

NC CROSSROADS

A Publication of the North Carolina Humanities Council—Weaving Cultures and Communities

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ON THE DAY THE OLDEST TEXTILE MILL IN THE SOUTH CLOSED

Not once did I think of Connor Wray,
that good man, who took me home
after our shift at the Angle Plant,
talking all the way about the day's nothings.
I did not think of the accidental rhyme
of his name with "pay" and "day,"
those working twins,
and so by inattention did one good thing.

I did not think of the fights with my mother,
not fights, she was too calm to call them that,
but *her reason made me furious*.
My hours at the mill would buy a motorcycle.
"Yes," she said, "they would *or*
see you through a year at school,"
the soothing voice, the placid face
making me rage "Whose life is it anyway?"

I did not think of Buford Murphy
drawing his knife from its masking tape sheath
to saw the used cardboard cloth boxes
into squares the incinerator could digest.

I did not think of Ellis, the jazz fan,
in his hushpuppies and polyester slacks,
accounting for the swing shifts
in the cool of the front office.

I did not think of choir robes,
cocktail dresses, sheets, towels,
draperies, wash cloths, suit
lining, upholstery backing,
banners, flags or parachutes,

the fork lift, warp truck,
gear bath, reed hooks,
shuttles, spindles, whip
rollers, canteen, vending
machines, punch clock,
parking lot or water tower.

To be honest, I forgot the day
and now try to recall what I did
because I'd meant to mark it.

Probably I worked all morning,
as usual, without speaking,
pushing some words around,
silent as any weaver,
ears plugged, listening,
to my own head's noise.

Any given day, it's like that,
the morning slipping by, the afternoon,
a remembered tune repeating, becoming
annoying, some kid, far off,
shouting "Whose life is it anyway?"

—Michael Chitwood



"a sense of community"

Over in the 100 alley of the weave room, I could see two members of the Glade Hill Rescue Squad trying to discuss something in the loom roar. In the 400 alley, a soprano and a baritone from the Redwood Methodist Church Choir tended to troublesome sample runs. From where I sat on my wobbly scaffolding over the looms, I could see husband and wife, father and son, right fielders and their short stops, deer hunters, Ruritans and women of the Bethel Baptist Ladies Auxiliary—in short I could see dozens of kinds of allegiances, bonds of both blood and belief. And, I was about to see those bonds tested.

It was the summer of 1978, and I was spending my college break working in the maintenance department of the textile mill in my hometown. I'd been assigned to clean the tin shades and replace flickering fluorescent tubes in the lights above the thrashing Draper looms of the mill's weave rooms. It was a typical southern summer, drenched with humidity which was exaggerated by the water jets in the ceiling of the weave room that kept the yarn from raveling. There was talk of softball games, NASCAR wins, quarts of beans canned and one other thing—the thing that would strain the bonds that years of familiarity had fashioned—the union.

