

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

**Interview #538
EASLEY, William (Bill)**

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Description of interviewee: William “Bill” Easley worked for Springs Corporation and held several high positions relating to human relations and human resources. He was present during the buyout and decline of the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company.

Interviewed: July 7, 2017

Interviewer: Alex Windham

Index by: Alex Windham

Length: 00:47:51

Abstract: In his July 7, 2017 interview with Alex Windham, William Bill Easley detailed his thoughts and memories of his time associated with the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company referred to locals as the Bleachery. Easley spoke of the time of the 1920s through 2017 and on the follow topics: Race relations, his father Joseph Easley Assistant Plant Manager of the Bleachery and his childhood around his father, day-to-day job responsibilities and actions when he began work for Springs, technology changes, the buyout of the Bleachery by Springs, the decline of the Bleachery, his work as a Springs employee, his thoughts on the redevelopment of the Bleachery site into University Center at Knowledge Park and his activities until 2017. Also Easley offered his opinions on how Rock Hill was impacted by the Bleachery from the 1930s to 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; Joseph Easley; Springs Corporation; buyout; decline; Wamsutta;

Interview Session (July 7, 2017): Digital File

Time Keywords,

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

Joseph Easley, Bill’s father, began work in 1929 at the Bleachery. He was hired to start the Laboratory. He was the first of two employees at the Bleachery. He spent his whole working career from 1929 to 1968. He became the Assistant Plant Manager. In 1947, when Walter Jenkins the Plant Manager was killed in a car accident, Joseph was offered the Plant Manager’s job but he refused and so Bill Grier became the Manager of the Bleachery and Joseph stayed as the Assistant Plant Manager.

00:02:15 Springs did not have a finishing plant from 1929 to 1948 and so no competition existed for labor in the early days of the Bleachery for labor. Lowenstein even did some of Springs’ work for bleaching and finishing cloth until they built their own plant.

00:03:00 Bill's childhood is described based on the fact that 20-25 percent of Rock Hill's population worked at the Bleachery until the 1940s and 1950s when the Celanese and Bowater plants were founded. Bill said Rock Hill was peaceful and very safe with little crime. Kids could play outside unattended until suppertime without issue. He said his father was fairly strict about time and he regimented the family by the clock. He attributes that his father was so strict because he scheduled his world around the running of the Bleachery. He and his family lived roughly five minutes to drive to the Bleachery. His father had to travel once a month to New York via train, he felt his father disliked having to do this.

00:06:15 Bill remembers the Bleachery Christmas Tree Party and how small booths with different toys based on age groups were organized for the children. The children, in the thousands, his father did not feel that his children should not have participated because he felt that those less fortunate who did not have much should hold precedence over executives' children. Despite this Bill was allowed to participate. Generally it was held the Saturday before Christmas or a week before Christmas and it was usually a big part of the workers children's Christmas. Other things he recalls was a foreman's picnic at Joslin Park and all the upper management did this together.

00:09:10 The Red Cross Blood Drives were a big deal with the Bleachery workers. Bill's mother volunteered at the events and he said many of the wives of the workers did as well. His mother did administrative jobs for the Drives. It was meant to bring the family aspect of the Bleachery and gave and fostered relationships. Upper management did it too and Bill said he "didn't think upper management wouldn't do things unless they themselves believed in it.

00:11:05 He graduated from Duke University in 1965 with a degree in psychology. His father was worried about nepotism and did not allow him to work summers or temporarily there. He said from his youth he only visited and toured the plant with his father but he never worked there. He just wanted to show his son what he did for a living. Bill's mother wanted him to go over to Fort Mill, South Carolina and had read a newspaper article about manager training programs they had. His mother cared for the Close family and thought highly of them. She thought he should check in to the Fort Mill office, and so he went unannounced. He did not throw out the Easley name or about going to Duke, but he was able to get an interview for the program. He noted that both Springs and Lowenstein had their respective territories and they respected the Catawba River as the border. There was not any intense animosity between the companies but they joked good naturedly between rivals.

