

CROSSROADS

A PUBLICATION OF THE NORTH CAROLINA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

“They Are Not Strangers to Us”: Lewis Hine’s Gaston County Photographs, 1908

Robert C. Allen

WHETHER THEY were photographed in 1908 or 2008, the subjects of documentary photographs usually remain strangers to the viewer. The separation by time, space, place, and history between the people who were photographed and those who look at them as unrelated subjects often creates a chasm that is too far to leap over. This is true for most people who see the remarkable photographs of child textile laborers taken by documentarian Lewis Hine. Hine’s images are well-known, and they are accessible through museum exhibits, Internet sites, and library archives. Probably millions of people have seen them — and experience them as images of other people from some other place in time.

But this is not the case for all. For those living in Gaston County today, Hine’s 1908 photographs bring family home. The images in these photographs are of places they know, of places now gone that their parents and grandparents knew. For some, the images are quite

literally of parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and other relatives and their neighbors, friends, and co-workers. The specific places they portray also are familiar. They are the Loray Mill, Trenton Mill, Ozark



Tom Jenkins, Walter Jenkins, and John Glover, closing hour at Trenton Mill, Gastonia, NC. Billy Jenkins, nephew of Tom and Walter, attended “Standing on a Box” as did descendants of John Glover.

Mill, Melville Manufacturing Company in Cherryville, the High Shoals Mill, and the villages that surround them. Most of those mills are gone now, and some of us know of them only through the memories of relatives. We know the people and scenes in these photos. They are not strangers to us. I know because I am from this place.

It was only a few years ago when I discovered that the families of two of the young men Hine photographed in Gastonia a hundred years ago — Eugene Bell and John Poindexter — lived a few doors down from my paternal grandfather William Hoyle Allen in the Loray Mill Village.

Although neither my parents nor grandparents were photographed by Hine, I did begin to wonder about the descendants of those pictured in the photos. What happened to Eugene and John and the other

young people who were photographed by Hine in Gastonia? Did their grandchildren and great-grandchildren have any idea that their relatives had been memorialized in this way?

Lucky contacts, happy accidents, and the help of other people also fascinated by these images and the people's lives they represent — especially Joe Depriest of the *Charlotte Observer* and Joe Manning, an intrepid researcher of Hine subjects and their families — led to my being able to correspond and talk with the families of sixteen of the young people Hine photographed in Gastonia.

It was a wonderful experience hearing from family members from Goldsboro to California and talking with them about the lives of parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. I also heard from the children and grandchildren of other cotton mill workers who

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Managing Editor & Publisher:

Harlan Joel Gradin
Associate Director
North Carolina Humanities Council

North Carolina Humanities

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Design:

Kilpatrick Design
www.kilpatrickdesign.com

Founding Publication

Team of Crossroads:

Katherine Kubel
Pat Arnow
Mary Lee Kerr
Lisa Yarger
Harlan Joel Gradin

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GASTON COUNTY: BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER

In the fall of 2008, the North Carolina Humanities Council funded in part “Standing on a Box: Lewis Hine’s National Child Labor Committee Photography in Gaston County, 1908.” This multi-part project explored Greater Gaston’s textile heritage and its impact on the community’s present and future. “Standing on a Box,” directed by Carol Reinhardt of the Gaston County Public Library, used photographs taken in 1908 by Lewis Hine, a sociologist, reformer, and National Child Labor Committee photojournalist, to explore child labor conditions in textile mills at the turn of the twentieth century.

Interpreting textile history is very complex and often contentious. While Hine had one particular focus, many other factors also influence historical analysis. These include race, gender, power, culture, economics, the production process, working conditions, the nature of family labor in the move from farm to factory, and labor and union issues.

“Standing on a Box” featured a photographic exhibition with interpretive text; reflections by descendants of mill workers; a public concert featuring string band music of the era; an Internet component open to the community; and a community book-read of Elizabeth Winthrop’s *Counting on Grace*, the story of a 12-year-old millworker. The project included presentations on textile history by scholars Roxanne Newton (Mitchell Community College), James Leloudis (UNC Chapel Hill), David Goldfield (UNC Charlotte), Tom Hanchett (Levine Museum of the New South), and Robert C. Allen (UNC Chapel Hill).

