

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

**Interview #545  
RUSSETT, Emile**

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Description of interviewee: Emile Russett was employed at the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company from 1977 until 1998 when manufacturing ended and the plant was shut down. In 1984 he was made the General Manager of the plant and would hold this position until the plant closed.

*Interviewed:* June 28, 2017  
*Interviewer:* Alex Windham  
*Index by:* Alex Windham  
*Length:* 01:06:38

Abstract: In this June 28, 2017 interview with Alex Windham, Emile Russett detailed his thoughts and memories of his time at the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company referred to locals as the Bleachery. Russett spoke of the time period of the 1970s through 2017 and on the follow topics: layoffs, day to day job responsibilities and actions including ways he tried to communicate with the workers, technology changes, worker attitudes, the decline of the Bleachery, involvement on the Bleachery Heritage Committee and the new changes with University Center. 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, union relationships, decline, layoffs**

**Interview Session (June 28, 2017): Digital File**

**Time      Keywords,**

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

Emile worked in a wide range of textile mills from New Jersey to South Carolina ending his career at the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company. He began at the Bleachery in 1977 where he held the position of Assistant Plant Manager. He sought to take his perspective learned from working at different plants and try to implement the ideas in Rock Hill. He wanted to bring new life to the plant. He said the issues from workers in the transition from Lowenstein to Springs were associated with labor union relations. Springs did not believe in unionized workers but buying the Bleachery, Springs inherited a unionized plant. Emile took the idea that going into the Bleachery that the union would be helpful and not a deterrent. He mentioned the issues that came from the original building design and how they caused difficulties and high expense to modernize the plant. The 1960s into the 1970s and 1980s, he saw the Bleachery was way too big to be modernized. In order to combat foreign intervention he traveled the world including China, Japan, Europe, and Scandinavia. He wanted to

figure out in his world travels to these textile mills the Bleachery's place in the textile world and sought to specialize the products produced by the Bleachery.

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Emile's perspective on coming into the Bleachery was mixed. He saw that the Bleachery had a lot of good ways of doing things but they had a lot of old ways they had not changed. He did not know the reason why they did not change, but he said the plant had been "inbred," meaning the issues with hiring supervisors from within the rank and file for far too long. It was tough to change this because the union did not like change. He said by the time that he arrived issues had arose between the union and the management and so when they tried to make changes the trust that should have existed was tenuous at best making change very difficult. The union did not readily accept the words of upper management especially when they were told about the changes in the markets and the outside world. He felt that contract negotiations were constantly on their minds and that they thought that upper management only sought to get an advantage over the union by telling them this. The union would have thought the entire thing was management blowing things out of proportions because upper management wanted to change their operational rules, and in this respect the union said no and they did not want to believe it. He wanted to modernize thought processes to bring the plant and its workers into the reality of the situation of a declining textile industry. The introduction of Rotary Screen Print technology came into being and with it major changes to the Bleachery. When Emile came to the Bleachery the "Backbone of the plant," Roller Printers were in full function. The Bleachery had at one time a total of forty-six Roller Print machines, with thirty-six in the main plant and ten in the Grier Division. When he was over the plant they had thirty-two in operation. The screens on the Rotary Screen Print machines were easier to change out patterns because they did not weigh much and a single person could replace them. Emile said the process of changing out of a Roller was much more work intensive as it was extremely heavy. The consumer changed and everyone wanted different prints and so the large orders of the same print from the old days was gone and Roller Print machines were not conducive to facilitate the large scale differentiated demand of constantly having to change patterns for customers varied tastes. Rotary Screen was quick and unfortunately according to him because of this change it impacted the printing department and a large amount of workers. The printers had a very powerful union and he said because of this their pay was very high and it rivaled all supervisors apart from the departmental managers and the other upper management.

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He said there were thirty-two print machines and that each machine had five people and there were three shifts totaling roughly 480 workers who depended on the Roller Print machines for work. This transition hurt but the workers and it had to be downsized to three workers per Screen Print machines.