00:14:30 The program for the managers in the Springs Company lasted two years. It followed the philosophy that a manager could not be effective unless he himself had worked the jobs of his subordinates and knew how they worked and in this respect the manager could empathize with the workers under him. So he worked for some period of time on each job in the plant working side by side with hourly workers would teach him how to do he job. He would then work that job anywhere from one week to six weeks. His work ranged from heavy labor jobs to specialized jobs and so when he was talking or working with a subordinate he was able to relate.

00:16:16 Colonel Springs devised this program for his son-in-law Bill Close back in the late 1940s. Springs made sure that before Close had a leadership position that he knew the jobs under him and so the system created by the Colonel was used from that point forward to train new managers. In 1967, Easley became a third shift supervisor in the Card Room at Springs' Fort Mill Plant for roughly six to eight months and he

moved around the plant in supervisory roles. He then worked in Chester, South Carolina as a department head. He moved to a larger plant in Chester and held a higher department position before moved on to Kershaw and became the plant's Assistant Plant Manager from 1969-1973. He lived in in the mill village in a mill owned home across from the mill.

00:19:35 His experience in the year 1969 when he lived in a mill village was not unpleasant and he lived around nice people who walked to work every day just like he did. He mentioned that by 1969 mills had begun to disinvest in mill villages and the paternalism of controlling housing was on a downward spiral as mills sold their villages. This was the case in Kershaw where he worked but before his time the Springs Company had begun to sell the homes to the workers or other outside groups to cut costs of production. He was the assistant Plant Manager so the company supplied his house.

00:21:44 After leaving Kershaw he moved to Lancaster and was the assistant Plant Manager in Springs' biggest grey mill and he was responsible for 2000 workers who produced yarn. The plant had roughly 4000 workers split between yarn manufacturing and weaving. Bill worked in this plant until 1975. The he became Plant Manager of the White Plant in Fort Mill.

00:22:30 He said at this time he did not see the textile industry as a declining field of work. His classmates from Duke told him he would never survive in the industry because it was dying out. However, he worked for 40 years, all of his working life. He said it was not a dying industry when he left. He said "there were clouds on the horizon but there were still protections in place, quotas and tariffs for our industry as well as others that would eventually die out."

00:23:52 He was Plant Manager at the White Plant in Fort Mill until 1980. In the years between 1980 and 1987 he was a group manager where he managed six grey mills in the apparels fabric division of Springs. They ranged from Chester, South Carolina to Laurenburg, North Carolina. He was then promoted to Vice President of Human Resources for the entire Springs Corporation in 1987.

00:25:06 Bill was involved in the process of working with the transition after the buyout of M. Lowenstein by Springs and with this 1985 buyout the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company became a property of Springs. He said there was not only the acquisition of property in the buyout but also employees. Lowenstein executives Jules Lasinck and Hunter Galmen were transferred in the buyout to high positions in Springs. His goal as Vice President of Human Resources was to create a smooth transition between the two very different cultures of Springs and M. Lowenstein.

00:26:00 Bill did mention that the two companies had long histories and as a result there were some issues as they had to alleviate these differences. He mentioned some in Springs had anxiety as some members of the Lowenstein staff transferred into positions of power in the Springs Corporation especially in management positions. The philosophies of management were very different in the two companies and this caused worry and resentment. Bill said this was not only manager-manager but also hourly-manager relationships. He said he did not have as much to do with manufacturing and hourly people in the plant because they kept their Human Resource department managers from Lowenstein. He said the only real transfer of power was at the upper management levels. No one (hourly) was transferred back and forth between Lowenstein and Springs involuntarily. Management was a little different, the main point of getting Lowenstein was getting their brands

and the reputation associated with them. Wamsutta was a higher level brand than anything that Springs controlled, and therefore Springs wanted that brand and the power associated with it. Bill said Springs as a corporation also felt that combining Springs and Lowenstein would be to the benefit of both companies and together they would be stronger and more successful. Springs integrated those who were most responsible from Lowenstein for developing the reputation of the Wamsutta brand. He said these people included some New York workers, brand managers, designer, and merchandisers. Also he mentioned that he himself was placed under a man who came from Lowenstein and he worked for him for several years. He worked with other senior officials from Lowenstein and he feels that by having the mixing of Springs and Lowenstein working together this made the new relationships better and the transitions more cohesive. He said Springs managers were also sent to Lowenstein Plants.

