

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

**Interview #550  
WILLIAMS, Thomas L. (Pookie)**

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Description of interviewee: Thomas "Pookie" Williams began working at the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company in the Laboratory, he transitioned into a supervisory job and would move throughout the departments as a departmental manager.

*Interviewed:* June 5, 2017  
*Interviewer:* Alex Windham  
*Index by:* Alex Windham  
*Length:* 01:06:31

Abstract: In his June 5, 2017 interview with Alex Windham, Pookie Williams detailed his thoughts and memories of his time at the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company referred to locals as the Bleachery. Williams spoke of the time period of the 1950s through 2017 and on the follow topics: Segregation, integration, race relations, plant management, day to day job responsibilities and actions, technology changes, the buyout of the Bleachery by Springs, worker attitudes, the decline of the Bleachery, family, and finally retirement to the year 2017. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company; Bleachery; Springs Industries; Segregation, Integration; Management; Race Relations; Seniority; Gender Relations;

**Interview Session (June 5, 2017): Digital File**

**Time      Keywords,**

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

Pookie began work in the Bleachery in 1959 after time spent in the National Guard. His first job at the Bleachery was working in the laboratory. He majored in textile chemistry at Clemson University, and this helped him considerably in his job at the Bleachery's lab. Due to his degree he knew how to mix chemicals that he worked with in the Bleachery. He worked in the lab until 1961.

00:01:45      In the lab he was a shade matcher and he would take the dyes that had been requested by customers and his job was to match the correct shade of color. He mentioned that sometimes they had to purchase new dyes, but mostly the lab already had most of the dyes that the customer needed to make their specific color. From the chosen dye he would present the shat to his manager and then, if and only if it was right, the dye would be sorted out into the specific department that needed it. The lab did work for Lowenstein

and then also for commissioned outside customers. Pookie said that the lab dealt with small time customers and the Lowenstein sales representatives would make deals with the big name retailers.

00:05:42       The lab had both salaried and hourly workers. Women who worked there tested the strength of the cloth. He did not have any ladies working in the dying group. The gender make up in the lab was equal between men and women. According to him all the managers in the department were all men when he began working in the lab. He also mentioned that there were a few African Americans when he first began working in the department.

00:07:53       He transitioned into the Rayon department after when he left the lab. His responsibilities consisted as working as a dyer on the third shift. He said that roughly twenty machines were used in the dying process. He gave the rank and file workers the formulas for the dye and then he was responsible for checking the dyes and making sure that they were correct so that they could be sent to other departments. He started out in this department as a supervisor. He said that he was on third shift for a long time, but once he built up enough time on the job (seniority) he was able to move to another shift. He said that you could ask for a job but it may or may not be given to a person because it was relative to your skill set and time on the job.

00:10:53       On racial tensions in the 1960s, Pookie said that he really, to his knowledge, did not see any major issues in the plant. Most of the blacks worked in custodian jobs when he first got there. He said the Bleachery transitioned smoothly once it was decided to integrate. The fairness of the Bleachery came into play in the integration process because in order to get a job regardless of race, it was based on seniority and being qualified to do the job by knowing the methods and actions required to perform the job correctly. He said that he had to deal with this personally as a supervisor and if the person did not have enough seniority he told them that and they did not get the job. He did not have many problems with the integration process however. He said that the blacks who worked with him in custodian jobs were good hard workers and if they were qualified, often by watching and asking questions to the other machine operators while on the job, he would often give the job to them. If no one else wanted the job or did not bid on it he would choose a black worker and teach them how to do the job.

00:12:45       He explained the training process in regards to new jobs. He said that if there were four people who all bid on the same job, the person who could run the job the best regardless of seniority could get the job. The only instance that training occurred came when the people who bid for the job did not know how to do it. Then the person who got the job depended on seniority and they would train them to do the job.

00:13:45       He began talking around women in supervisory roles. He said that he did not have any women supervisors while he was working but showed that women got the chance to bid on jobs and if no one was qualified who bid against them, that they could be hired and taught the job.

00:14:53       Two women were in the Rayon department when he got there left over from WWII and they worked in the department until they retired. He held no issue with hiring women and when he was told to hire them he hired them. He had a lot of women who worked for him. He said they were better at coming to work than the men. The aspect to provide for their families, he said the men did not care sometimes and would not get to work on time. He did not have any problems with the integration process, if he did have issues, which he did not remember any, he said he would have ended the problem by explaining it was not going to happen. He said

he probably had the most women in his department other than the Packing and Shipping departments respectively.