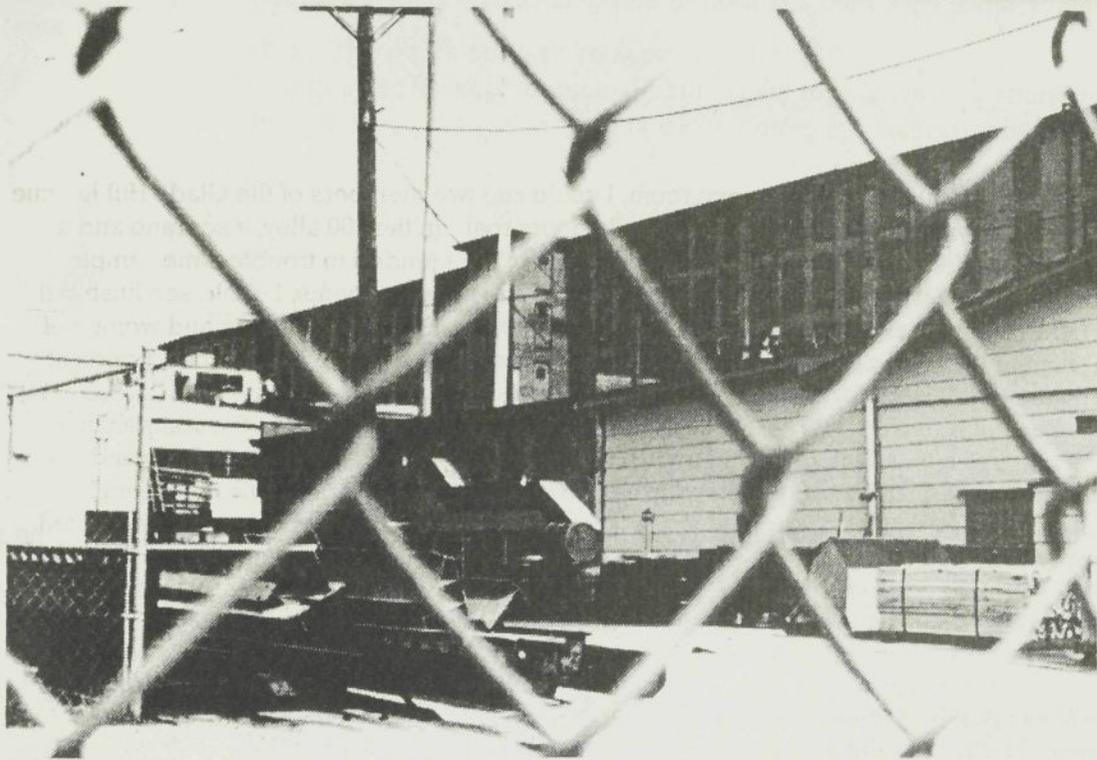
This particular summer the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (ACTWU) had targeted this mill for organization. From my catbird seat above the looms, I watched union advocates work the weave room, convincing some, alienating others, and I watched the management, who shared with the weave rooms' workers many of the allegiances of church and community, work against the union. As the "college boy," I was one of them and not one of them, with them and, literally, removed from them. At the time I understood little of what I was witnessing, but the images of their daily lives stayed with me.

Nearly 20 years later I was visiting with my father, who had retired from his position as the mill's personnel manager. I asked him to take me back into the mill. As we walked through the weave rooms and he shook hands and squeezed shoulders, leaned close to people's ears to shout through the loom roar, the images rushed back to me and I began to see them in the context of this vital community whose bonds had held up under the strain of social and economic conflict. The poems printed here, along with others which form a book called *The Weave Room* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), began flooding my daily writing. For three months, they poured; they troubled my sleep; they wouldn't leave me alone. Later, when I told a friend, with some embarrassment, that I'd written the first draft in about three months, she said "Gee, it only took you three months—and twenty years."

She was right. It had taken me nearly two decades to climb a different kind of scaffolding and get the perspective I needed to honor that community in all its complexity, humor, determination and humanity. What I'm after here is not to "take" the pictures of weavers, cloth doffers, fixers and even personnel managers, but, finally, to give them back.

—Michael Chitwood





MEETING

This is one of several prose poems in the book, and like the others is a monologue from one of the mill's many characters. The speaker recalls a particular incident in which an outsider runs head on into the solidarity that living and working in this community has created.

Called a big meeting for a Friday morning. Said we was to meet a man might be interested in buying our plant, man out of New York, or some such place, and when we all gathered, the supervisors and foremen, Mr. Grey introduces him.

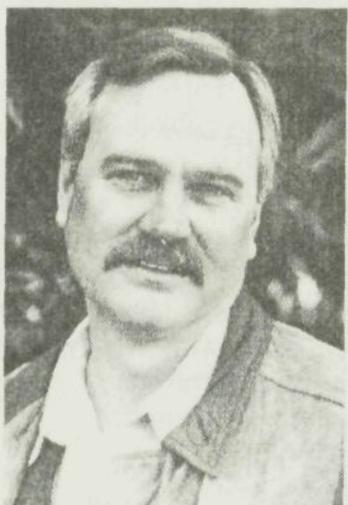
He starts with You People this and You People that, saying we ran a tight ship and he admires a tight ship and that's the only way to stay afloat, ha ha, in this industry today. He says he admires our "sense of community," sticking together and not needing a union to speak for us, and then he says he could help us get even more efficient and everybody would profit from that, wouldn't they?

And then Mason Herrick, the one who's always putting a snake in somebody's lunch box or sewing the grease rags together, says why don't we show him the weave room so he can see our operating procedures. Where Mason got words like that is a mystery to me.

So we troop to No. 2 what was running fancy curtains for a New York flipwrist. We start walking the alleys, Mason pointing to different looms like this man knows heddles from drop wires and then Mason leans to him and shouts something. The man looks like he wants to ask somebody else about what Mason said, but he can't figure out how so he shrugs and takes the plugs out of his ears.

