

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

**Interview #547
THOMPSON, Bob**

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Description of interviewee: Bob Thompson worked for Springs Corporation as a Director of Public Affairs and was present at the closing of the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company where he had to address the community and public.

Interviewed: June 29, 2017

Interviewer: Alex Windham

Index by: Alex Windham

Length: 00:34:37

Abstract: In his June 29, 2017 interview with Alex Windham, Bob Thompson detailed his thoughts and memories of his time at the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company referred to locals as the Bleachery. Thompson spoke of the time of the 1970s through 2017 and on the follow topics: Public relations, Springs buyout of the Bleachery, Springs perspective on the closing of the Bleachery, reasons for the decline of the textile industry and his ideas on the future of the Bleachery as University Center of Knowledge Park. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Segregation, Springs, NAFTA, race,

Interview Session (June 29, 2017): Digital File

Time Keywords,

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

Bob was the Vice President of Public Affairs and Relations. He moved to Rock Hill in 1970 to work at the Fort Mill, South Carolina plant and Springs Corporate office. His first job in the areas was as a director of Public Relations and then he became a director of Public Affairs, in which he became a lobbyist for Springs. In 1985 he became the Vice President for Public Affairs and he handled the public and community relations, philanthropy, government, both federal and state relations, and the overseer of an extensive arts program. During his time at Springs, Bob saw several different leadership changes of the CEO of Springs including, Bill Close, and then the first non-family members Peter Scotise and later Walter Lisheah and in 1998 Crandle Bowles, Bill Close's daughter. In the 1980s Springs according to Bob, embarked on a large campaign of acquisitions focusing on smaller furnishing companies and he focus on obtaining the Wamsutta Brand was pivotal to his involvement with the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company. In 1985, for \$280 million, Springs bought out M. Lowenstein. Springs acquired the Wamsutta Brand and also the Bleachery in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Springs chose to keep the Bleachery open for various reasons including those involving the

community, and union reasons. Springs wanted to keep the Bleachery open but according to Bob by 1988 Springs realized that it could not modernize the plant effectively due to both technology and engineering issues. The structure of the building was very difficult to modernize, very thickly built walls, and lots of deep pits designed for fabric to drop down into and lots of narrow spaces that inhibited movement of components needed for the transition to Rotary Screen Print Machines. Springs had two of the largest finishing plants in the world, one in Lyman and the other in Lancaster. These two plants were both supplied with the modern machines and equipment. The Bleachery was a plant that Springs soon discovered they could not make money on. They tried for eight to nine years to sell the plant to other groups according to Bob. Congressman John Spratt was present in the deals but unfortunately these groups came to the same conclusion that Springs had and that was the Bleachery was a bad investment. The Bleachery had dwindled down to around 500 workers in 1998. The Springs Corporation made the conclusion that it had to cut its losses and decided to close the plant so his office was responsible for communicating this with government, workers and the public.

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The union did not like it but they understood the demise. The public posture of the textile workers union was that they deplored the closing of the plant. He said the union worked hard to try and find a solution to preserve the jobs and the contract. Springs was antiunion but he said they were not on a warpath in the Bleachery to kill the union but it was understood that they did not like unions. The aftermath of the closing of the plant according to Bob was that Springs had planned to demolish the plant leaving only two buildings standing but after talks with banks, Congressman Spratt, and Springs, the plant was sold to Bonnie Watts. Watts owned a printing shop in Clover, South Carolina and he had been a printer at the Bleachery and a union shop steward. He was approved for a loan of \$5 million to buy the plant. He ran the plant for roughly two years and it closed around 2001-2002. Watts negotiator was Jim Ferguson from Rock Hill National Bank. He became a printer of last resort and would fill orders that other plants needed filled. Bob said the operation was very inefficient because Watts had a limited labor force and also had inferior technology. He could not do much production because the print machines were slow. In Bob's opinion, the Bleachery stayed open longer than it should have. Watts employed around 300 and he had to default on the loan. Springs was still in office space in what is now the Springs Creative. Springs Creative was owned by Derrick Close a grandson of the original Springs.

00:12:30

Thompson was on the Winthrop Board of Trustees and he was present when talks with Winthrop wanting to deal with the Knowledge Park development. Bob said the Bleachery lives on more through the emotions of the people who worked there.

00:15:17

He does not necessarily see the Bleachery site, now University Center at Knowledge Park, as being any more successful than the former Celanese site which is now the Riverwalk Community, because Riverwalk has much more space. He feels that the sports aspect of Knowledge Park will feed the development of the area. Riverwalk is an entirely different concept as it is more residential. Former workers from Celanese have put together the Legacy Piece (a monument to the memory of the Celanese Plant). He feels that the Bleachery site

will not have as much of a representation of the Bleachery as the Celanese Piece does for the Riverwalk site. His reasoning behind this thought is that because the drivers of change for University Center are developers and they want to make money, and that they may not care too much about the history of the site.

00:20:00

Bob is not associated with the Bleachery site other than just shutting down the company. He retired in 1999 because he worked for the Superintendent of Education. He receives a retirement check from Springs. Springs was bought by the DaSilva family of Brazil and they moved most of the company to Brazil. Derrick Close bought Springs Creative and he imports fabric and he places the product on flat rolls. He also bought the Wamsutta Print Library and got Springs' contract with Walt Disney Corporation and he deals with all of their logos and turned a \$40 million a year business into a \$120 million a year.

00:24:27 ***End of Recording One***

00:00:00 ***Beginning of Recording Two***

He worked for the Textile Manufacturing Institute during his thirty years with Springs. He was also involved in Trade Association and was familiarized with the different firms in the textile industry. He was part of the group in Washington D.C. that tried to override a Ronald Reagan veto of the textile import Control Bill in 1988, this proved to be successful because he called the legislation "a finger in the dike trying to stop the flood." When the Chinese quotas came off and the trade agreement ended that was when the foreign governments were able to step into the textile trades. He said this was a big blow to the American textile industry and he did not in his time working around other mills see a way to save the industry. He said that Springs bet heavily on the branded home furnishing industry because it was where the money was and the highest returns on investment. These included towels, sheets, pillowcases, bed spreads, and all the things that are not fabric (component these got mostly sent overseas). He said that online textile mills are in Gaffney, South Carolina and are selling to foreigners thus reversing the process, but they do not make much money. What the Bleachery represents as a former major employer according to Bob was replicated across the south, where it employed many and this led to towns being built around the mills. He said lots of South Carolina towns came into being because local bankers built and funded cotton mills. The bond referendum to expand the city's water supply and flow in 1928 helped to build Rock Hill and get Lowenstein to build in Rock Hill.

00:04:57

Bob had to call Emile Russett (General Manager of Bleachery See his interview) and tell him several times that the creek was a different color due to the dyes from the Bleachery and a local had complained. There were roughly 200 monitoring wells and after the Bleachery closed it was found that there was ground pollution but not ground water pollution as of now, from when the Bleachery was in operation. Bob said it was part of buying the environmental issues, Springs got out of that when the City of Rock Hill bought the plant. There is potential for there being some serious environmental issues under the concrete in some places at the Bleachery site. Part of what is a preservation of the Bleachery is nostalgia of the time when manufacturing was great. He said in that respect much of the south was laissez faire with the environment because the jobs created by textile firms were seen as a public good.

00:10:20 *End of Recording Two*

00:34:47 *End of Interview*