

Narrator: Robert Harris
Interviewed: Mary Beameschini

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So we did that in a hundred and ten jars. And we did what we thought was right, but all spoiled.

INTERVIEWER Oh!

HARRIS It all spoiled so, uh, that's the way that was--so, ah, we worked real hard, but we were a happy family. We were real happy. We, we had a--in the house, we had a pot belly stove. You know what I'm talking about? We heated one room. And, uh, in the winter time, we had a cold winter, an' you know, when you would go to bed at night (He takes his arms and curls them around his chest)--

INTERVIEWER Lots of blankets, right?

HARRIS You just wrapped up in bed in those covers, an' you know, you didn't see much. You didn't see anything.

INTERVIEWER You didn't?

HARRIS No. My brother, he did contacted pneumonia. He was sick for I don't know how long. Called the doctor out an' he came out an' said he was gonna die. So, uh, he went to his car, and he come back. He says "I'm goin' into Charlotte." He went into Charlotte an' come back, an', uh, he had a little white powder. He gave that to him, and so that was the first sulfur drug that I'd ever seen.

INTERVIEWER That was the first drug you'd ever seen?

HARRIS Sulfur drug, yeah. Most the time when you got sick, it was onion cloves and mustard plaster--a home remedy.

INTERVIEWER Yeah, I'm sure that came in handy.

HARRIS But, uh (laughs), that, uh, basically the way life was. Get up in the morning an' get up early an' I'd say "Get up, get up" to the others. Maybe my brothers (inaudible) (laughs) an' the first thing we'd wanna do is get the old pot belly stove going. Get up around that. But we'd all have to crowd in because it only heat one room.

INTERVIEWER I would imagine that brought the family closer together.

HARRIS Oh, yeah, we were a close-knit family, and like I said, we were happy living like that. It was simple and nice. That's about all I can tell you of that part of it. An', uh, we'll go down here to, uh, recreation. (Pause) As I reckon there wasn't much of that either.

INTERVIEWER When you got off work, you said that, uh, you said before that you started working in the mills when you were about eleven?

HARRIS Well, ah, it was kinda a "slip in" thing, you know--you'n learn.

INTERVIEWER So you had sorta on-the-job training--there was no formal education of it. It was basically just what you saw and picked up?

HARRIS Just what you could pick up by yourself. See, back then, uh, you didn't have (cough)--you didn't have, uh--they didn't train you. It was okay to go in and just clean up the floors, sweep the floors up an' you'd go in there and they'd bother you about not

being in school, but you would watch all these machines, and that's the way we learned. You didn't have anybody showing anything. That's the way I learned. I started working there when I was ten or twelve years old. I had an uncle who worked on Saturday. He'd let me come in there, ya' know. There was nobody in then, give me a little chance to run these things that, uh, I wasn't able to learn unless I worked them.

INTERVIEWER What did the children of the town do for fun? Was there a park or a field or anything like that?

HARRIS I can't recollect. I don't think there was. The only thing that we had was a baseball field. An' we played baseball from sun up to sun down (He smiles). An' then we'd play kickball and football, but it wasn't in so-- like it is today. (Pause) I've got a grandson goin' over there to South Point. An', uh, football is always driving through his head seems like. We didn't do that then. We did it in fun. An', uh, American league baseball was a big thing then. We had the old Davis Park. We played in there. It wasn't all burnt down, you know. It was before it burnt down. But, uh, we did it mostly there. We did have a tennis court. (His face brightens up.)

INTERVIEWER Did you play tennis?

HARRIS Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I love tennis. I played tennis. But, uh, I needed to work more so I couldn't any more-- so I gave it up (regret showing on his face).

INTERVIEWER So there really wasn't a lot for kids to do. It was just what they created--

HARRIS Mostly, mostly what you invented yourself. Yeah, you know, uh--Now if I ever talked to somebody about this-- a pee-gee game. You wouldn't know--you wouldn't know what I mean--but you'd get out, and you'd play pee-gee. I talked to my grandson about that (inaudible) so-- And we pitched a lot of horse shoes, volleyball, an' that was about--that was about the size of it.

INTERVIEWER Was there a big responsibility for the youngsters to take care of the family and--while the parents were working--take care of the home, or were you given freedom?