00:31:00 From 1987-1989 Bill went to the Bleachery fifteen times where he primarily worked with the upper management. He did however go into the plant itself and spoke to the workers. He described attitudes in the Bleachery because they did not seem to have attitudes of concern from hourly workers other than a few who were curious if Springs was going to shut down the plant. He did say that if the workers had known him better that he may have heard more and learned about their concerns but there was a barrier of him being from Springs and not Lowenstein. He said at the time 1986 that Springs had no intention or plans to phase out and shut down the Bleachery.

00:33:02 He left the Vice President of Human Resources position in 1989 and was moved to head of Manufacturing Apparel Fabrics and the Bleachery was within this umbrella of influence. He established a working relationship with Emile Russett and he would go to the Bleachery to learn more about the situation and operations there. When asked about him being the son of Joseph Easley and how Bleachery employees viewed him because he was not a member of the Lowenstein family as an executive but instead worked for Springs. He said he did not see any issues, the most he experienced was positive recollections of his father from the few workers who were old enough to remember his father and if there was any issues it may have just been suspicion at worst.

00:35:00 He said his interactions with Russett, showed that Russett wanted to make sure that his people were going to be taken care of and could continue their functions and work. He said he stressed the Springs Corporation did not want to come in and change everything but that the motivation as previously mentioned was to get Lowenstein's good brands and they needed the Bleachery because it had been a successful plant.

00:37:00 Bill noticed the changes of seeing the plants of being less profitable for he Springs Corporation, namely the Bleachery and other old plants, when he held the position of President of Grey Manufacturing. This came with the issue of foreign competition and the Springs Corporation began to shut down the plants. The Bleachery was built in the early days of apparel fabrics and the factors of the width of fifty to sixty inches wide affected the way the machines were built and so as times changed and wanted to have wider sheets of fabric the Bleachery's machines did not accommodate for this. The product with the longest life sheeting fabrics was wider than the possibilities of the Bleachery and Springs chose the direction of the longest life products, which the Bleachery unfortunately could not produce.

00:40:45 He said realizing the Spring Corporation was planning to shut down the Bleachery was difficult for him. He was connected to the Bleachery emotionally because it was a big part of his childhood as he grew

up around it and his family managed the plant. He said he hated to see a place that had been so instrumental to his hometown go through the process of a shut down and he had hoped that somehow it could have been saved.

00:42:10 He did not see the changing generation's work ethic contributing to the demise of the textile industry because he said the workers began working harder in hopes of keeping their respective mills open. He did say that they did hire some that they did not feel they would have hired, but these people also proved to be good workers.

00:43:40 The goal of combining Lowenstein and Springs could have perpetuated the industry. He said there had been fears but over the decades the protections held and so when he retired in 2003 despite losing some of the protections over the years he felt that the industry had a number of years left. Unfortunately it started the "Death Spiral in 2005," and Springs essentially now has left the country going to Brazil and only a small capacity exists in the United States.

00:45:00 Bill's views on both Springs Creative and also the use of the Bleachery in Knowledge Park are both positive. He is especially happy that Derrick Close is able to keep working and some remnant of Springs is still in existence. He said he is happy that there finally going to be some use of the Bleachery site and that it is continued to be used and that a case could be made to keep some of the original buildings and not completely tear the Bleachery down. He hopes that the plans come into fruition and that it survives to stand as a monument to Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company.

00:47:51 *End of Interview*