

WORKING IN TOBACCO

AN ORAL HISTORY OF DURHAM'S
TOBACCO FACTORY WORKERS

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"Oh, honey, I know you don't know what hard work is!"

*Viola Bond,
Retired tobacco worker*



Liggett & Myers, Shift change on Morgan Street, ca. 1930
Courtesy, Durham County Public Library

FOREWARD

“DURHAM’S TOBACCO FACTORY HISTORY: LESSONS LEARNED”

Dolores Janiewski, Ph.D., delivered the following lecture on November 30, 1987 at the North Carolina Tobacco Museum in Durham, North Carolina.

Today we meet to hear the results of a project in oral history that sought to uncover the history of Durham’s tobacco workers. We are after the history of thousands of people but many of those people are no longer here to be interviewed. Oral history can rely only on the survivors. We interview the people who have lived long enough to be able to talk with us. There are many parts of the truth that are not accessible any more but we do the best we can do. History cannot ever report the absolute truth but it can come as close as possible to it.

The history of tobacco in the South is as old as the South. I’ll begin with the history of tobacco workers before the period that oral history can

reach. Indeed, I’ll begin before there was a Durham or any tobacco workers here. Jamestown was founded in the early 1600’s as a tobacco plantation. The first slaves were brought into North America to work in the tobacco fields of the South. The tobacco factories built in the years before the Civil War were the beginnings of industrialization in the South. The tobacco industry is the crucible of much of what we think of as distinctly Southern in the United States.

We have only a limited amount of information on the first tobacco workers in the South, those slaves who worked in the fields and, later, in the early tobacco factories before the Civil War. We know there were 5,000 slaves working in factories, most of them males and most in tobacco factories. We know that women were beginning to work in these factories in small numbers. By 1820, we think that there were 200 females in tobacco factories. Most of these were black women who were probably slaves.

By the Civil War, there are indications of 4,000 workers, mostly black and slave, in the tobacco factories. By 1850, we know that there were a few white women beginning to work in these same factories. The cotton boom was on and it was cheaper to hire white women than to use male slaves who were valuable in the fields.

Thus, by the 1850's, there was a labor force in the tobacco factories that was largely black, mainly male, with some females. There was also the start of white males entering the factories. So there was already a relatively complicated pattern of labor in the tobacco industry. We don't know a great deal about the conditions in these factories but it was almost certainly a segregated labor force.

The tobacco industry that emerged after the Civil War had a labor force composed of two racial groups and both sexes. This was the pattern that Durham inherited in its tobacco factories. The industry in Durham started in the 1850's but did not really take off until the 1860's and 1870's as the Dukes and Julian Shakespeare Carr came into

Durham. Carr became well-known as president of the Bull Durham Tobacco Company.

Black people were employed in Durham mainly in the leaf departments of the factories, preparing the leaf by taking out the stem. This was the dustiest and the most labor-intensive part of the operation. In the 1880's, with the introduction of machinery into the factories, whites were hired to work in the cigarette making department, a relatively cleaner operation. Thus, Durham had a segregated labor force in tobacco from the earliest years. Whites were hired to do the mechanized part or the supervision; blacks were usually working in the hand labor part of the factory.

Wages in the early tobacco industry were differentiated by race as well as by sex. There was a relatively elaborate hierarchy in the industry, with different conditions of work in the different departments. White men had the most important roles and the best-paid jobs. Black workers were the largest number of workers but had the lowest-paying jobs. There were an increasing number of

women entering the industry, especially black women taking on the lower-paid leaf department jobs.

Those men who controlled the tobacco industry and shaped the conditions of workers in Durham were not themselves always aware of the conditions of workers. When James B. Duke was asked in 1903 how many workers were employed in his factories, he answered, "Oh, 15,000 or 20,000 or 30,000." He was involved in high finance in his new home in the North and was not aware of the conditions of his employees.

With the beginning of the Twentieth Century, we have an increasing amount of information about the conditions of work in the tobacco industry. These sources of information are actual interviews with workers, some written records and the words of people still alive who remember this period.

In the early Twentieth Century, working conditions in the tobacco industry were still

complicated, depending upon the worker's race and sex. If you were black, you were still probably working in the leaf department, stemming and processing the leaf, especially if you were a woman. You probably had children working beside you to help because you got paid by how much leaf you could process. These children were usually younger relatives and were generally not on the payroll, especially after the federal Child Labor Law was passed. These children would hide when the inspector came through, so there is no good information on how many children actually worked in the factories.