HARRIS You had to help out. I wasn't gonna even tell you this, but when I was about 12, 13, I babysat 7 children for a dollar a week (laugh). I was lucky. I was up getting a hair cut, an' I met one of those girls I used to tend to, and she came up an' hug me. So, uh, that was kinda special.

INTERVIEWER Oh, that's neat (pause). You must have worked awfully hard for that dollar.

HARRIS Not really. But you could take that dollar an' buy a new shirt and pants. An' you can take that dollar right now an' can't buy nothing with it. But the dollar you could buy nice T-shirt, nice pair or work pants. It's true.

INTERVIEWER What was the work like?

HARRIS Work. Well, the work was hard. Ya' didn't have too much light. Ya' had a light, but it wasn't much. It was dusty. It was a (pause)--well, it just wasn't very healthy.

INTERVIEWER Now, you worked at Imperial Mills.

HARRIS (Nods head yes)

INTERVIEWER Now from what I understand it was yarns and things like that that you manufactured.

HARRIS Yarns, yarns. We made yarns go--went into, uh, socks, T-shirts, things like that.

INTERVIEWER Was it sanitary?

HARRIS: It was sanitary as they could make it. You see, uh, you didn't have laws back then to protect the worker like that. It's kinda like ya' see that brown lung. Well, people that got brown lung probly got it way back many years ago when they didn't have any protection. Now they've got to clear that dust out of there now. Not too much chance of getting it. Back in those days you didn't wear anything to protect yer ears, you know. Now you got to wear those ear plugs. An', ya' know, you're in all that lint. Now you've got safety glasses that you wear to protect your eyes.

INTERVIEWER So there were no standards back then?

HARRIS Not too many. You just worked 8 hours. Nothing to cover yer eyes up, nothin' to, to protect yer ears, an' all that. It was, uh--it was pretty bad, but it was a way to make a living. That was the main thing--to make a living.

INTERVIEWER About how many people would you say worked in the mill?

HARRIS Then? You mean the one I worked in? I would say between 160--maybe, an' uh, 170. Maybe a bit more. See, over the years, uh, machines has replaced a lot of people, a lot of people. An', uh, back in those days, machines was not as safe, an' uh, a lotta people--some people got hurt. You had to have saw it to know what it is I'm really talking about.

INTERVIEWER And you worked in the mills for how long?

HARRIS 47 years one place.

INTERVIEWER And you retire next year?

HARRIS This year!

INTERVIEWER This year. Oh! (Laugh)

HARRIS I really hope so. The folks I work for, well, they appreciate it. They never bother me about my job or anything. I've been working there so long, and that's it.
(pause)

INTERVIEWER Back then were there a lot of blacks in the mills?

HARRIS No blacks.

INTERVIEWER No blacks?

HARRIS Not on the job. An' ya' know I feel bad about that 'cause, uh, the only job a black person had back then was (inaudible). An' I've always--I've always felt bad about that. I'm a, uh, born Southerner, but, uh, I've learned that black people are human beings the same as myself. An' my neighbor back there (points to house behind his) is a black person. Ain't nothin' in the world that man wouldn't do for me, or I wouldn't

do for him. An' the way they treated black people then was awful (disgust and remorse on his face). Couldn't go in the front of the cafeteria, had to go to the side window, couldn't go into the movie house. I guess you know about those things though. You read about them. An' you know what I'm telling you is the truth (with emphasis).

INTERVIEWER Did they live in the village with the other workers?

HARRIS No. I just wish you could've saw right up here where you came down (points toward road). There was shacks in there. Well, in those shacks is where they lived. They would come around and pick up yer newspapers an' put it up on their walls for protection from the cold ya' know. But, uh, the houses that we lived in, they was just as cold.

INTERVIEWER No insulation?

HARRIS: No insulation.

INTERVIEWER No insulation! (amazement) (pause) So the blacks were really segregated from the whites in the village and in the work place.

HARRIS Yeah. Couldn't use the same bathroom. Now I'm not tryin' to embarrass you or nothin', but I'm tryin' to--they couldn't use the same bathroom. If one worked--you had to go down to the warehouse (pause). Now I look back over that, an' I feel awful bad 'bout it, but nothin' I could do about it. I live my life like I usually do, and I have saw the Ku Klux Klan in

front of my house goin' out to what we call Smokey Holler.