For the people of Gaston County, history is close and intimate. While studying Hine’s photos of 1908, Allen, a native Gastonian, was able to trace the descendants of several individuals pictured in Hine’s Gaston County photographs. “‘They Are Not Strangers to Us:’ Lewis Hine’s Gaston County Photographs, 1908” is an adaptation of Allen’s keynote address for the project “Standing on a Box.”

Harlan Joel Gradin

The Lewis Hine photographs included in *Crossroads* are courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, National Child Labor Committee Collection.



In 1908 Eugene Bell had worked for nearly two years as a sweeper at the Loray Mill in Gastonia. Pictured here are Bell's granddaughter, Barbara Groves Yarbrough, and his daughter, Nita Bell Groves, who visited the Hine exhibit in 2008. Photo on the right by Barry Wood.

hoped that someone might have preserved their images.

Photographs are important for so many different reasons: they are personal; they offer a glimpse of someone's sense of the world through both the subject and framing of the picture; they are historical; they are artistic. They restore voices and faces of the people whose hard work, pride, resilience, triumphs, and tragedies made the world we live in today. In so doing, they reveal one of the most important connections of these Hine photographs: many people will get to see themselves as history-makers during the last century and know for certain those observing the photos are stakeholders in this county today.

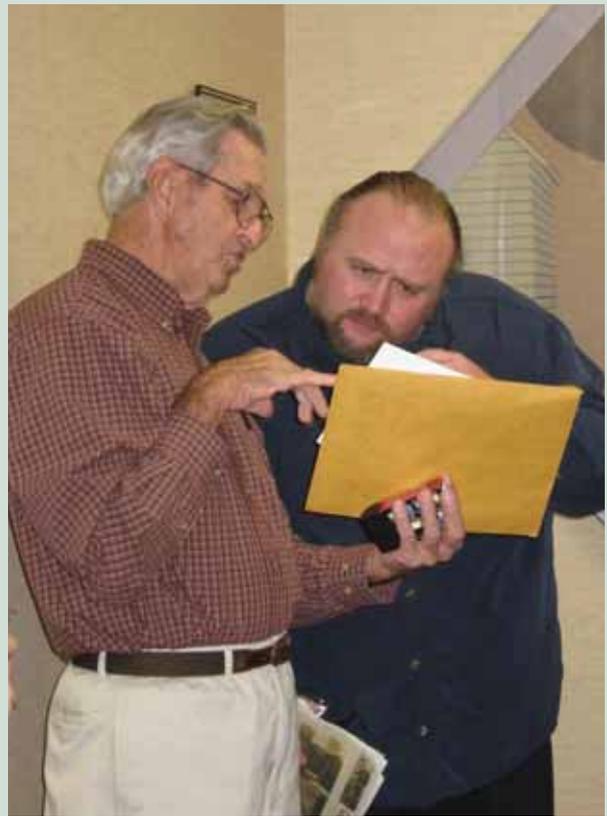
Lewis Hine and Child Labor in Gaston County

In 1908, Lewis Hine worked as staff photographer for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC). Founded in 1904 and based in New York, it was one of the first nonprofit organizations in the United States. NCLC was part of a larger reform effort at the turn of the twentieth century known as the Progressive Movement. Reform groups focused

on a wide range of social ills plaguing ordinary Americans, many brought about by the industrialization of the country's economic base during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Reformers at local and national levels advocated strong changes in economics, politics, health, social issues, and moral attitudes and behaviors.

Among the pressing injustices, child labor seemed particularly cruel. According to the 1900 census, over two million children toiled in factories and mills across the United States. Among the industries for which child labor was most prevalent were textile mills in the South. Indeed, between 1880 and 1910, one quarter of the textile labor force was below the age of sixteen.

The first law in North Carolina regulating child labor had been passed in 1903, only five years before the census was taken. Under the law, children could legally begin work at age thirteen and at twelve "in an apprenticeship capacity." The age limit for night work was fourteen.



By 1908 Rush Merrill, doffer, had worked for three years in the Loray Mill. Rush's son John explains the Merrill family history to a visitor at "Standing on a Box."