Black men were often working in what were called "bull gangs" doing a lot of heavy labor, mainly carrying the heavy hogsheads of tobacco or working in the flavoring area. They worked in the hottest and dirtiest part of the whole process. White women mainly ran the cigarette-packing machines. White men ran the cigarette-making machines, repaired machinery or worked as supervisors in other departments. Wages paralleled this hierarchy of jobs.

By the 1930's, the record becomes richer because tobacco workers began to be interviewed by people they trusted. Oral history flourished in the 1930's climate of interest in the common people. Oral history involves the interaction between two people. Who these two people are, how much they have in common and the quality of their relationship will affect what the oral historian is told. People will tell you what you deserve to hear. They won't always tell you everything they might think about a subject. No one person can get at the whole truth.

In the 1930's, Charles S. Johnson, an important black sociologist, reported on the wages of workers in Durham's tobacco industry. He reported that white male workers were earning about \$726 per year on the average in 1935. White women earned approximately \$646 annually. Black men earned \$543 per year while black women were earning only \$430 annually. The average family at that time needed about \$1,000 to \$1,500 annually to support its members comfortably. As a black tobacco worker, you had only about 1/3 to 1/2 of what was necessary to support a family. There was pressure

to have more than one member of a black family in the labor force and children were put to work as soon as possible.

There was a high percentage of women working in Durham in the 1930's and a relatively high percentage of married women working going back to the earlier part of the century. In the 1920's, 42 percent of the women who worked in the industry were married. By 1930, this percentage was 60 percent and in 1940, it was 67 percent. Many women had double jobs — working in the factory by day and caring for their families at night. Many women worked until midnight or later at home and then got up at five a.m. to go into the factory for a full day. Many women never got a full night's sleep. Some black women earned around \$4 per week doing this. It is amazing how many survived doing all this hard work. These were quite amazing, strong people who worked so hard, kept on going, and did not give in.

Women, both white and black, had hard lives. In almost every circumstance, however, the situation of black workers was harder and more

difficult. In the factory, foremen were more likely to make sexual advances to black women or withhold titles of respect like Miss or Mrs. when talking to them. Blacks were not allowed to use the cafeteria but had to eat lunch in the streets. White women wore white uniforms and black women wore colored uniforms. White women could wash up before leaving work while blacks had to walk home wearing the dust of the factory on their clothes. There was racial harrassment, name-calling and fights.

At the same time, in the 1930's, there was increasing pressure on the workers to work harder and faster. The Great Depression enhanced the power of the employers in Durham. They could always threaten to hire someone else to do a job.

Given this situation, it is easy to see how the tobacco unions began winning support in Durham in the 1930's. But unions also faced obstacles in organizing the Durham workers. Tobacco workers were divided racially both in the factory and in their neighborhoods. White workers could still take minimal comfort in having a group (blacks)

over whom they could feel superior socially. This was a major problem facing the labor movement. But the unions succeeded by tapping the motivation that existed in the factories to improve working conditions and provide workers with some control over their futures.

Unions were also aided by a "culture of resistance" that already existed in the tobacco factories. Tobacco workers had always resisted mistreatment or injustice in individual and personal ways. They stood up, talked back or threatened supervisors who were abusive to them. Faster workers would carry others along who weren't as fast or were vulnerable to criticism from foremen. Occasionally, there were whites who supported or sympathized with black workers although they faced abuse from other whites in the factory.

Just as crucially, in the 1930's, for a brief period, the federal government supported union organizing. Federal protection for the right to organize began in 1933 with the National Industrial Recovery Act and continued with the Wagner Act

in 1935. These steps shifted the balance of power at the local level between workers and employers and offered some protection to the efforts of union organizers.

The same day in July 1933 that the NIRA was signed in Washington, D.C., an organizer from the Tobacco Workers International Union arrived in Durham to meet with a group of white workers from Liggett & Myers. By August of 1933, white workers were pressing for a mass meeting but the TWIU organizer cautioned the whites against going it alone. He argued that the union must organize the majority of workers who were black to be successful. But some white union sympathizers opposed black involvement. They resisted union proposals to give priority to the fight for a minimum wage, believing that it would benefit blacks more than whites.