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Emile became General Manager in 1984 a year before Springs bought the plant from M. Lowenstein. Emile sought to ease the transition from Lowenstein to Springs and he said he did several things to accomplish this. Every month he did a meeting called "Coffee with the General Manager." He and the Human Resource Director went into a conference room in the plant on all three shifts and anyone who worked the shifts was allowed to come into the room where he would give a report on the status of the plant. He allowed the workers to then ask

him any questions that they had. He said he began this campaign in 1986. He also sought to look at the people and he started with the parking lot, in which the front spaces were labeled and reserved for specific supervisors' names, he decided that they needed to get rid of the reserved parking. "A parking lot is a parking lot and whoever gets there first gets the best parking space." He ignored the backlash from supervisors because the workers, from supervisors to hourly workers were "All in this together they just had different jobs." His next step in furthering this idea that they were all workers, was removing a policy that all supervisors and management had to wear neck-ties, his reasoning behind removing this policy was that he questioned why they needed to wear neck-ties, "Did it make them special? The hourly guys' job is just as important." He sought to change a time clock policy as well. All hourly workers had to punch into a time clock when they entered and left work. A discrepancy was that supervisors and management did not have to do this, and so he wanted to end this discrepancy and show the hourly employees a level of trust. He wanted to make everybody equal with dress, parking lot spaces, and time in order to reestablish a connection of trust that had been severed and reestablishing a trust in management. He said he got a positive response from the workers. His goal was to build a working trustful environment with the union.

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He said an issue with the union came when management wanted to bring in more Rotary Screen Print machines. Each machine cost around a million dollars and they (management) wanted to cover these expenses by having the workers work extra Saturday shifts. The union took issue because a clause existed in the contract which limited the number of Saturdays a worker had to work. Emile said the management initially hit a brick wall and failed miserably on this endeavor. He said the union knew it was to doom of the Roller Print. The entire process was drug out and negotiations took a while but they were able to eventually add overtime eight Rotary Screen print machines. The other issue with the union came with the gradual demise of Roller Print and they sought to keep four Roller Print machines. These four machines were going to be used to do specialty prints that the Rotary Screen print could not do. He wanted to place a single shader (color matcher) and a supervisor over both the Roller Printers and the Screen Printers, but the union would not accept this agreement and so management decided to pull the Roller Print machines altogether, which Emile said it could have lasted for a while, but he qualified this statement by saying that they were becoming obsolete. However, the decision by the union to deny this agreement led to the quicker end of the Roller Printers much earlier.

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The cutbacks over time in the plant over time hurt the union and he said the union told management that they had been hearing from 1930 that the plant was going to shut down and had shown a staunch resistance to the management because the plant had survived the Great Depression, the World War Two years and the years that followed and because of this they felt the Bleachery was invincible. Therefore when management had told them the plant was going to close many thought it was much of the same talk and rumor that they had heard from the 1930s.

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During the process of downsizing one of the biggest expenses was sewer fees from the City of Rock Hill. The City was not willing to give the Bleachery a break on the sewer fees as they saw the textile industry was a as a

“sunset industry.” He said he did not think the agreement would have perpetuated the Bleachery but the goal was to at least make a dent in operation costs to compete with the Far East (Asian companies and their cheap labor) and the cost of product per yard of cloth.

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Emile walked the plant twice a day and he would talk to both first and second shift. He gauged morale over the time from 1977 to 1998 based on this communication. He compared the plant to American views on politics, in that he described there were union members who joined and listened strictly to everything the union told them. Also he said many joined the union in order to not be harassed by the union members, even though South Carolina is a right to work state and the workers had a choice to join the union, it often occurred. The plant was highly unionized, he did say there were those who were strictly union and then those who sided with the management and then in the middle there were moderates who could and did listen to both sides.

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In the first major cutback when he was in power he said there was fear in the plant of who would be next. He dealt with attitudes of the union who blamed the downfall of the plant on Springs. This was an issue because there was a rumor that Springs was an antiunion company and just wanted to get rid of the plant because it was unionized. Emile mentioned there were countless members of the twenty-five and fifty year clubs and they “weren’t very educated,” he said these people were scared of the plant closing because they were worried about finding other jobs. He mentioned most of the mills in Rock Hill and the surrounding area were grey mills. The Bleachery was one of the only finishing plants and it paid well due to this it was better than the other mills. Jobs at the Bleachery were highly sought after for textile mill workers because of this increased pay. He said there was a lot of confusion and the issue of the workers who lost their jobs ability to support their families. Emile was reflective after hearing the stories of the hourly workers recounted by the interviewer, and he said “we could have been more sympathetic to those that we were laying off.” He mentioned however that it is often ignored by the hourly workers that supervisors had to be fired too. The policy of the layoffs for him was especially difficult for him because he had grown attached to the Bleachery during his years as General Manager. He personally laid off supervisors but did not bring in hourly workers because “there were too many of them.” When it was time to lay off his supervisors it was tough for him to fire people in that way. He said textiles were not the only industry that was shutting down. He mentioned the plight of the automobile and steel industries as examples but he does not buy into the explanation that this was going to happen because of the transition from a manufacturing economy to the service sector centered economy. He argued that “this was not possible because someone always has to make something in order for economies to work. You have to have goods to trade with the world.” He was brought up with manufacturing, which he did from graduating college for his livelihood. He talked about how the strength of the manufacturing sector from World War Two to the 1980s and 1990s and it helped to establish a middle class in America and gave children who grew up in this time a chance to attend college. He said now these individuals are struggling because there are not any great manufacturing to work in. He said he is empathetic to these people and their children.