00:17:10 He saw an influx of African American women roughly around the same time that white women came in. He never, to his knowledge, knew of any issues. He claims to have hired one of the first black women to the office, Willian Wilkes, and he said that she was a great worker. He was remained in the Rayon department at least until the late 1980s.

00:20:08 Pookie was not in the union but he did not have to take many grievances or arbitrations to upper supervisors. He said he would have been in the union, but because he was a department supervisor he could not join. He said he did not have issues with the union because he read the contracts and he knew what the stipulations and guidelines were and therefore he had no problems of breaching the contracts. He held similar interpretations of the unions' viewpoint on contracts. It was a balancing act and to be a successful supervisor he had to be flexible.

00:22:01 *End of Recording one*

00:00:00 *Beginning of Recording two*

Union issues were limited and Pookie was a supervisor that would do his best to deal with the situation without having it leave his department and go to higher level management. He explained that the union was based on a blanket contract between union members and their host company and this contract protected the union workers for a specific number of years. Unions negotiated with the company and would vote as a body to make changes or approve the contract. According to Pookie, the Bleachery got along well with the union and was flexible.

00:01:32 Concerning paternalism of the Lowenstein company, Pookie addressed the company's Christmas party, which gave children of the Bleachery workers cheap toys for Christmas. He also mentioned that even though his father was not a Bleachery employee, his family got to participate and he said that the Lowenstein company often did things like that for the community. He also spoke on Joslin Park and how he went out there as a child. He mentioned that he took his kids there as well. He said Joslin Park was there to be used by the employees and they used it regularly.

00:05:10 The American Red Cross did a blood drives with the Bleachery employees and Pookie said that during his years he donated at least a gallon of blood to the American Red Cross.

00:06:12 Pookie addressed the suggestion boxes that were spread throughout the plant and he said that management and the supervisors in the different departments would read the suggestions and if they were good they would implement them. This showed that Lowenstein was willing to listen to its workers.

00:06:41 He mentioned that the tradition of hiring supervisors from within the ranks was a method of M. Lowenstein's company and when Springs came in as owners of the plant he said tha Springs let them pretty much run the plant as usual. One thing that Pookie did not like about the system was taking a skilled worker off of their job to make them into a supervisor because a new worker with less skill would replace them. He said it was a "necessary evil." He said it took a long time to get back into the level of production that came from taking

the good employee off the line. He explained the flexibility of the Bleachery by explaining how they (supervisors and workers) would help the new person adjust to their position and work together to make it work.

00:08:51 He mentioned that even though there was a comradery there were a few that wanted in his words, "Stir up trouble all the time." He said that he was lucky because he did not have many of those people as most Bleachery workers were there to work and he agreed with this.

00:09:10 The newer generation from the 1970s onward, he mentioned that he interviewed everyone that he hired and he stressed in these interviews two main points which he said helped to cover the union contract. The first was that if a worker was going to be out of work he or she had to contact the supervisor and second if they were going to be late to work they needed to call and tell him. He said that this often worked to weed out those who were not going to work. He mentioned that often if this happened too much they would not make it through the eight week probationary period and were fired. If they made it through the eight week probationary period they could not really be fired unless they did something really bad or enough offenses against them were documented.

00:11:06 He mentioned them as being "his," after the probationary period ended. He was the upper management and he stressed the concerns that he was given from his higher ups to the supervisors under him and made sure that they understood what was to be expected. He dealt with the supervisors as his job, and he told of a situation in which he was instructed to fire a supervisor who had shown up to work drunk. Pookie felt that he could not fire this man without taking the time to talk to him, and once he was able to talk to the man he set him straight and he was able to continue working at the plant rather than being fired. He said that he tried to look after his people both supervisors and the rank and file.

00:13:00 Pookie did mention that there were not really bad managers, but there were some who were at times overbearing and these men were often dealt with as they had the most grievances filed against them. Usually, he said, that they were good to the rank and file people. The Bleachery was generally a very cordial work environment.

00:14:50 He moved over to the phasing out part of plant departments and he stated that during this time after he left the Rayon department to go to the cotton dye houses. He had been over the Rayon department and it had a finishing component in the process of rayon production and because he had this experience with finishing, he was eventually placed over the entire Finishing department when the Bleachery was phasing out and consolidating its departments in the 1990s. He was also placed over Screen Print and the remaining Roller Print machines. He said that before the closing of the plant he was also over the Soapers, Agers, Screen Print and Finishing departments. He said the only departments that he was not in were in the shipping and transporting sectors of the Bleachery.