Mason pulls us all aside one by one and shows us a note and when we came out of the weave room, it's all agreed. We start mouthing to each other like we're talking big but of course not saying a thing and the man gets ashy colored and we're mouthing "What's wrong?" and he takes off for the office like a turpented dog heading for home.

Naturally he don't buy the place, but the place, we all say, bought him and then some and what he heard was "a sense of community."



John Rosenthal

About the Author of "A Sense of Community"

Michael Chitwood was born and raised in the foothills of the Virginia Blue Ridge, and is now a free-lance writer living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *Poetry*, *Ohio Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Field* and numerous others. Ohio Review Books has published two books of his poetry — *Salt Works* (1992) and *Whet* (1995). His third book, *The Weave Room*, will be published by The University of Chicago Press in the Phoenix Series (Spring, 1998). A book of essays will also be published by Down Home Press in 1998.

He is a regular commentator for WUNC-FM and a columnist for *The Independent* in Durham, NC. His book reviews have appeared in newspapers and magazines including the *Greensboro News & Record*, *Charlotte Observer* and *Duke* magazine.

Chitwood is a graduate of Emory & Henry College (BA) and the University of Virginia (MFA).

"A Sense of Community" is the inaugural issue of *NC CROSSROADS*, a new publication of the North Carolina Humanities Council (NCHC). Now celebrating its twenty-fifth year of service to our state, NCHC is a non-profit foundation and state-based affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. NCHC's mission is to support public programs that address fundamental questions about who we as human beings are and how we can live together in the world we all share.

In 1997, *NC CROSSROADS* will explore the theme of "Democratic Vistas: Citizenship and Communities in the 21st Century." "Crossroads" evokes a wide range of meanings that are linked to human aspirations of belonging to and being connected with a place and people. A crossroads can be an intersection at which we must choose one path and place or another, or it can be a meeting place where different possibilities collide, conflict, compete, cooperate and realign. Always, we connect this place of intersection to the movement among past, present and future, assessing what to hold on to as we move on. We hope you enjoy this first issue of *NC CROSSROADS*.

For more information about NCHC and public humanities programs, write or call:



North Carolina Humanities Council
425 Spring Garden Street
Greensboro, NC 27701
910-334-5325

For more information on life in southern textile mills....

Non-Fiction Books

Byerly, Victoria Morris. *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls: Personal Histories of Womanhood and Poverty in the South*. Ithaca: ILR Press, 1986.

Clark, Daniel J. *Like Night and Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Glass, Brent D. *The Textile Industry in North Carolina: A History*. Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1992.

Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, LuAnn Jones, and Christopher B. Daly. *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987.

Hinson, Betty, editor. *From this Red Clay Hillside: Stories of Families from a North Carolina Cotton Mill Village*. Belmont, NC: Spindle Books, 1997.

Salmond, John A. *Gastonia, 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

Tullos, Allen. *Habits of Industry: White Culture and the Transformation of the Carolina Piedmont*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

Fiction Books

Lumpkin, Grace. *To Make My Bread*. New York: The Macaulay Company, 1932.

Secrest, Donald. *The Rat Becomes Light*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

Films

Norma Rae [videocassette]/ Twentieth Century Fox; Produced by Tamara Asseyev and Alex Rose; Directed by Martin Ritt. Farmington Hills, Michigan, 1982.

The Uprising of '34. Produced by George Stoney and Judith Helfand for the Research Consortium for the Southwide Textile Strike of 1934. Available through First Run/Icarus Films, New York, NY.

NC CROSSROADS

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On The Cover:

Poem from *The Weave Room* by Michael Chitwood, (University of Chicago Press, 1998). This poem is from the third, and final, section of the book. It's a section that brings the book into the present and reflects on what's been remembered, and what's been lost, in the nearly two decades since the action at the book's core. I have changed, the South has changed and textile communities have changed. But the best of those remembered tunes are worth repeating.

A WEAVER

This is one of several portrait poems in the book. This contrasts, I hope, the difference between the life of the person who is making the cloth and the lives of those who will use it. To my mind, the weaver's is in many ways saner, not driven by the whims of fashion and status.

Black warp, purple fill
or bride's white through white,
she watches for seconds.

She watches for broken ends.
She adjusts the whip roller
and jacks the speed.

She will have her break.
She will have her lunch,
her cigarette.