However, as Hine learned, these laws were not regularly enforced. They in fact were blatantly ignored and routinely violated. The NCLC planned to use Hine's photographs of child laborers in protest. His notes on the photographs were designed to shock middle-class Americans into recognizing the extent and consequences of industrial child labor. By raising awareness of the evils of the problem, NCLC sought to lobby state governments to strengthen laws relating to the employment of children and young adults.

From Hine's notes as well as from the posters, articles, and brochures his photographs illustrated, we can see the outlines of the NCLC's arguments about the deleterious effects of industrial child labor — upon society and upon the children themselves. Child labor deprived children of the opportunity for an education and condemned them to a life of unskilled, menial labor. Child labor depressed wages for adult workers, making it difficult if not impossible for a family to survive without multiple family members, including children, working. Child labor encouraged parents to collude with employers in employing under-aged workers, even by the lax age requirements set by some state laws. Child laborers performed work that was not only tedious but in some cases physically dangerous. The child laborer's

long hours of toil in factories, mills, and mines had long-term physical effects.

The Photographs and Gaston County

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, thousands of Southerners from farms and the western mountains sought to escape the penury and endless indebtedness that resulted in the post-emancipation economy anchored in the crop lien system. Both white and African Americans left their homes; many of the white North Carolinians settled in the Piedmont to work in the area's cotton mills. In 1880, the Piedmont had 49 textile mills; by 1900, there were 177. When it was incorporated in 1877, only 236 residents lived in Gastonia. By the time Hine arrived in 1908, more than 5,000 people lived there. They worked in places such as the Loray Mill, which was one of the largest mills in the South. Surrounding towns such as Cherryville, Mount Holly, Bessemer City, and High Shoals sprang up around mills, and by the time Hine visited it, Gaston County was well on its way to becoming the combed cotton capital of the United States. Ten years after his visit, Gaston County would boast more mills than any other in the country.

When Hine reached Gastonia around the sixth of November 1908, he had been on the road photographing working children for several months. Over the next three months, Hine would set up his camera in ten towns in North Carolina — from Whitnel in the west to Laurinburg in the east — and five towns in South Carolina — from Clinton to Dillon. In all he would take some 236 photos in and around nineteen mills. He took more photos in Gastonia (thirty-five) than any other town, and more in Gaston County (fifty-nine) than any other county.

Approximately 200 Gaston County children and young people had their photographs taken by Hine over the five days he spent here in November 1908. The photographer names twenty-nine of the children, for two of whom he offers only first names, Lacy and Savannah. It was unlikely these children had ever seen a camera before, much less been photographed. None of them, so far as I know, ever saw their photos.

At 5' 4", not much taller than the oldest child laborer, Hine always wore a hat, suit, coat, dress shirt, and tie. He was thirty-four years old when he came to Gaston County — around the same age as the parents of many of the children he photographed. Hine was the same age as Eugene Bell's mother and four years younger than his father. Hine was two years younger than both Rush Merrill's father, Luther, and Minnie and Mattie Carpenter's mother, Mary.

We can only imagine what Gastonians would have made of Hine. As soon as he opened his mouth to engage them in conversation, he revealed that, as my mother used to say, he wasn't from around here. His Midwestern accent would have instantly marked



Spinner in Whitnel Mill. Hine's note to this photograph reads, "When asked how old, she hesitated, then said, 'I don't remember.' Then confidentially, 'I'm not old enough to work, but I do so just the same.'"

him as a "Yankee." In 1908 the vast majority of North Carolinians had been born in the state, and those who were not native had crossed the border from an adjacent Southern state.

What would Hine have said to the young millworkers? How would he have represented himself and his reason for wanting to take their pictures? Would he have explained why he wanted to know how old they were and how long they had been working? Why did he want their names?

He asked the children of the cotton mills about aspects of their work lives most directly relevant to the NCLC's agenda for public exposure and reform: their age, how long they had worked in the mill, how many hours a day and a week, how much they



Minnie and Mattie Carpenter. Donny Seagle and his wife attended "Standing on a Box" in 2008.

earned, what kind of work they did, whether or not they went to school. Sometimes he wrote down their responses in their own words — or as he heard and understood them.

In some cases, but not all, he wrote down their names and addresses. For whatever reason, Hine more often noted the names of his Gastonia subjects than those in other towns. He also wrote down his observations: how large or small his subjects seemed for their age, their apparent state of health, working conditions in the mill, the attitude of the overseer or superintendent to his request to take pictures of their workers.