00:16:25 Pookie began to notice that when the plant began to close down the Roller Print machines and the changes in technology that at this time, the Bleachery began to decline. He also mentioned that he noticed a difference in the Bleachery after he returned from his time in the Army in the early 1960s.

00:18:15 He mentioned that he disciplined his subordinates (supervisors) by talking with them in his office. He said that the interview process was very important when it came time to hire new supervisors,

because in the interviews he would outline expectations of the job to the employee. From his experience, if the expectations were outlined and understood, he had good supervisors and he had to only terminate a few.

00:19:15        When the Bleachery was in decline he said that he did not have to do much to keep his workers motivated. He mentioned that the seniority process again in regards to the bottom of the seniority roster which consisted of those who had the least amount of on the job experience being the very first to be laid off, unless it was job no one wanted. There was a certain time limit for staying on the seniority roster after being laid off and he would call the most senior on the list and give them the chance to return to work. If the worker had found employment elsewhere he would still extend the offer to them but he said "most of them wouldn't take it because we were in the decline mode." If they did not choose to come back to work they would be taken off the roster and they would terminate themselves.

00:23:36        The biggest change in technology he saw while working at the Bleachery was the introduction of Screen Printing, which was faster than Roller Print and also required less workers.

00:24:45        Pookie did not notice any big changes in the upper management's attitudes when Springs took over and they did not try to change his managerial style. Springs may have talked to the people above him but this did not impact his management style. He did mention that Springs would bring in some new supervisors if a Bleachery supervisor left. Springs was also in decline at this time and he mentioned their Lancaster plant was going through the same phasing out process as the Bleachery.

00:26:16        He felt if anything hurt the textile industry from outside foreign influences it was the US companies subcontracting work to the cheaper labor in foreign countries. He never was involved with Springs that deeply, but he did say that there was contact by Springs with outside countries. He said that he "heard of it anyways."

00:27:40        He said that the rumor mill within the Bleachery, concerning talking about the impact of the foreigners was pretty much limited to the supervisors and the upper management. The talks were about how much longer the industry would last, but there was not much talk by the rank and file about it as far as he was aware. He mentioned that the ability for a foreign company especially in Southeast Asia to produce the same products that the Americans were making for much cheaper really hurt textiles in the United States.

00:29:04        When asked about the made in the USA movement in textiles he did not recall it happening but he said it had to have been placed on the products in the Shipping department, which he did not have any connection.

00:30:13        He mentioned that everyone saw the decline coming down the line, and that the textile industry was ending. He said some people looked for jobs elsewhere and others just sat back and relaxed. He was moved around the plant rather than Springs hiring new people and he took over department after department as the decline progressed.

00:31:45        He could not remember what his emotions were like when the plant closed because the idea that the plant was closing or going to close was just stuck in his mind and it essentially became a waiting game.

00:32:32        *End of Recording two*

00:00:00      ***Beginning of Recording three***

He said he thought once that everybody knew the plant would be closing that they just got used to it and as mentioned earlier some of them went to look for other jobs.

00:01:11      He mentioned Emile Russett was the General Manager at the time when the plant closed (see his interview).

00:01:50      In regards to those expecting to work at the Bleachery for future livelihoods, the closing of the plant hurt them. He was nearing retirement age and the closing was not as negative for him.

00:02:50      Pookie had been previously associated with the Poe family, who own A.B Poe Farmers Exchange on Cherry road in Rock Hill, South Carolina. He was a frequent customer and friend of the family and they offered him a job where he could make his own hours and he took it. He and Alvis Poe were good friends and had worked together in the past. Pookie worked with Alvis until he ( Alvis) died.

00:05:40      Pookie is involved in the Bleachery Heritage Project. He feels that the current work done at the Bleachery is positive because he said "You can't let land sit vacant like that," he did not care if they tore the buildings down but he wanted the land to be used.

00:06:50      Pookie enjoyed working at the Bleachery and he knew that he was going to work there for his entire working life. He could not imagine anything that would have compared as far as a job. He enjoyed the workers and said that they were all generally from the same backgrounds.

00:08:50      He worked during the strike in the 1950s and crossed the picket lines, but he said that even though he did this it did not follow him as far as any animosity when he worked there full time. He said that it was a tense situation in Rock Hill but he never experienced any conflict or issues with people. He did say he may not have crossed the picket lines if he had the chance to go back.

00:11:30      He enjoyed everything about the Bleachery even though there were critical situations he said that he probably would have still worked there and he would not have changed the course of his life if he had the chance to go back.

00:12:09      ***End of Recording three***

01:06:42      ***End of Interview***