These deeply held beliefs retarded the union drive. By 1934, two white TWIU locals had been formed at Liggett & Myers and at American Tobacco, but there was little successful outreach to black workers. In early 1934, a separate black

union, Local 194, was organized among the stemmers at L & M. Attracting 3,000 members, Local 194 became the largest local union in Durham within six months. Black workers showed they were interested and could organize. Then came a setback. In the fall of 1934, a failed textile workers' strike discouraged black faith in the labor movement. Membership declined to less than fifty, but a core of devoted members kept the black union going.

Meanwhile, the white union locals began to make gains. By 1935, Local 176 signed the first collective bargaining agreement in Durham history; in 1936, Local 183 also had secured a contract at American. But the black locals, hampered by the seasonal nature of work in the stemmery department, found it tough going. Nevertheless, a breakaway black local at L & M, Local 208, got a contract by 1937. Its members pressed the TWIU for black organizers in Durham, but were unsuccessful in changing the predominance accorded whites by the union leadership.

In 1939, the two segregated unions at L & M, Locals 176 and 208, pulled off a successful strike, the first in Durham's history, without the support of the national union leadership. The new contract signed with L & M in 1939 established the union on a relatively solid basis in Durham. However, the blacks in Local 194, unable to participate in the strike, were not satisfied with the subordinate role they played. In 1939 and 1940, at the TWIU conventions, Durham locals and other Southern workers successfully pressed for more democracy in the TWIU. Blacks and Southerners assumed some leadership positions in the national union after ousting the old leaders. Black union activists began to be involved in political affairs and civil rights activities locally and nationally as Local 194 and the black locals at American achieved contracts.

Despite the growing influence of organized tobacco workers in local affairs, the situation for blacks in the unions and in the factories was still second-rate. In the 1950's the stemmery at L & M closed and the black workers lost jobs

disproportionately. Segregation still ruled in the factories while, tensions between civil rights advocates and segregationists surfaced within the tobacco locals.

When the international union forced the merger of the black and white Durham locals in the 1960's, the black workers in Local 208 fought unsuccessfully to keep their independent organization, which had become a vehicle for civil rights and labor gains.

The union movement represented a mixture of achievement and failure, due in part to the divisions among the workers. Overall, despite the anti-labor climate throughout the union-building period, the real tensions between black and white workers, and the weaknesses of the national union, workers' organizations were formed in Durham. Cooperative efforts for democracy and improved working conditions succeeded. However, the ultimate factor in the weakening of the union movement in Durham was the transformation of the economy from manufacturing to service jobs,

starting in the 1940's. In this transformation, the situation in Durham paralleled the changes occurring throughout the United States.

In assessing the lessons learned in studying the union organizing movement in Durham, one sees a mixed picture of success and failure. Efforts by workers were not entirely successful. Workers did gain some victories in the factory, in the community, and in city-wide politics. There was a sense of power and pride in surviving and in improving their own lives and those of their children. These achievements deserve attention, respect and celebration.

The anti-labor climate within North Carolina and the nation, the obstacles to organizing presented by their employers, and the internal divisions by race and sex within the working class held back the labor movement in Durham. Joining the efforts of the workers' rights, civil rights, and women's rights movements was necessary to build

a strong labor movement. However, the movements remained separate from each other instead of cooperating effectively. To succeed in that effort is one challenge Durham's tobacco workers pass on to us.

Our problems were not invented yesterday, nor will their solutions be invented tomorrow, as the history of Durham's tobacco workers makes clear. There have been people working at our nagging problems for a long time, and it would be a shame to let their wisdom vanish with them. We can all learn from the past and the people who dealt with the same problems we deal with today. Despite the heavy labor and the constant exertion, the ability of Durham's tobacco workers to keep on going can be an inspiration to all of us. These people triumphed over adversity. If we go to work with the same kind of will and spirit that is revealed in their testimony to us, we can all overcome the problems that face us.

Oral history can serve as a method of recapturing the history of people who don't leave written records but have important things to teach. Oral history also bridges some of the social divisions that have divided and weakened the labor movement. We can all learn how the past looked from a different viewpoint, from people who have different concerns from ours. A vast, real history of Durham lies in the memories of its residents, and this history deserves to be told and written.

Dolores Janiewski received her Ph.D. from Duke University in 1979 and is author of Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender and Class in a New South Community (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1985). She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of History at Mt. Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts.



“Regardless of how you look at it, back in the late thirties and early forties, indirectly and directly, everybody that lived in this part of North Carolina made their money from tobacco.”

