

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

**Interview #535  
ALLEN, Robert and Geraldine**

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Description of interviewees: Bob and Jerri Allen worked for the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company. Bob worked in the Agers and Soapers departments and Jerri worked in the Lowenstein Building in the Open Stock office and also in the Printing department's office.

*Interviewed:* July 22, 2017

*Interviewer:* Alex Windham

*Index by:* Alex Windham

*Length:* 00:48:19

Abstract: In their July 22, 2017 interview with Alex Windham, Bob and Jerri Allen detailed their thoughts and memories of their time at the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company referred to by locals as the "Bleachery." Bob and Jerri spoke of the time of the 1940s through 2017 and on the follow topics: Race relations, day-to-day job responsibilities and actions, technology changes, their work with Christian youth, and the decline of the Bleachery, their thoughts on the redevelopment of the Bleachery to the year 2017. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Strike, Segregation, race, New York, foreign trade and competition

**Interview Session (July 22, 2017): Digital File**

**Time      Keywords,**

00:00:00      ***Beginning of Interview/ Interviewers Introduction***

Bob Allen began work at the Bleachery in 1945 while attending Winthrop Training School. He worked during the summers while in school in the Ager department. His responsibilities were to heat the cloth and set the colors into the cloth by running it through a vat ager. He would then send the cloth to the Soaper department to be washed.

00:01:12      Bob said the Bleachery had lots of open positions in 1945 because most of the men were still fulfilling their war obligations. He said he was able to get the summer job and then part time at night during the school year. He began working there because his father worked as an Ager and he convinced them to hire Bob.

00:02:20      Bob had lots of family who worked in the Bleachery, but he said this did not really influence him or matter to him working at the Bleachery, he chose to work there for extra money. Jerri his wife claimed a running joke and theme at the Bleachery was the job roster. Often the supervisors would not

post a job to the roster, but instead would ask the workers if they had any relatives who needed work and through this process positions were filled. She said she thought this was common until the union gained more power and then they stopped a lot of the nepotism.

00:03:28 Bob was a union member but Jerri was not. Bob said they paid roughly fifty cents a week, which was a sizable portion considering they did not make much money each week. He said the union had its good points and its bad points. He stated that the union was supposed to help the members during strikes as far as feeding and supporting the strikers. He did not personally receive much of this support from the union.

00:04:50 He became a union member after he went full time in 1949. He moved to the Soapers department once he was a full time worker and he ran a soaper machine, which he said was about fifty to sixty feet long and it ran the cloth through water and rollers. The process began in a box from the Ager department and he had to unload the box of cloth into the machine while at the other end a man loaded the washed cloth into a box to be sent to the Finishing department.

00:06:49 Jerri was at the Celanese plant from 1950 to 1951. The odors were bad at the plant and she was pregnant while she was working there, and this caused her to get sick frequently and so she quit Celanese altogether. Bob left the Bleachery at this time because he said he had reached the top of his potential at the Bleachery, unless he made supervisor, so he went to Record Printing Company in Rock Hill. He said he had a good experience working at the Bleachery but he needed a promotion and more pay so he left.

00:08:16 Race relations at the Bleachery were good according to Bob in his time there because there were not many African Americans working there at the time and those that were, were treated with respect. He said he got along well with African Americans outside of the Bleachery too. He said they mostly worked in heavy labor and in custodial jobs. He said Rock Hill was segregated and also many of the African Americans were treated badly. Bob mentioned that this trouble and maltreatment came from "hot heads trying to stir stuff up." He said the Bleachery was not bad though due to the fact that there were not many African Americans working there.

00:10:59 Bob left the Bleachery in 1951 to work for Record Printing Company. His responsibilities at this company were to do commercial paper printing focusing on different types of office supplies such as stationary and letterheads. He worked as a pressman for nineteen years.

00:12:17 Jerri began working at the Bleachery around 1954 and she worked in the Open Stock Office in the Lowenstein Building.

00:13:15 The strike of 1956 was like many strikes at most places. There were typical reactions of the different sides in the strikes. Bob said some would do things which were not "kosher," such as slashing tires and putting sugar in gas tanks of those who crossed the picket lines to work in the plant. Jerri said the strikers would yell at the women going across the picket lines. One instance Jerri ran into a striker who attended her church and he asked her to hold his sign while he lit his cigarette. She soon realized that she was holding a strikers protest sign and she quickly gave it back to him because she was crossing the picket lines and was not on strike.