Black warp, purple fill cocktail
or bride's white through white,
she will never have such dresses
or their need.



LOOMS

The noise produced by two working weave rooms is deafening. That's why hearing protection is mandated in the mills. But the sound can be heard a good distance from the mill and becomes a kind of constant, staticky soundtrack for the lives of the people. And, because the mills run three shifts, someone's day is always ending, someone else's beginning.

Some dragging home from a card game,
some after leaving the hospital where they had sat in the dark beside a bed,
some near dawn, on the way to a cold creek
some on an early errand to take a dish to a dead aunt's house,
some driving a colicky baby around,
some standing just outside the shaking doors, watching the third-shift moon
grow pale,
some when an unpaid bill goes again unpaid,
some when an old one going or new one coming calls them out,
some who hope to hang a buck on the old swing set frame before
evening,
some squinting and guessing for the center line,
some looking to catch somebody red-handed,
some stalking a son or, worse yet, a daughter
and some not knowing what they seek when everyone else is sleeping
hear them singing,
how they fill up the day ending and beginning for miles.

The Story, A Dress and Some Sheets and How No Lies Were Told
These three poems are the story of a young woman who works in the weave room and finds herself pregnant and unmarried, which still carried a considerable stigma in the semi-rural mill towns of the late 1970s. Though she feels the strain of having violated the social norms (The Story), she finds that the mill's bonds are strong (A Dress and Some Sheets) and that the women in particular share an almost mystical sisterhood with her (How No Lies Were Told).

THE STORY

"You don't see young ones what
talk to they selves so much,"
the supervisor observes.
"Somebody got into her
pockets bad."

She told it to her
breakdowns, knocked-out
ends,
drop wires and whip rollers,
told it to warps and heddles,
her mouth and hands moving
together,
working the mistakes, the defects,
the ruined pattern.
And she would tell you, if you'd ask
or just sit still
in the canteen or the ladies room
or try to scream it to you over the
thrash of the looms.
But mostly she told it to herself,
and even she couldn't hear it,
but could feel the words buzzing
like hornets in her chest's angry nest.



HOW NO LIES WERE TOLD

Six months gone,
she started up
in the employee discount store,
at the seconds table,
a kind of singing, keen
like tin ripping in a big wind.
She made for No. 2, screaming,
"No more lies,
I don't want to hear no more lies."
She threw her earplugs in the sand
bucket,
went down the 300 alley
and squatted by a sample run.

How they knew,
so quickly and from all over,
they would not be able to say,
but the cloth room emptied,
the canteen, drawing-in.
Women came putting hands to ears,
pushing in the plugs,
volunteering to be deaf.

They came to her
and because they knew
there was nothing
she could hear
they squatted with her,
among those strands
the noise was making
come together.

A DRESS AND SOME SHEETS

In her third month,
she found them
in a bag with her name pinned on,
by her pocketbook in the locker room.
The dress, home-made with perfect
stitching
only one or two there could have
done,
and the sheets, 250 count, first run,
the best they made.
No other card
and no one would say
who or why
though she knew
it was from all of them
because they were hers
and she was theirs,
the best they made.

THE CHOIR

This poem shows one of the several kinds of bonds that existed in this close-knit community. The Wesley referred to is Charles Wesley, a famous Methodist hymn writer, and I hope the poem shows how interconnected all the parts of the employees' lives are.

They sing around a song,
warbly sixty-year-old altos,
nasal tenors, shallow bass
and those screeching sopranos.
What wondrous love is this?
They roil the stream
of Wesley's pen
the way the saved muddy
with baptism a crystal creek.
Their robes, which rolled
from their own shrill
air-jet looms,
glisten, no defects
in the sight of the Lord,
no seconds in this loft,
and this sound is true
as it is off. Twice
now this cloth
has made a joyful noise,
both times for a living.

UNION SUMMER

For and against,
behind backs, this said,
not that said.

Union talk splintered
soft ball teams,
congregations,

all that had been together
coming apart
"for the good of all.

How long will you use
up your lives
to make them rich?"

Them. Us.
Behind backs, this said
not that said.

Shop talk ruined
choir practice,
hymns stalled

when bass and tenor
couldn't harmonize
for worldly reason.

"Would you trade
one boss for two?
Pay dues and taxes?"

One for two,
for all,
this said, not that.