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In regards to the government intervention and interference he talked about NAFTA. He said the theory for NAFTA to work was that the printing and finishing jobs would be done in the United States and then these goods would be sent to Mexico where they would do the labor intensive jobs of creating garments. Eventually the Mexicans and South Americans bought their own printing and finishing machines and took the American worker out of the process entirely. He said it was an unavoidable situation that the textile industry would move to locations around the world where labor and costs of production were cheaper. He said it needed two things, cheap labor and industry. He went to a plant in China that was in the countryside and it had tons of workers. According to Emile, the workers worked and lived on the location of the plant without many families. So he said the Chinese had a system that the United States could not compete with due to their control over the workforce, and the Chinese worker's lack of diversified work opportunities in these locations.

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Concerning mill villages and how the Bleachery was different because it did not have a mill village owned by the company. He said his work at the Lyman plant, which did have a mill village and no union, was drastically different from Rock Hill. [He did not know how the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company became union so the interviewer explained the process.] Then talk turned to Celanese and Bowater both plants in the Rock Hill area that people went to as the Bleachery shut down, and how they declined as well.

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Emile described how sad the final years of the Bleachery were for him. He said he got invested in the Bleachery and he tried to save the plant and he got attached to the people in the process. His walking of the plant made it especially difficult because workers would come up to him and ask him about the plant's future. He found out about the closing of the plant months ahead of time but Springs asked him not tell anything to the people because they had orders they still needed to fill. If he had told them the plant was closing they would have "bailed out," of the plant and Springs would have lost money. He said they (management) tried to keep the experienced workers in the plant and gave incentives for the more senior workers to stay.

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The incentives were based on years of service and the workers were given a bonus half pay per day until they were released from their jobs. Emile did not stay for the very end of the Bleachery. He said he left the plant when the manufacturing portion ended. He mentioned that John Spratt, South Carolina senator, came to him and told him that Bonnie Watts, (former printer at the plant) wanted to buy the plant. Emile gave the opinion to Spratt that he felt Watts could not run the plant successfully, but Spratt wanted to save jobs. He said Watts ran the plant for a few years until he had to shut it down and it was sold to Lynn Stevenson. He said when he left the plant he walked away from textiles and left it in the past. He said he has been asked if he missed the plant and his response was "When I walked out of the plant I forgot about it and moved on with my life." He said the saddest part was driving past the Bleachery especially after the fires that occurred. He hated seeing the buildings decaying and collapsing and he wanted someone to tear them down because the Bleachery he remembered was a viable plant that served Rock Hill. He mentioned Winthrop University professor Phil Moody took photographs of the last days of production and created an art and photography exhibit that showcased the Bleachery. He took photographs of the people working. Emile is involved in the Bleachery Heritage Committee.

He spoke about an art project of creating a sculpture using an old Roller Print machine that would have been similar to the ones used in the Bleachery obtained from Carlisle, South Carolina. The machine was in a field placed there by a former engineer from the Bleachery Tony Vaughn, who transferred to Carlisle, and he saved the machine from being turned into scrap when Carlisle shut down. Vaughn checked back years later for the project and it was still there, so he was able to talk to the owners of the machine and they gave it to the City of Rock Hill to be used in the display of Bleachery history with the stipulation that on it somewhere they said it came from Carlisle.

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The City of Rock Hill bought the Bleachery from Stevenson's group. He got a call from the City about being a member of the committee and he joined in the early 2010s. He pushed the idea the Roller Print machine to help symbolize what the Bleachery was all about. He got together with his other members and planned the process of using local artists to create a message. He spoke of the rise of Cherry Park and the mayor who opposed it. He talked about how successful sports tourism and the new plans of basketball and hotels at the Bleachery site. He felt that idea of drawing in the people with this plan of Knowledge Park is positive and he hopes that once the locations are completed they will lead to good things. He feels that the plant will be there in a different scope for another generation to have and find jobs in Rock Hill rather than tearing it down and forgetting it.

01:06:38      *End of Interview*