James P. Morgan, retired tobacco worker

Much of Durham’s history lies in the experiences of thousands of workers who were employed in the city’s many tobacco factories during the past century. The following is an attempt to uncover that hidden history through interviews with some of Durham’s retired tobacco factory workers.

These interviews were conducted during the Fall of 1987 by participants in an oral history seminar in the History Department at North Carolina Central University. The participants were Carrie McNair, Edna Ballard, Joyce Mitchell, Cheryl Medlock, J. B. Weeks, Alison Jones, Felix Armfield, Margaret Nelson, Mignon Schooler, Darin Stinsen and Frederick Royster.

Mrs. Annie Foster Jones

I was born in 1903 near Wendell, North Carolina. I came to Durham in 1928 and worked at American Tobacco from 1928 to 1948 as a stemmer and dropleaf picker.

We stemmed on that leaf for a while and then they put us on the 'chine working by the hour. At first we worked for, I think it was, eighteen cents an hour. At that time if we made nine dollars a week, that was nice. Then when we got to the point where we'd make twenty-four dollars a week, that was grand.

You worked on the 'chine with five on the table and one back there in the hole. Up there on the slide where they put the tobacco at, there was three feeders and two spreaders. (There were) eleven on that machine.

I liked both of (those jobs) 'cause I was getting a little pay every week. You know, on the farm, sometimes you didn't clear nothing; it was just a gamblin' life.

Old man (supervisor) K___, he was just as mean as he could be. (He would) jump from 'chine to 'chine, drunk 'bout all the time. He was very evil to some of the people. There was five women up there he didn't like (and) he'd cuss 'em out (and) scold 'em. (He) told one she won't no good for a part of lye soap; told another he was gonna work her 'til her tongue fall out. And I told my foreman, I said, "If Mr. K___ ever come up and talk to me like he talk to the other girls, this is one job he can have. This ain't no slavery time."

Old man K___ didn't want you to talk. (He) come and said to me one day, "You don't ever smile." I said, "Well, if I be smiling and grinnin', you'd be up here trying to lay me off." People on the 'chine said, "You talked to him like that?" I said, "He ain't nothin' but a white man and I'm a Negro."



Annie Foster Jones

Mrs. Cora Office

I was born in 1900. I was about twenty years old and married when I went to Liggett & Myers.

When I first went to Liggett & Myers, they put me on the stemming machine. I fed (tobacco into) the machine. I liked it pretty good. I'll tell you one thing — you had to run a thousand stems an hour. You got a register on your machine. Every time you ran a thousand, the man came and checked with you and he'd lay you out because you didn't run a thousand (fast enough). When I got out of the factory, I was wet to the hem of my dress. But I made it. I was a lot younger than I am now.

Mr. Daniel Johnson

I was born on July 4, 1901. I went to work at American Tobacco in 1910 when I was nine years old. I started at packing bull tobacco onto the belts and stayed at that for about seven years. Then I went to sweeping the cutting machines and stayed at that until I retired in 1964.

Mrs. Dora Miller

I was born January 27, 1906 in Apex, North Carolina. I moved to Durham in January, 1925 and went to work at Liggett & Myers.

When I first went to work (at Liggett & Myers), I worked on the fourth floor with the "butting machines"; they cut the butts off the tobacco on the conveyor belt. (Another) lady cut the butts off at that time but later I was promoted to cutting butts myself. I always pulled up on the job anywhere I worked. I always happened to be lucky enough to get higher pay.

At that time we wasn't making but twenty cents an hour. We didn't get anymore than that until 1933 after Roosevelt. Roosevelt came in and I got a promotion to twenty-five cents an hour. We worked from eight to nine hours a day and five hours on Saturday. After Roosevelt, they cut the hours back to eight hours and raised our pay.

The union started in 1934 and the first union was set up by myself and an old man named Mr. Atwater who belonged to St. Mark's Church. Him and myself wrote up people for the union. This was just blacks, 'cause the white people had their own union. All the black tobacco workers was in together in the beginning.



Dora Miller and Asia Dee Lloyd, granddaughter

We started on a Saturday, writing up people for the union; later in the day, we called in another lady to help us out. She was named Daisy Jones and she helped us write people up for the union at the old Wonderland Theatre. That's where we sat in fold-up chairs all day long. (The union) paid us twenty-five cents an hour to write people up.

