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O. Henry

The Art & Soul of Greensboro

The Magical
World
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The Life of Linheads • Wiley Cash Comes Home • The House That Restored a Man

Lintheads

A world that once bore the sting of a class-driven insult is now a simple badge of honor to those who remember a happy life in area mill communities

BY STAN SWOFFORD



I was a “linthead” long ago, a third-shift linthead, which meant that when I walked out of the mill at 7 a.m., my sandy blond hair was shimmering white in the sunlight, as if I had been caught in a sudden snowstorm.

But it wasn't snow, of course, although it does snow occasionally in mountainous McDowell County, where I grew up and worked for a year at the American Thread Co. It was lint — bits of thread and cotton that made me prematurely gray four hours into my shift.

But I didn't care. I was in my mid-20s, just back from a year in Vietnam on a helicopter gunship, and full of piss and vinegar. I was a “bobbin boy,” the guy who gathered and cleaned the bobbins for the production workers, most of them women, who spun the thread on huge looms. When the bobbins were full of freshly spun thread, I helped them “doff,” or clear their machines and prepare them for another round of spinning. I had a dangerous job, not because of mill machinery or the remote possibility of contracting brown lung disease, but the distinct probability that one or more women, who were paid according to their rate of production, might surmise that I favored one over another of them — which sometimes I did.

I was grateful for my job. Money from it, plus the G.I. Bill, would allow me to finish college. I didn't mind lint in my hair. It would comb out — most of it, anyway. The important thing every morning, which was my evening, was to find my buddy, Billy Ray, and head to the closest legal establishment that sold cold beer at 7 a.m.

I don't remember the name of this fine place, but it was filled with third-shift mill hands like Billy Ray and me. I knew that because most of them had that prematurely gray linthead look, although some sported blue hair. It all depended

on the color of the cloth and the millworker's job. But you had better be smiling and have that look yourself before referring within earshot to one as a linthead. That was a word that could get you a fat lip, fast. I saw more than one beer-fueled dust-up over that word, and heard numerous arguments that almost erupted into blows.

“Linthead,” if directed toward a millworker by someone who thought he or she belonged to a higher social class, was a word that stung — a demeaning term of disparagement, not only in the mills that sparsely dotted Appalachia, but in the bustling Piedmont, once home to, and economically powered by, thousands of millworkers.

The textile industry moved into its heyday in Greensboro in the late 1940s, when the city had between 60,000 and 70,000 residents, and began to boom after the war. Begun 120 years ago in Greensboro by brothers Ceasar and Moses Cone, Cone Mills was the world's largest denim maker. Burlington Industries was the world leader in rayon weaving. Blue Bell was America's leader in overalls manufacturing, and Guilford Mills had begun production. Greensboro became a world leader in textile manufacturing. Lots of lintheads lived here and in nearby towns such as Gibsonville, where Cone owned Minneola Manufacturing Co. Greensboro and Burlington, of course, were home to any number of Burlington Industries mills.

“Lintheads made this part of the world,” declared 83-year-old Shirley Adams, who with her husband, Bud, went to work for Burlington when she was 16. “Lintheads put food on our tables and clothes on our backs.”

Burlington had a lot of lintheads, but the greatest single concentration in the Triad was in the mill villages built by Cone Mills for its workers.

Moses and Ceasar Cone named their first mill Proximity because it was adjacent to the Piedmont's cotton fields. They then persuaded their friends in

South Carolina, Emanuel and Herman Sternberger, to come to Greensboro and partner with them to build a flannel factory. They called it Revolution because they were certain Southern textile moguls would consider it a game changer. Two other mills soon followed — White Oak, the largest denim mill in the world throughout most of the 20th century, and Proximity Print Works.

The Cones would amass many other textile and textile-related holdings, but these were the four core mills, constructed just northeast of the city limits at that time, that would lay the foundation for Greensboro to become known as the textile capital of the world and put bread on the table for thousands of people during the looming Great Depression.

And that's why former mill workers, whose hair is now lint-free but white with age, no longer bristle when they hear the word "linthead." In fact, they now accept it as a badge of honor. Mill workers built the economic underpinning for Greensboro and much of the rest of North Carolina, but especially Greensboro, say Judith and Paul Sams to just about anybody who will listen.

The couple, who now live in Whispering Pines, grew up in a Cone Mills village in Greensboro. They remember the hard work and sacrifices that their parents and the parents of other mill children had to make. They also recall the term linthead and remember its sting.

