it was some of the young people that they was hiring and their attitudes changed about wanting to work. They wanted something for nothing and it was the whites and blacks, it wasn't just black folk. Most of my blacks I had real good attitudes and good production out of them. I mean, I'd tell them what I wanted out of them and that's what they done. We would work side by side.

00:10:09

AW: Alright your bosses, how did your bosses, what kind of motivation did they give you or did you get bonuses and stuff or was it constant?

SW: [Laughing] Well they'd tell you what to do and you'd best go do it cause if you didn't they was coming out there to find out why! I watched one boy come up off a bench and he hit the big boss man right upside the head. He hit him hard enough to kill him! And that fella just staggered and then walked on off, but I knew what was happening the fella wasn't feeling good and he had done been aggravated with the cloth he was running and it was just a situation that the boss man shouldn't have jumped. Of course that wasn't the only one there was a black boy he was running a machine and he (the boss man) come out and blared out at him and that boy nailed him too. But that just don't work with people, you just can't treat them like animals. This boss man was strictly boss, I mean it didn't matter what you said or done, you done what he said. Me and him had a few words, other than that it wasn't no problem.

00:11:38

AW: So was this in the seventies or the eighties?

SW: Yeah, I would say it was in the early seventies.

AW: Did he (the boss man) stick around with the way he treated people was he around for a long time?

SW: Yeah I stayed there up into the eighties...

AW: As far as your boss that treated people poorly, he was there the whole time?

SW: Yeah, I really would like to see him if he hasn't died, he was just bull-headed. I've been to his house before I bought stuff from him. Me and my daddy bought stuff from him. Matter of fact me and a good friend went down there and bought a trailer a house trailer and pulled it all the way from down there back up to the house.

00:12:20

AW: So that attitude was pretty much cordial throughout the whole working relationship?

SW: Yeah.

AW: So, people got along with their bosses even after being finished working there?

SW: Yeah, I mean he was just one of those who was hot-headed, wouldn't take time to understand a situation so I never really had no tough problems with him. He was a decent fella but he just didn't know how to treat people.

00:12:56

AW: How many people can you estimate were under you when you were in a supervisory position? And what department was it?

SW: This was in the Grey department, which were all the grey goods come in. I probably had thirty people under me most of them being women who sewed the cloth and all that because we would get in bales and we'd get in rolls and all types of cloth.

00:13:30

AW: So, you didn't have too many men in that department because of course it was the beginning stages (of production) right?

SW: Most of the men were the machine operators, like I said I had that one black girl and she could run a machine just as well as the man beside her, it didn't bother her a bit. Which I loved her for that because she was going to advance it didn't matter what because she was a tough little worker. I doubt if she weighed 120 pounds she wasn't much over four feet tall.

AW: Oh wow, and doing work that men were doing.

SW: Yeah, she was tough I mean just tough. She'd done been cut up in fights and all kind of stuff but she didn't care. She'd show it to you and keep on going.

00:14:25

AW: How much was that- was there much of a gender stereotype? That "Oh women can't do this work," how heavy was that when you first got there versus when you left?

SW: Well most of the women they didn't want to do the work like that, the heavy stuff.

AW: The hard work, yeah.

SW: Yeah, they just went in as machine sewing operators which they were pretty decent jobs they made a little bonus on it if they sewed enough seams- God I don't know how many women, there wasn't that much of a turn around with the women. If you got one of them in there they usually stayed, and didn't nobody fuss at them because they done their job. I mean Lord a mercy they worked hard to try to stay ahead of those machines that was running the cloth.

00:15:20

AW: Alright now that you mention the machines, of course you started in the sixties and you ended in the eighties, how did technology impact the amount of jobs and the productivity of jobs and just people keeping their jobs as the machines got more advanced?

SW: You could see it cutting back on the help. I mean they'd always have layoffs. The machines was so dang smart and everything, people, it just didn't take as many to run it. I mean Lord they doubled up on the help with the machines which wasn't no problem if you had the seniority you'd be the one that was left, and they could run two or three of the machines by their selves. I mean cloth wasn't no problem. It was kind of a tough way to learn, but like I say I had some good people under me. They call me every now and then talking, wondering what I'm doing.

00:16:37

AW: So you had positive workers and you still apparently get along-

SW: Oh yeah!

AW: You still get calls from them.