After being in the union for a while, I was elected as a shop steward which is one of the highest (offices). (I went) to the main office (of the factory) to ask for agreements for the whole entire union. I have been to Richmond, Virginia; Rochester, New York; Wilson; Williamston; Danville, Virginia; all those different places. At that time the union was paying for it and we was making twenty-five dollars a day, which was money. They gave us that and transportation.

We had some tight foremen (in the factory). My first foreman was (called) "One-eye" because he had but one eye. He cussed you. He'd get on top of the machine and lookdown and cuss everybody if it wasn't going like he wanted it to. There was quite a lot of prejudice when we first went (to the factory) and the union pulled it out, it pulled it out.

When I became a (union) committeeman, they seemed to (show me) a little inferiority, me being a woman, but I stood up. I've always been a person to stand up and I stood up for my rights. They seen I meant what I said and they had to recognize me. They recognized me as "Mrs. Jones." I was a Jones then. At that time it was a rare thing for a white man to say, but they did because they knew I was the only woman (union official) in the plant and they did respect me that much.

I worked at Liggett & Myers around thirty-eight years. They terminated the department that I worked in. I draw a little something every month but I don't draw the full retirement pay. Some of the people that wasn't eliminated, they draw full pay.

Mr. Richard James

I was born in South Carolina on November 29, 1911. I worked at American Tobacco Company from 1939 to 1976.

When the war broke out in 1941, I got a job downstairs stripping tobacco. I would go to work at twelve midnight and work until seven a.m.. And then at seven, I would transfer to another job and work on that job until twelve (noon). Then, because of the shortage of men in seasonal, we would go over to seasonal and work 'til four p.m.. After sixteen hours, I could go home. For 1941 and part of 1942 we did that during the seasonal part of the operation.

It was so construed with the War Labor Board that we couldn't get any increase in wages. They were paying fifty-two cents an hour. We couldn't get any raise whatsoever; we went on strike in 1944. First we went on strike for a union shop and then our wages were frozen by the War Labor Board. We stayed on strike three weeks in February. It was cold! At that time I was secretary of the union so I was very much involved.

At that point (1945), there were certain jobs that blacks did and certain jobs that whites did. In the manufacture of cigarettes, the whites had all the jobs, such as (machine) operators. We were not permitted to go on those types of jobs — skilled jobs — which paid more. I worked in the leaf department, that was mostly black. The only whites that worked in the leaf department were foremen, mechanics and truck drivers. We were not permitted to get on those jobs. We worked hard to try and get a change over and I even wrote the first letter on discrimination (in hiring) policies at American Tobacco Company in about 1948.

Then finally, I believe it was probably about 1965, they said they were going to allow blacks to become truck drivers. I put my application in for it and management accepted. So I became the first Negro truck driver in Durham. But I frankly told management, "Now, you're not doing but one thing. You're just moving the line one step."

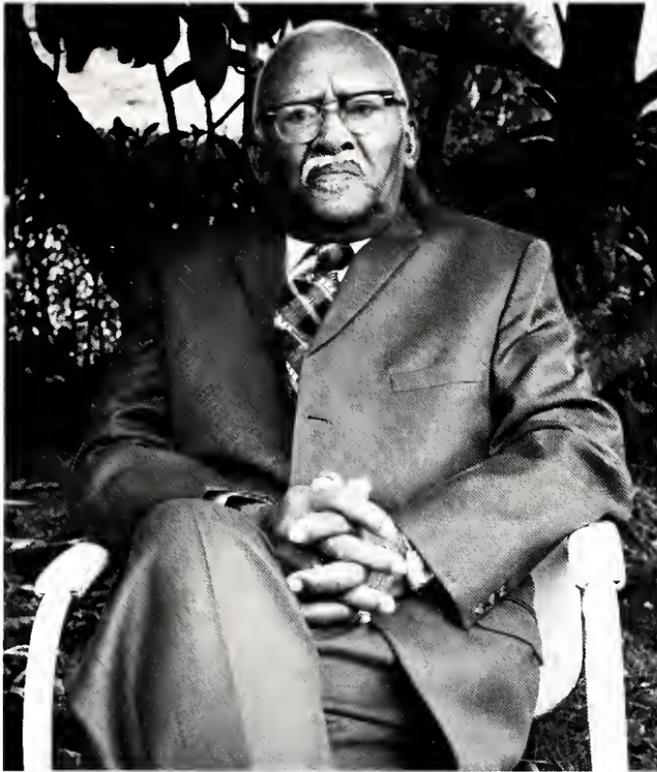
Mr. Horace Higgins

I was born on December 12, 1909 in Greenwood, South Carolina. I came to Durham in 1926 and worked at Liggett & Myers from 1926 until 1975.