The Samses are well aware that they are members of the last generation to know what it was like to grow up in a mill village. They're on a mission to raise enough money — they figure it would take about \$25,000 — to sculpt and place a statue of a millworker on the site of the old Revolution mill, which is now becoming an upscale retail and studio complex. Paul Sams said developer and owner Jim Overton likes the idea and believes the statue would complement the development's textile memorabilia room. "Don't forget the millworker," says Judith Sams. "Never forget the millworker."

The Samses know how easy it would be to forget. Much has changed since the Proximity, Revolution, White Oak and Print Works mills were all humming, smoking and producing goods in Greensboro, along with Burlington Industries and Guilford Mills. Out of the original four Cone Mills plants, only the White Oak mill, now called Cone Denim, is operating. It and Burlington Industries are owned by the International Textile Group, which has headquarters in Greensboro. Guilford Mills, which moved its headquarters to Wilmington in 2005, was recently sold to the Lear Corporation of Michigan.

During their peak, in the mid-to-late-1940s and into the '50s, it took almost 2,700 workers living in about 1,500 Cone Mill-owned houses on about 450 acres to operate the mills. The Cones built five completely self-sufficient "villages," or towns — one village for the families of each mill, and one village for black workers, assigned to the most menial jobs in each of the mills. The villages were named for their residents' mills: Proximity, Revolution, White Oak, White Oak New Town and East White Oak, which was the village for black workers and their families. The houses, many of which were renovated in the 1940s, were usually one-story, wooden frame structures with three, or

possibly four, bedrooms, although some were brick and a few had two stories. They were built solidly and, though spare, were well-proportioned. Some, with white porches and swings hanging from the ceiling, still stand between Summit Avenue and Church Street harboring memories collected since they were built at least seventy or more years ago.

Most are good memories, say former mill village occupants, some of whom worked in the nearby mills and some who grew up in the houses. Cone, to ward off labor disputes and unionization, tried to anticipate and fill workers' every need. In addition to living in mill-owned houses, workers worshipped in mill-built churches, attended mill-provided schools, and played on mill ballfields and in mill recreation centers and Y's.

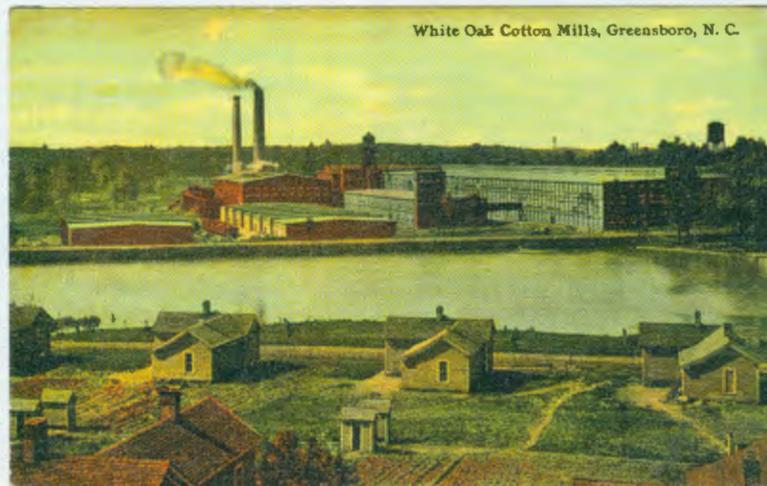
Workers and their families bought groceries and clothes at company stores. If a worker or family member became ill, Cone provided doctors and nurses. If a worker or spouse had a baby, a Cone-provided doctor or nurse likely was there for the delivery. Dr. A.K. Maness delivered Bobby Hill in the back bedroom of Hill's parents' mill house in the Proximity village. Hill swears that Maness held the U.S. record for delivering babies. "He said he could recognize anybody at Cone by just looking at their hind-end," Hill says. Hill was one of eight in his family who lived in the five-room brick house.

Hill recalls the family paid a dollar a month for rent and 25 cents for electricity. Like most mill children, he didn't encounter any ugliness about his mill background until he completed his early grades at the mill schools and entered what was then the Greensboro school system's Aycock Junior High. That's when the linthead taunts hit him. "I tried to ignore them," he says, his eyes flashing at the memory. Hill quit high school at 16 and went to work in the spinning room at Cone's Proximity plant, the third generation of his family to work for Cone Mills. His grandfather, Luther Courtland Hill, worked in the mill for sixty years.