INTERVIEWER Smokey Hollow?

HARRIS Yeah. That's where the colored people lived. It was right back here from my house (points). The reason they called it Smokey Holler--every morning you'd get up, and there'd be a fog there. An', uh, they'd call it Smokey Holler. I talked to some (blacks) since they left, an' they said it was the best thing that ever happened to them. But now, let's see, we got lots of black people working--do a job just as good as a white person.

INTERVIEWER They've finally begun to realize that, huh?

HARRIS Yeah. (Laughs) Now you go in the mill an' see 'em working all over the mill, an' white people an' black people get along fine. I work with two of 'em every day, an' I jus' think well of all of 'em. If it hadn't been for the laws the government passed, then you might go down to Mississippi and Alabama an' find the same thing. It may never change.

INTERVIEWER Was the--there anyone in town who was considered, uh, the town clown or the town character?

HARRIS Well, not really. You see, if you lived in a cotton mill back in those days, an' y'er parents worked in there, you got the name "lint head."

INTERVIEWER Got the name. . .

HARRIS Lint head.

INTERVIEWER Lint head (laugh)

HARRIS , So I come home with a lot of black eyes because I didn't like that, ya' know. An', uh, I looked through an' most of the people that was callin' us that, their parents worked in stores up town. Come to find out we made more money than they did. Because they lived up on the fenced streets on the other side of the tracks, I guess, they never checked it out, so they thought that they was better than us.

INTERVIEWER So within the big town, within the town of Belmont, the mill workers were treated differently than, say, the store owners, people like that?

HARRIS No, uh, they wasn't treated differently. It was just the fact that, uh--have you ever heard "the other side of the tracks"?

INTERVIEWER Yeah.

HARRIS You know, you live on this side of the tracks. They live on that side of the tracks. Actually, well, they was home owners, an', uh, they was better off. I mean, if we was livin' over in the Mill Village, we got lint head. But when I got older, I sat down an' I realized that--I says, "Look what we do for people. We make the sweater you're wearing. We make the socks you're wearing, the pants you're wearing, the shirt you're wearing. We make the shoe strings on your shoes, an' the carpets on your floor, upholstery in y'er car. . .

INTERVIEWER That puts a different light on the situation, doesn't it?

HARRIS Yes, it does. We even make bandages for hospitals, sewing thread to sew with--So you see, textiles are very important. They really are.

INTERVIEWER What would you say was the worst thing about working in the mills back then?

HARRIS No air conditioning. You'd go into work, say, in July. Ok. You'd go in there an' it's so hot you can hardly breathe. There was no circulation back in those days. Well, they claim that if anything came in, it would blow this into that, you know. Like you blow something like a greasy something into your fiber like that--so it was miserable from, ah, two o'clock or whatever hour you worked 'til you got out. An', uh, on top of that, remember I was tellin' ya' about the bathrooms. Some of them didn't have a shower or bath tub. So I built me a little out building. The water was cold, but I was always glad when summer time come so I could go over to the river (laugh). Yeah.

INTERVIEWER Was the, uh--was the company responsible for taking care of insurance an', uh, health costs, an' things like that?

HARRIS No. We had no hospitals back then. You got sick, you just got sick.

INTERVIEWER Was there no doctor there in the Mill Village?

HARRIS Well, we had doctors, but if you called, you had to pay 'em. Ya see, uh, now compare, uh--we had, uh--we didn't have any hospital insurance at all, an' uh,

compared to now--if I had to go to the hospital, I got plenty of it. But back in those days, you didn't have any hospital insurance, or any life insurance. But back then, you know--I think now it costs around \$3,000 to have a (inaudible). Back then it was \$150, \$200.

INTERVIEWER Was there a high mortality rate in the mills?

HARRIS Not really. Well, a lot of people got sewed--fingers cut off an' stuff like that. I can't remember, uh, if over a couple of people I knew getting killed in a mill. You know, jus' plum out killed. A lot of them is been hurt. Like I said the fingers cut off an' things like that. But they didn't stress safety too much back then like they do now. I think--if I ain't mistaken now--I may not be right about this. I think they did have insurance to cover the accidents. As far as health insurance, we didn't have any.