SW: Yeah if I run into any of them I, Lord I got to talk to them because they require you to talk to them [Laughing] they just so interesting in what you're doing now. Yeah it's been a while since I seen any of my old employees, they were some good ones. I tell them, heck, I needed something done right away, a sample, roll, or something else. They wouldn't swap words, the next thing I know that thing was done run. So, I enjoyed working with them I really did! Then they moved me out of the Grey department and I went to the Bleach department.

00:17:35

AW: Okay, and what did you do in the Bleach department what were your responsibilities there?

SW: Just watched what they (machine operators) were running and made sure they used the right chemicals on it and helped them on the machines if they needed help. I would keep up with the tickets on the cloth and made sure they got put upstairs when they bleached the cloth out and it went in the White bins. And that didn't last very long.

AW: When would you say this was what year?

SW: I would say it was in the late seventies. Then I went to the White department and I would line up the machines on what I needed run on of account of the print machines, and Lord keeping up with them printers was something else, but I always made sure they had their cloth. We had a stock room down in the White department and I'd pull all the cloth and make sure I had it all before I ever lined it up, and they go to running it and printing it.

00:18:56

AW: So you were pretty much a supervisor probably from the mid-seventies until you left?

SW: Yeah.

AW: Because you were a trusted worker and you would make sure people did their jobs but not in the way that was not hard on them (the workers).

SW: Yeah, I wasn't hard on them. I'd catch them with their dope and stuff and I'd just tell them "look fellas you going to have to quit it (smoking dope) or quit doing it in here because you will get fired for it." I never did have no big trouble out of them with their dope and all it was just simple thing to handle you just talk to them in the right way and let them know that was interested in them and I had some good black workers and I appreciated every one of them because man them boys would run a machine and come out there and help a fella on the floor with the cloth. I mean they didn't mind working on anything they'd find a way to do it.

00:20:00

AW: Did you have, like you say them being hard workers and people had to change their attitudes somewhat about them.

SW: Yeah!

AW: How much did you see of people "Don't work with me don't help me," white people reacting that way? Was there much of that at all?

SW: I never seen any of it! I mean these fellas appreciated whatever help they could get and I don't know like I said it was just like a big family and we all worked together and got the job done.

00:20:33

AW: Okay- How did the Lowenstein Company perpetuate that idea of a "family," as far as outside activities and stuff y'all could do during the sixties, seventies, and eighties?

SW: Well you see coming up as kids that's where we got our Christmas from they had the outside Christmas party and had the toys and all that.

AW: And your daughter Sherry, did she ever participate or did they pretty much discontinue that by the time she came along?

SW: I think all my kids participated at least one time and then they quit it and I knew things were going downhill from there cause they was getting where they really didn't care about their help and the union they came in along then too and it made it a whole lot better on the people in the plant then. They could join or they didn't have to join. I was in it.

00:21:51

AW: And you said it had a big influence because management and the upper crust had decided that y'all weren't really worth the time to put into it or-?

SW: More or less I mean they just- they got to where they didn't care about their help and stuff and you could see it in the way they talked when you went before them and we always had meetings and everything. So, I'd take it back to my folks what they said and what was going to be done and that's what was done. It finally just washed out the whole plant. I hated to see that place shut down.

00:22:42

AW: So you left in 1983 because of a layoff?

SW: Yeah

AW: How many people would you reckon were laid off at the same time as you?

SW: Oh Lord a mercy! Probably a thousand because they was really cutting back in the departments then, some were whole departments they just cut out.

AW: Now was it owned by Springs by the time you came through or was Springs about to buy it?

SW: Springs was about to buy it later. I don't know whether they ever worked anything out or not. Let's see the Grier Division it was just like the Printing and Finishing Division I mean it done about everything that the Bleachery done. It was just a smaller set up.

AW: They made the chemicals ya'll used in the plant?

SW: They ran the cloth and all that stuff. It was just a smaller form of the Bleachery. They would get grey goods in and they'd run 'em and bleach 'em and all that stuff they had print machines, and when I was getting ready and know I was coming out of that place (Bleachery) they was putting in screen print machines. Now that was a fun machine to watch, I mean, dang it didn't take it no time to print up some cloth.

AW: It would just go straight down the cloth like a printer would today, like a printer for paper?