After a stint in the Navy, which included action during the Korean War, Hill returned to work at several Cone mills, including Print Works and White Oak. He later took advantage of training Cone offered him and became a construction inspector.

Ultimately, Hill first became a building inspector for the city of Greensboro and then president of the North Carolina Building Inspectors Association. When he was elected president of the association, someone noticed that he didn't have a high school diploma. The association contacted the White House, and President George W. Bush issued him an honorary high school diploma. If that's what a linthead background will get you, he'll take it, Hill says.

So will Joe Lewis Davis, 79, who grew up in Cone's White Oak village and later had a park named after him. Davis' father, Isaac Newton Davis, worked forty-four years at the White Oak Plant, supporting a family of seven on his mill pay. "We ate a lot of pinto beans, cream potatoes and cornbread," Davis says, and they lived in a three-bedroom, one-story house on 20th Street. But in 1950, the Davis family moved into a newly remodeled four-bedroom, two-story house, with a garage, on 20th Street. Cone Mills, which had begun selling the houses to its



White Oak Cotton Mills, Greensboro, N. C.



14. Weave Room, White Oak Cotton Mills, Greensboro, N. C. COPYRIGHT 1909 BY H. G. WHITE CO.

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GRADED SCHOOL AT WHITE OAK, BUILT AND MAINTAINED BY THE COMPANY



workers, sold it to Isaac Davis for \$12,000. "I never saw my daddy so proud," Davis says.

Davis loved growing up in a mill village. "The people were good to one another," he says, "and they believed in working for what they got." Unlike some of the people in junior high and high school who called him "linthead."

"I took it as a joke," he says. "Or I tried to, anyway. Some couldn't."

Davis worked part time in the mill during summers. "I hope you don't get too attached to it," his father told him. He didn't. When he wasn't working in the mill or going to school, Davis usually could be found swimming or playing basketball at the White Oak or Proximity YMCA. That's where he got to know Oka T. Hester, the Greensboro Parks and Recreation director. Hester gave him a job, and to Davis it was a very special job.

Hester told him that Cone Mills was about to donate the White Oak Y to the city. Would Davis like to run it? "I was 21 years old."

As manager of the Y, Davis essentially started his own mill village parks and recreation department. He organized ball teams in the mills and got to know all the superintendents. Cone paid for the equipment. He organized teen dances on Friday nights, charging 25 cents admission, and hired two police officers to keep things orderly. "People came from all over the county," he says. "People still come up to me today and say, 'Joe, I met my wife there.'"

Davis became one of the most well-known residents in the Cone Mills villages, so well-known that the city decided to name a park after him. It's at 1410 19th Street, a seven-acre park with a softball field and walking path. "I'm proud of it," Davis says.

Delane Nabors Pate is proud of her mill village upbringing, and she remains a bit puzzled at why people often seemed sorry for her. Pate's parents worked at the Proximity plant for more than forty years. She vividly remembers them coming home with their clothes covered in blue denim lint. Her father once held her up so she could look through a window to see inside the plant, and all she could see was "this blue fog of lint."

But life was good, she says. Everybody seemed happy. It was when she graduated from Proximity and entered the new Page High School that she learned she was "poor." Here's how she described it in a piece she wrote for *The Bobbin & Shuttle*, a magazine published by the Textile Heritage Center in Cooleemee:

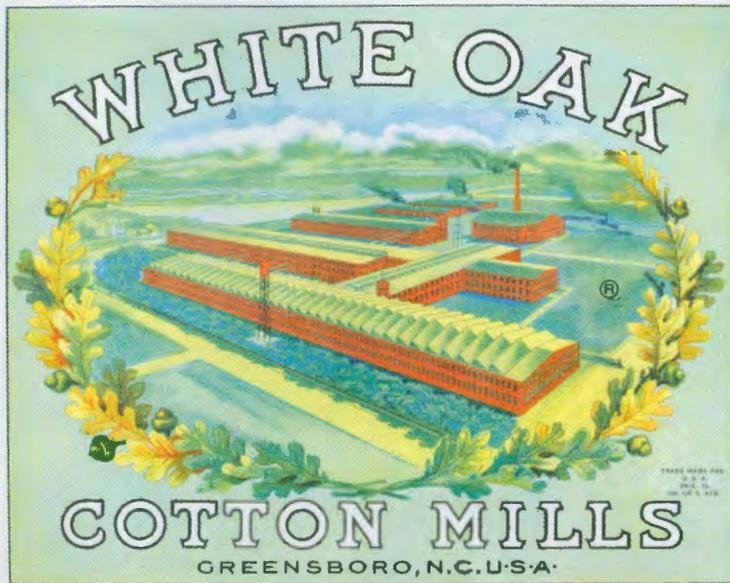
"When the school year began, there was a newspaper article that said Page Senior High was an 'experiment' for Greensboro. School officials were trying to see the results of sending rich kids to school with poor kids. I was baffled. I remember looking around for the poor kids, but I never saw anyone I considered poor. I even asked my cousin, Janice Ritter, if she had seen any poor kids to which the newspaper was referring. She had not seen any poor kids, either.