The photographs Hine took in the Carolina cotton mills began to be published within months of his taking them. They appeared as illustrations in magazine articles and on posters, which the NCLC displayed at conferences, legislative hearings, and other gatherings in the early 1910s.

Four of the Gaston County photos appeared in a 1909 NCLC brochure entitled “Child Labor in the Carolinas,” written by Alexander J. McKelway. A Presbyterian minister and former editor of the Charlotte-based *Presbyterian Standard*, McKelway had lobbied in 1903 for the passage of the North Carolina child labor law. The following year he went to work full-time for the NCLC’s Southern committee, focusing on child labor in the textile industry, by then the South’s chief manufacturing industry.

What impact did these photos have on child labor laws? That is, of course, very difficult to assess, but in calling attention to cruelty of child labor and to the weak enforcement of child labor laws in many states, particularly in the South, Hine’s work on behalf of the NCLC has certainly been credited with helping build support for legislative action. North Carolina’s child labor law was strengthened somewhat in 1910. The first federal child labor law was passed in 1916 (with McKelway leading an intense lobbying effort), but a Constitutional challenge to the law was upheld in 1918. It would take until 1938 before a law banning the sale of products manufactured by child labor would be passed. By that time, however, a combination of technological changes in textile manufacturing and an increase in the age at which a young person could drop out of school had largely ended the era of child labor in the cotton mills of Gaston County.



Why “Standing on a Box”?

One descendant of a mill worker wrote to me, “My grandfather...was nine years old, worked a twelve-hour shift at Loray...I remember him stating that... he had to stand on a box to reach the spinning frame to do work.” Another wrote, “I cannot remember the name of the mill where they worked, but my mom was very young. I remember the story that she had to stand on a stool to reach the loom at which she worked.”

—Robert C. Allen



“One of the smallest boys” (Hine).



“Lincolnton, N.C. Spinner. A moments [sic] glimpse of the outer world. Said she was 10 years old. Been working over a year” (Hine).



Child laborers at Loray Mill. Hine notes that two smaller children “appeared at the door and vanished back immediately” on seeing him.

Lewis Hine

Robert C. Allen

LEWIS WICKES HINE, born in 1874 in Oshkosh, WI, studied sociology at the University of Chicago before moving to New York City, where in 1905 he graduated from New York University with a master's degree in education. While a teacher at the experimental Ethical Culture School, Hine became interested in photography as a pedagogic, or, as he called it, "interpretative," tool. He took his students and the newly invented Graflex camera to Ellis Island to document the thousands of immigrants arriving there.

The founder of the Ethical Culture School, Felix Adler, also headed a reform organization, the National Child Labor Committee, and in 1907 he asked Hine to become the NCLC's staff photographer. For nearly a decade, Hine traveled widely to photograph children in factories and fields, canneries and mines, moving south to record the working conditions associated with increasing industrialization in North Carolina textile mills, sometimes posing as a fire inspector to gain access to child laborers. His photographs were designed "to exert the force to right the wrongs."

At the end of World War I, the Red Cross employed Hine to travel to Europe to expose the plight of

refugees, particularly in the Balkans. In the 1920s and 30s, Hine sought out opportunities to celebrate the industrial worker and the dignity of honest physical labor, resulting in *Men at Work*, the book of photographs by which he is most popularly known. Although Hine won several awards for his photographs, he was always a photographer for hire and struggled to make ends meet. In the 1930s, the country was in the Great Depression, Hine was in his sixties, and his aesthetic of documentary photography was being replaced by a new generation of New Deal documentary photographers. He died in poverty on November 3, 1940.

Over 5,000 of Hine's NCLC photographs and 350 glass negatives are housed in the Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs Division. To view the digitized collection, visit http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/207_hine.html. Other large Hine collections are held at the George Eastman House and the Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery.



Photo courtesy of the Hine Collection, Albin O. Kuhn Library and Gallery, Univ. of Maryland.



Doffers in Cherryville.



Doffer in Mellville Mill. "Said he had been working for two years. Many of them below age" (Hine).