My daddy died when I was about fifteen yers old and I had to go for myself. I took care of myself and my mother from about fifteen years up. That's why I didn't get too much schooling but I got a lot of experience. I reckon I knew about every man (at Liggett & Myers) and they knew me. I got along with 'em good. I always had one of the top jobs after I started out. I didn't get any further than (machine) operator. I didn't ever get to be a foreman or anything. I was a mechnic and a head operator.

(Working) conditions was bad when I first went there. About 1935-1936, things started gettin' better (because) we had a strike there and got a union and then we got along pretty good.

If it hadn't been for Liggett & Myers and American Tobacco Company at the time, I say, it wouldn't have been much of a Durham. From 1945 on, Liggett & Myers paid good wages, and American (too). You could get a good living after the changeover; colored folks got good jobs, got to be foremen. All that kind of stuff come to be after the union had the strike; before then, you didn't have it.



Horace Higgins

Liggett & Myers was one of the better places for jobs around from the time I worked there. There's a lot of children I know now whose parents worked at Liggett & Myers and they gave (the children) an education. Tobacco work was the biggest manufacturing in Durham. When I worked at Liggett and Myers in 1935, they had about three thousand employees.

When first went there, in the building where I worked, folks were getting fifteen to twenty cents an hour, maybe getting twenty-five cents an hour. When I retired, I was making four dollars an hour. That same job I retired on was making 'bout twelve or thirteen dollars an hour about two years ago. It jumped up like that.

That's what makes a company go down — the employees try to get all the money. They ain't goin' to stand for that. They'll shut down, close down if they don't get a profit out of it. But people don't see that. If you had to pay your employees all your money, you wouldn't do that. That's what happened at Liggett & Myers.

Liggett & Myers started off making good cigarettes. After everything speeded up, (when) they started puttin' in fast machines,

that's when they're messin' up. They used to age tobacco from six, seven, to eight years before they even bothered. But the last fifteen to twenty years, they aged tobacco one year and some of it didn't get aged. They started to age it with machines and it looks like they lost it. People used to age tobacco by hanging it. They had old men who put that tobacco in a machine and (could) tell when it was right in the storage house. I knew a lot of men, of course all of them are (now) dead, who did that. My brother, he did it.

Mrs. Lottie Bell Covington

I was born in 1911 in Richmond County, North Carolina. I came here (to Durham) in August 1929. In January I started to work to the Venable (Tobacco Company). I'd hand the tobacco to someone who put it on a stick. I worked at that job the space of two years. (Later) I worked at American shakin' tobacco and puttin' it on a belt. There'd be two women to shake tobacco and put it on the belt. Do that all day long 'til knockin' off time. Worked there part of two seasons and went to Liggett & Myers. That's where I got my Social Security card.



Lottie Bell Covington

I stemmed tobacco at Liggett & Myers. I hung tobacco and shook tobacco and graded tobacco practically twelve years. When you stem, you break that stem about half-way and pull it (out); that's stemmin'. When you're strippin', you pull it all the way out, like that. People when they used to work at Liggett & Myers, had to stem; you couldn't strip. They'd sent you home for strippin'. At them other local factories, I was strippin'.

I worked at Central Leaf over there on Angier Avenue where they're remodeling that old place. I worked there sixteen years.

I weren't retired from nowhere; I just got old enough to get my little scratch. I wish I could have stayed at Liggett & Meyers 'til I retired.

Mrs. Roxie McCullough

I was born June 6, 1909 in Robeson County. I came to Durham in 1921. We moved for the better schools but the Depression set in and I didn't get very much schooling.

The (Tobacco Workers') union was very helpful. The union made our work a little better. Before they had the union, we just took anything. We took what we could get. The union helped get the workers a place to sit, got a cafeteria for us to eat, got pay raises.

Back then, the foremen, they were all white and we were all black. The white people were in another part (in the factory). Stemming was dirty, dusty, sweaty and it paid way down lower than what whites got.



Roxie McCullough

We had (union) committees that looked out for any situation that seemed like it was unfair. If a person had seniority, he had to be recognized first. If it wasn't done, our committee would go in to talk about it.

In one of the cases, when I was weighing hogsheads (of tobacco), the foreman was a white man and was acting a little short-patience. So, I told one of our committee and she went right on it the same day and talked to somebody about it. That was eliminated at once; so I didn't have any more trouble with that.