Their livings' room
grew raucous with looks.
The wedding wouldn't

take. But the living
with this said,
not that said, the vows

sworn at friends,
not friends, was
for better and worse.

SINGING THE "UNION SONG" FOR THE COMPANY MAN

It didn't matter that I'd seen
him waltz Mother around the
kitchen,
singing "Hey, hey, good-looking,
whatcha
got cooking," her batting at him
with the lid of the bean pot,
laughing, saying stop, meaning
don't. The pen's flew
from his pocket shield on the dip.

It didn't matter that he put me
on his back and carried both poles,
the stringer, the light and me
up the dark river bank.
My hands clasped at his throat
could feel "Amazing Grace"
as he hummed it.

It didn't matter that he said "Stop"
and meant it. I'd get him going,
devil him, with that song,
"Look for the Union label,"
trying out the Political Science
I was learning on his tab.
He suffered my innocence,
knowing, I guess, how a tune
can turn, worm in, begin to gnaw.

WINDOWS

Because they let in
light that would fade the cloth
and, in summer, heat
that would fray the yarn,
they were sealed.
But the newer bricks show
clearly where they had been.

The one I can see through
is in this Friday envelope,
my name cloudy under cellophane.
Behind "Pay to the Order of" I live
and these solid red numbers
show clearly where I've been.

Union and Union Summer

The irony of attempted unionization in a community already tightly formed was that the thing that was supposed to bring people together, the union, caused much discord. These two poems show some of the tensions as they are felt along the myriad connections within the weave room. The vows of this abortive wedding were sometimes heated and profane.

UNION

What I remember of holding my father's hand is that I felt what wasn't as much as what was. Not a single finger had been left whole by his hours at Bald Knob Furniture. And I can not forget the story the men, his friends, on Needmore Hill told of his first time, at the table saw, only 20, but moving up, no longer tailing the rip saws, folks already talking of his being made foreman. His left index slipped in, and prong, wrong sound of the saw finding something that wasn't wood.

When people looked around, he was sitting, legs spread, in the sawdust his morning had made, clutching a piece of himself so that they had to pry his fingers open to take it from him. And soon after he started talking union.

Never made foreman. When a heart attack found him still at the table saw, the boss said they wouldn't be able to hold his job.

So that's what union talk gets you and when the ACTWU man came sniffing around our softball games like he couldn't see the company name stitched to all our backs, I told him union was just a word and words don't come by with a dish when someone's mother dies and come Sunday he'd find this same gang in the pews at Redwood Methodist and Calvary Baptist and that, my friend, was a blood bond and what a union was good for was getting people fired.

But I began to see the little blue cards around the weave room, men tucking them in shirt pockets, women slipping them into purses. If enough were signed, there'd be no need to vote.

Then the ACTWU started standing outside the gate with leaflets and lettered jackets asking us to choose up teams. More than one who dropped the leaflet when the boss was looking signed the card when he wasn't.

"Did they think Greenville wouldn't notice," I said in the canteen. "New York didn't give a rat's ass whether the cloth came from Angle or Yokohama."

Some said that was right, but others said they wanted more, better, and that I was an ass kisser, looking to make supervisor.

But for or against, we didn't expect what happened. The ties from Greenville coming down the alleys in both weave rooms, shutting off the looms. How many times had we heard it would be cheaper to replace a whole shift than shut off the looms? In both rooms, they were shutting off now, and it was done one at a time, not easy by throwing the main switch, but slow so we would get the full effect.

Then we were invited to the slasher room where they'd cleared out the warp racks and set up tables, covered in good linen. They'd brought in barbecue and tubs of sodas.

Mr. Goldman from Greenville had a few words about our good work, lack of lost-time accidents, and we were told to help our selves, just help our selves. And we did, but not to praise or pig but to that sound, that quiet of the looms not running, not what was there, but what wasn't.



Just as a muscle is most visible when under strain, the stresses of the effort to unionize the mill revealed the many strong bonds in this textile community. Some snapped under the pressure, but most did not. The union, finally, was not able to get enough votes to organize the plant. During the buyouts of the 1980s, the mill's parent company was bought and then the buying company was taken over. The plant, under a new name, is still in operation and a goodly number of the employees I knew 20 years ago are still there. Whether to labor unions or high-rolling corporations, they seem to have been saying the same thing for the last two decades—you will never offer us anything stronger than the bond of our shared lives. What you can still hear in the roar of the looms is "a sense of community."

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