About the Author

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ROBERT C. ALLEN is the James Logan Godfrey Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with appointments in the Departments of American Studies, History, and Communications. His research has focused on the history of American popular entertainment and popular culture. Allen's books include *Film History: Theory and Practice* (1985), *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1992), and *To Be Continued: Soap Operas Around the World* (1995). While studying Lewis Hine's Gaston County's National Child Labor Committee photos of 1908, Allen identified millworker John Poindexter, pictured here, as a boy who grew up on the same block as his paternal grandfather.



Photo by Barry Wood.



John Poindexter, Loray Mill, 1912.

Claiming the Past: Textile History of Gaston County

Harlan Joel Gradin

THE PROJECT “STANDING ON A BOX” exemplifies how public humanities can plant seeds of local community development — in this case, a deepening awareness of the connection between the personal and communal, an understanding that lives are intertwined and depend on each other. Success in any cultural and economic endeavor requires nurturing this connection.

Driven by project director Carol Reinhardt’s passion, energy, and organizing brilliance, “Standing on a Box” drew over 2,100 participants. It energized and gave substance to a collaboration of organizations throughout Gaston County. Major partners included the Gaston County Public Library, the Gaston County Museum of Art and History, the Gaston County Historic Preservation Committee, Friends of Gaston County Public Library, the Gaston Arts

Council, Preservation North Carolina, the *Gaston Gazette*, county schools, local churches, and the Levine Museum of the New South.

The three-month project included an exhibition of photographs by social documentarian Lewis Hine; presentations by scholars of textile history; reflections by relatives on early twentieth-century textile workers; string band performances of era-specific work songs; weekly news profiles of Gastonians who spent their childhoods in mill villages; radio spots with project leaders; an interactive Internet component open to the community; and a book-read of over 5,000 Gastonians, young and old. The Lewis Hine photographs will travel to the Levine Museum of the New South in Charlotte and will finally be installed in the former Loray Mill.

Development of this kind happens when citizens have the opportunity to assert that their lives are important. They matter to how history happens; they are not incidental to how history unfolds. The extent to which this deepening awareness can be realized and nurtured is rooted in front-end planning, inclusive participation at all levels of implementation, a diversity of opportunities provided by programs, and the expansiveness of publicity that educates about the project’s content.

While “Standing on a Box” stemmed from historian and Gaston County native Dr. Robert C. Allen’s desire to identify the people in Hine’s photographs and trace them to their descendants and neighbors, it was nurtured to full growth by Reinhardt and her colleagues. The public conversation about Gaston County’s complex textile history actually began, however, in 2005, when the North Carolina Humanities

Gaston County native Bobby Brown reflects on growing up in “mill hills,” or mill villages, in the *Gaston Gazette*.

The Gaston Gazette | www.gastongazette.com

Hometown

Monday, September 28, 2008

4A

BELMONT ABBEY HOMECOMING
Page 7A: Abbey Spirit: Catch It All Over Again. Homecoming has more than a sporting chance of being the greatest ever.

Our Textile History EVERY MONDAY SERIES
NEXT WEEK: SMYRE VILLAGE

The Mill and the Village

By Bobby Brown
Special to The Gazette

Belmont 28304, 404, 904
Special to The Gazette

THE MEMORIES
The Village:

The mill village was made up of homes built by the company for the workers and their families. Most were built between 1900 and 1920. Almost every mill had a “Village” and you were “raised up” on the “Majestic,” where I was born or raised on the Crescent, Climax, National, etc.

Belmont had more than 20 textile mills and some 15 mill villages consisting of 30 to 50 houses. Most were referred to affectionately as “Mill Hills.”

Each village was named after the mill company that built them. They were all pretty much alike in style. That is clapped siding, three-, four- or five-room houses, some larger — two stories, built on pillars, beaded wallboard on the inside with 10-foot ceilings. They had large porches; most toilets were on the back porch, no bathtubs and no hot running water.

The walls, floors and ceilings were not insulated and the heat source was a “coal” fireplace, coal burning heaters called “laundry heaters,” or “warm mackings.” The rooms were drafty and cold in the winter compared to today’s standards, and you sat close to the heater or fireplace during the winter.