"Many years later, I attended a Page High School reunion, and someone brought another newspaper article that proclaimed the school system's 'experiment' a success. In complete sincerity, I asked, 'Who were these poor kids they keep referring to in this article?' Only then did someone clue me in. I was one of the poor kids — the mill village kids, the Proximity students. The rich kids had gone to Aycock.

"All this came as quite a shock to me, as all of my friends that I had grown up with had about the same things I had and were very proud of it. Imagine that, to find out as an adult that we were 'poor.'"

Even the segregated residents of Cone's East White Oak village, separated from the other villages by U.S. Highway 29, felt enriched — not by money, but an ongoing sense of community. "It was wonderful," says Marthella Richmond Jones, building manager of the East White Oak Community Center, the only original building remaining in the village. "We would get together and cook out almost every day. Everybody knew everybody and took care of everybody. Every family who lived here rented a house. And every Christmas a truck would come by with turkeys and hams."

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Benjamin Filene, UNCG director of public history, and nine of his graduate students conducted interviews with East White Oak and other residents of the Cone Mills villages for an oral history project. The students uncovered immense affection for the mill villages and a determination to keep alive their memories. When the city was about to demolish the East White Oak Community Center, which had begun as a school, residents sold chicken dinner after chicken dinner to buy it. Cathy Gant Hill says her grandfather, Truman Gant, told the Greensboro City Council “how important it was to the community, and they listened to him.” This sense of community and commitment prevailed throughout the villages, and was armor against acts and words of rudeness and putdowns, such as “linthead.”

“What power that statement has — ‘We didn’t know we were poor,’” Filene says. “But they know. Deep in their memories, they know how much they gave to the mill.”

Lynn Rumley, director of the the Textile Heritage Center in Cooleemee, says the mill village system was really part of a “social contract” between the mill workers and mill owners, “and both sides benefited.” It got much of the South through the Great Depression, she says. “Companies divided up the work, so every household had some money. Nobody locked their doors.”

Some professors labeled the millworkers “docile,” Rumley says. “Some people looked down on them and called them lintheads, and consider them pushovers. But they’re people of commitment and solidarity.”

Indeed, the state, including Greensboro, endured its share of labor unrest and violence. Six millworkers were killed during a strike in Marion, and others in Gastonia in 1929. In 1934, 400,000 workers joined a nationwide strike called for Labor Day, but with many across the state living in company housing, such as those of Burlington Industries and Cone Mills, some workers were evicted and the strike failed. In 1925, millworker James Evans led a successful walkout at Cone’s White Oak plant after the workload was doubled and pay remained the same. Five years later he was among hundreds of workers who created a chapter of the United Textile Workers of America at Cone, and he was among forty who were fired immediately. The union chapter did not survive.

“Linthead” is a word Alan W. Cone says he’s is not too familiar with. “I never heard it a lot,” he says, “and certainly never used it.” Cone, 86, worked in the family mills in the 1940s and ’50s. He’s the only Cone left, he says, who actually worked in the mills. Cone says he got to know some of the millworkers when he and other supervisors actually went into the plant with stopwatches and timed how long it took them to do their jobs. “Some of them could fool the hell out of us,” he says.

Cone says he found millworkers to be “extremely interesting. They under-



stood what I was doing and why. We became friends.” Cone says he was always impressed with how “loyal” workers were to the company. “It was a happy community,” he says. “They had everything they needed for a good life.”

Former millworker Joe Davis, who enjoyed his mill village childhood, even though it meant being branded a “linthead,” says Cone Mills “definitely left its mark here. They were good to the millworkers. But the millworkers were good to Cone.” **OH**

Stan Swofford, a former award-winning News & Record reporter, teaches journalism at UNCG and continues to struggle with a novel that is still mostly in his head.