- 00:14:56 The strike was hard on families and their friends according to Jerri it ruined many relationships and established issues for generations between some families and the resentment that occurred from the strike lasted for many years. Jerri would go on after the strike to work off and on at the Bleachery until the 1970s.
- 00:15:58 She worked as a liaison between the Bleachery and Lowenstein's New York offices. She was responsible for telling departments of changes requested in an order by the men in New York. She filled out progress reports for Open Stock by going into the different departments and would do this periodically leading to several long days of work.
- 00:16:45 Jerri had to leave the Bleachery several times during her nineteen years of work because of her children. Jerri said there was a strong comradery at the Bleachery. Both Bob and Jerri's coworkers have passed away and so they do not have contact with their fellow employees.
- 00:18:00 Jerri did not remember African Americans working in the building with her except for a janitor Budget, whom she said was a good person and he and she would joke with each other regularly. She mentioned a Joseph who picked up the mail and if New York workers came to Rock Hill, he would drive them around. Bob said in his time he did not remember a single African American in his department in the 1950s. Budget passed away and according to Jerri the workers from the office attended his funeral. The office manager was asked by the funeral director to speak about Budget and he told the congregation present, "Budget was very important because he kept the office very clean." Jerri said Budget was fun to be around and they picked on each other regularly. Jerri moved to the Print department's office and she did not remember any janitors who cleaned it.
- 00:22:12 Jerri took the job in the Print shop office, replacing a person who held a supervisory position, but she never held a supervisor's job. Jerri explained she left the Bleachery because she was unhappy. She worked with a man who did not do half the work that she did. She began as an eager and helpful worker in the office and early on she offered to help this man do his different departmental reports and work. However, he took advantage of Jerri and instead of do his part of the workload he left Jerri to do it while he took breaks. An issue that Jerri faced was the pay gap between genders because even though she was doing the same work as her male counterpart and often doing more work than him, he was being paid more money. She made the decision finally to refuse to do his work for him anymore and she would instead help other people in the office who reciprocated the help she gave them. Jerri said this was really the only bad thing about her time at the Bleachery.
- 00:24:30 Jerri said the Bleachery looked out for its worker's families especially concerning the Bleachery Christmas Parties. The entire Bleachery functioned and cared for one another, Jerri said if someone had a bad sickness, death or need assistance in any way the Bleachery workers would support them. She said this was done by sending an envelope throughout the departments and collect money to be given to the person or family in need. This was not something that Lowenstein as a company urged the workers to do. She said this was because the workers were compassionate and cared about each other and that is why they chose to do this for each other. However, Jerri said that even though the company did not officially mandate and endorse the workers doing this, that often a check from Lowenstein would be placed in the envelopes.

- 00:25:30 Jerri said the founding of Family Trust was very helpful to the Bleachery Employees and educated many on how to budget and establish savings for the future. She mentioned that the Christmas Club established by Family Trust helped the workers to save funds for Christmas presents for their children. She said these paternalistic things like Joslin Park, the Christmas parties, and other things made the Bleachery an enjoyable place to work.
- 00:26:54 Jerri said Joslin Park was a great place for workers and their families to get together. The Bleachery held picnics and Jerri went to departmental Christmas parties. She said often Lowenstein would either provide the funds or the food for these parties. The land was sold and Jerri talked about how much the park was sold for and how expensive at that time it was. Bob and Jerri said they had a river cabin (Lake Wylie is often called the River by locals even though it is technically not a river) near Joslin Park, and they also converted an old bus into a place out at the lake. Bob said this was a common thing for employees to do. Jerri said that Joslin Park was available for those workers even if they had a cabin.
- 00:31:00 The Red Cross Blood drives at the Bleachery was an event that helped to bring the Bleachery together. Jerri said the Bleachery tended to do things as a body and the Blood Drives were an example of the Bleachery's collective presence in the community and also as a workforce. Bob said that the Red Cross did not host blood drives when he was working in the 1940s and 1950s.
- 00:32:50 Jerri said "It was a good experience, when we look back where we've been we can see where God used us, and got us ready for the work at hand." She said the experiences between her office work on the logistical side and Bob's time in printing helped them when they moved on to run a youth camp in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.
- 00:33:40 Bob began working in 1970 for Unico Business Forms as a Vice President in Waxhaw, North Carolina. They continued to live in Rock Hill and he commuted to work. Jerri left the Bleachery herself in 1971 and began working for the Episcopal Church.
- 00:34:20 Jerri worked nine years as an office manager for the Episcopal Church. While she worked, she ran the youth group at her church and they traveled to North Myrtle Beach to Camp Play-more. Bob finished at Unico in 1983.
- 00:35:20 Following his leaving of Unico Bob and Jerri became shareholders of Camp Play-more when the camp was forced to change hands due to the sickness of its founder. Bob and Jerri and fellow shareholders bought the camp and renamed it Camp Christos. Jerri explained the camp had begun deteriorating and so a large part of their work was cleaning up the remnants of the camp. They were leadership and as a result they worked with the kids. The group was approached by the original owner of the camp and he wanted them to buy the camp, and deciding to buy the camp was a difficult thing to do. Bob and Jerri went down as stockholders directors and they stayed there for many years. The years 1983 until 2001 they would spend a good deal of their retirement years running the camp for Christian children.

- 00:41:00 After 2001, they returned to Rock Hill and continued to do missions work with their church. They worked with Campers Own Mission and Disaster Relief sponsored by the South Carolina Southern Baptist convention, and they traveled to Malaysia, Jamaica and Alaska.
- 00:43:00 Jerri is excited to see the changes that are happening at the Bleachery site. She said “I won’t get to see it complete but I will see some of it.” Bob and Jerri agreed that it is good to use the Bleachery for the future. They felt that the Bleachery will continue to be important to Rock Hill as a place of jobs and progress.
- 00:45:20 Despite them living in North Myrtle Beach during the decline and closing of the Bleachery Bob and Jerri still had opinions on the fall of textiles. Jerri attributed the decline of the Bleachery to foreign competition and trade. “They just couldn’t compete with cheap labor, those people work for fifty cents a day. They said they have had a wonderful life despite them not working in textiles.
- 00:46:04 Bob felt that textiles did not affect his future but Jerri said it affected him and how it might have made him a better worker and so he agreed with her that textiles affected his future life. Jerri said it helped her to be prepared especially in the things she learned doing clerical work in the Lowenstein Building.
- 00:48:19 *End of Interview*