Most folks heated only the kitchen and

“sitting room” in the winter. The fires were coal and never burned all night. It was necessary to build a new fire each morning to heat the rooms. Each room was lighted with a single bulb hanging from the ceiling with a pull-chain socket. In the bedrooms, usually a string attached to the pull chain with the other end attached to the iron bed

head rail so that it could be turned on in the night without feeling about toward the ceiling in the middle of the room.

The bedrooms were never heated. At your family grew and you were a good employee, you could manage to get a larger house on the village. There was competition for workers and moving from one vil-

lage to another for a “five cents on the hour wage increase” was sometimes a frequent thing.

Almost everyone had an oil stove in the kitchen. Some of our neighbors had wood stoves for cooking.

See MR/Page 5A ►►

Story and photos submitted by Bobby Brown of Old Forge Drive in Gastonia. He is the Belmont Historical Society Inc. president.

Brown was born on the Majestic Mill Village in Belmont. He graduated from Belmont High School in 1957 and graduated from Appalachian State,

class of 1961. He married his high school sweetheart, Gail Yount. The couple returned to Belmont to teach school. Brown also coached at Belmont High.

They moved to Gastonia in 1969 and have retained close ties with the Belmont community over the years.

THE GAZETTE IS EXPLORING GASTON COUNTY’S RICH TEXTILE HISTORY THROUGH WORDS, PHOTOGRAPHS AND VIDEOS ONLINE AT GASTONGAZETTE.COM/TEXTILES.

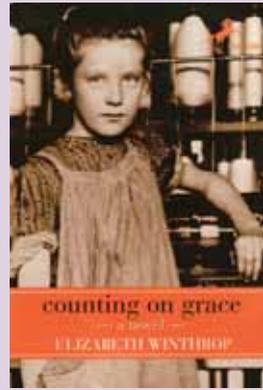


Photo by Laurel Hicks.

On Making Projects Matter

“STANDING ON A BOX” project director Carol Reinhardt gives this advice for planning and executing public humanities programming that results in real community development: “Choose a project topic of local interest; partner with appropriate institutions as cosponsors; involve local media early and often; network extensively to plan and promote project activities through a variety of venues and outlets.”

Reinhardt also believes that “being able to tap into the expertise and experience of lots of different people — rather like building a network of mentors” is an important part of a successful public humanities program. “Every project director,” she explains, “needs a network of mentors/advisors, even if those persons aren’t directly connected to the project.”



Council funded another community project, “History Happened Here,” spearheaded by Lucy Penegar of the Gaston County Historical Preservation Commission.

“History Happened Here” commemorated the 75th anniversary of the contentious Loray Mill strike of 1929. The project gathered together former mill workers and management, church leaders and labor organizers, and their discussions helped the community examine one of the county’s most significant historical events, one that has haunted residents since the strike occurred. Penegar understood that such revelatory and healing discussions were necessary for her community to determine what to do with the deserted but still standing Loray Mill. Plans now are for the mill to be refurbished. It is expected to include a charter high school, apartments, local businesses, a police office, postal branch, and permanent displays of the mill’s history.

In 2005, reflecting on the events associated with “History Happened Here,” historian James Leloudis wondered, “In what ways will the conversations begun...continue to reverberate in Gastonia? Will they be sustained? How? By whom? And what consequences will they have?” It will be interesting, he observed, to return a year later to see if local residents were still debating their history and grappling with its complex past.

“Standing on a Box” suggests that this discussion is ongoing, even three years after “History Happened Here.” In her project diary, Reinhardt wrote that “Standing on a Box” has “embraced hundreds of people — old and young...who came together...to examine and celebrate our local textile/mill village history.... For the first time in the forty-plus years I’ve lived in the Piedmont of North Carolina, I’ve heard people talk with pride about family roots in the textile culture, share family stories in the *Gaston Gazette*, and claim their own past.”

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Noon hour at Vivian Cotton
Mill in Cherryville, NC.

Most of those mills are gone now, and some of us know them only through the memories of relatives. We know the people and scenes in these photos. They are not strangers to us. I know because I am from this place.

Robert Allen

The mission of the North Carolina Humanities Council is to support through grants and public programs vital conversations that nurture the cultures and heritage of North Carolina. The North Carolina Humanities Council is a statewide nonprofit and affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



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MANY STORIES, ONE PEOPLE