SW: Yeah, I mean it was something else, but now they ain't got none of that and they were fairly new buildings where all that was.

00:24:37

AW: So what did you do after- you had mentioned earlier to me before the recording that you were a mechanic-

SW: Yeah

AW: part time throughout all of this- What did you do after 1983?

SW: Well I went to work for the DOT, which is the state highway department, as a mechanic. I started out in there making roughly \$150 a week, until they-

AW: Now what were you making at the Bleachery, was it much of a pay cut to leave from the Bleachery?

SW: I was getting, they were paying us by the month then, \$1700 and something dollars a month.

AW: And so you were sad to see the Bleachery- leave the Bleachery and go to the other (SCDOT)?

SW: Yeah cause see I had all my budgets and all set up on that \$1700 and that didn't work long! So I had to start cutting back myself then.

AW: So it greatly impacted your life leaving the Bleachery?

SW: Yes, most definitely!

AW: Because you had stability, and had to figure out what you were going to do next.

SW: Yeah I didn't have nothing then. So, they did give me a little severance pay which wasn't much, I think it was \$3600 or something like that.

AW: But they treated you halfway- they treated you decent?

SW: They treated me real decent.

AW: Right there at the end and it wasn't just "Get out," but it was more "Sorry to see you leaving," type stuff?

SW: Yeah cause there was a lot of boss men in there that really liked having me in there. See they shut down my whole shift was what it was. I run the third shift and they just shut it down. Then I moved to other departments and they finally shut down those. And Lord it wasn't nobody there compared to what it was when I first went to work.

00:26:50

AW: So, it obviously impacted your family when you left. Did you get to see them more since you weren't working third shift, when you worked for SCDOT or how did-how did it impact was it really kind of similar- to how much you got to see you family and interact with your immediate family?

SW: Yeah I was home a whole more because I worked, God, whenever the Bleachery folks called me I would be there.

AW: So you would fill in for people when they needed shifts?

SW: Then I went with the state-It took me a while to get my money built up where I could handle everything. They found out that I was a better mechanic than what they thought they were hiring, and then they stepped me up to a supervisor there as a shop supervisor. I was in it for several years.

00:27:45

AW: Well what about some of your other fellows, people that worked for you- you said the whole shift was cut- and you said that one girl, earlier that worked real hard- that she got to stay on for another year after you left-

SW: Yeah.

AW: How did they- you know as far as talking to them here in recent history, how did it impact them when they first left the shift- have you talked to them about that?

SW: It really hurt them because they thought they was going to be able to make a life out of it and then it just turned out the bottom fell out and there wasn't nothing for nobody to do. As far as I know a lot of them women, they don't have jobs now. They were old enough to retire but there was no real retirement from that place.

AW: So there was a big negative impact of ya'll leaving, ya'll basically had to start your lives- restart you lives-

SW: Yeah

AW:- Your work lives, how were the places that you went to as far as SCDOT, how did they deal with you coming from the Bleachery, knowing that you had come from that background in textiles- was it tough to get back started up?

00:29:00

SW: No it wasn't, because what had happened there, the shop foreman down there had brought a piece of equipment for me to work on and he seen what I knew and what I thought and he went back and he told them he wanted to hire me. So that was great for me, I mean I had a full time job, I stayed there twenty something years. So when I retired from there I had my full work history in I wasn't doing no more. [Laughing]

AW: So this was about 2000 you just decided that you were done?

SW: I was done!

AW: And so now you enjoy grandbabies and all?

SW: Yeah grandchildren, Gosh! [Laughing] If you want to go crazy raise some kids and have some grandkids because you ain't going to be able to do nothing with them. They think they know it all. There's one of them right there now, oh that's my wife. [His wife entered the room]

AW: So yeah, that family aspect it obviously stuck with you because you had grandkids and the way you raised them and everything.

SW: Oh yeah!

AW: Can you remember anything else as far as any big events as far as going back and meeting some of the people from the Bleachery? How they were impacted- after you left did you have anything where you went and visited people at the Bleachery or did you pretty much just go to work and left the Bleachery there?

SW: That was about it, I left it there when I left, and then the state the same way when I left there, I left it all behind.

AW: So just a lot of memories?

SW: Yeah, there's a lot of memories in my head.

AW: Well sir I appreciate your interview.

SW: Hey man, anytime, anytime.

00:31:32 *End of Interview*