They began to raise our wages. That was another thing the union committee was called on for, was to get our wages up and our working conditions better. They improved everything. We went from eighteen cents an hour through the years up to about seventy dollars a week by the time they cut us off. At that time if you didn't have a good education, that was the greatest paying job in Durham.

Mr. William Preston (Pratt) Edwards

I was born on June 24, 1912 in Durham. I started working when I was 'bout twenty-six or twenty-seven. I was actually older than what they was hiring but I had good hands and they hired me on that account. American Tobacco was my first and only job. I never worked anyplace but there.

I was hired as a machine hand, a "tie boy", to tie Bull Durham Tobacco. That was a smoking tobacco, not cigarettes. It was Depression time and everybody bought Bull Durham and rolled their own cigarettes. The market was open for it. Everybody was buying Bull Durham at five cents a bag. That's what they hired me for. Business picked up and they needed extra help.



William Preston (Pratt) Edwards

As soon as the Depression lifted off, everybody went to ready-made cigarettes and than that caused the smoking tobacco department to shut down. The company moved that to Richmond, Virginia.

They moved me into the cigarette department. The cigarette department was white only (but) they had a black man to clean up. At that time, everybody was chewing tobacco and they had these big iron cuspidors that you spit into. That's what I had to do — take up these cuspidors, wash them out, put out clean ones, clean up around the floor where they were at, clean up the bathrooms. Anything they didn't want to do, that's what I had to do.

I was a union official, see. That made my position very much different from the average employee. Nobody bothered with me. The union came in 1942. We were organized in a separate all-black union. It was a good experience for us. It taught us to fight for what you get, you see. If we had been in there with (the white union), we'd been getting the crumbs that fell on the floor.

Whatever the company gave the white union, we tried to get (too). It never did work. The company just wouldn't pay. They'd give the white man six cents and the black man three cents. Then when they got to bringing it up, they wouldn't give it to you across the board. They'd give it on a percentage basis. OK, who do you think got the money then? The more you were making, the more you got. I was angry all the time.

Mrs. Viola Bond

I was born December 4, 1916. I started work in 1935 at Liggett & Myers. I worked there five to six years in the green season and then went to work at American.

The job was dangerous, you know, but I wasn't thinking about that. I had three kids to raise and my husband had gone off and got killed. I didn't think about the dangerous part of it. I knew I had to work 'cause I had those three kids and they had to eat and they had to sleep and had to wear clothes.

Sometimes I worked sixteen hours a day. You could if you had to. I'd go to Liggett & Myers and make eight hours and then go to American and make eight more and get off at two a.m. in the night. Oh yeah, honey, if you had to do it, I guarantee, you did it. Boy, it was really rough.

I used to come (home) and wash diapers from the time I got in at two a.m. until three-thirty a.m. when I got to lay down on the bed. Oh, honey, I know you don't know what hard work is!



Viola Bond

Mrs. Margaret Turner

I was born January 4, 1918 in Lee County. I came to Durham at the age of ten. The American Tobacco Company is where I worked for thirty-eight years.

When I went to the American Tobacco Company as a young woman, I had children and my husband had passed. I had children I wanted to educate and I didn't want them to come through what I had been through. And during that time, I started working with the NAACP. (Then) they had a mark on me (and) they'd tell the others, "Don't say anything to her because she'll get you in trouble."

I was always a trouble-maker. That was my thing — to be a trouble-maker and try to get things better for us, which I did.

I worked faithfully with the NAACP. A few years ago, I put in a suit against the company for discriminatory practices which they were handing out to the black people. I was the only woman plaintiff in the bunch; out of all the women that were there, I was the only one that stood up.

The type of jobs that I had at that time was "black jobs", as they called them; (for me) that was cleaning. During that time, the working conditions was very bad for the blacks. They didn't pay us like they did the whites 'cause we didn't do the kind of jobs that whites did. What they hired us for was the dirty work, not (work) in the cigarette department but in the leaf department where everything was dirty. We didn't have any rights. The only right we had was to go and work.



Margaret Turner

I worked in the cigarette department. I was a sweeper and swept the floor and brushed the machines off until time (came) to integrate the plant. So one day I was packing cigarette cases and a union man came through and asked, "How long you been doin' that?" I said, "All morning." He said, "Don't be doin' it when I come back." Then he went into the office and the supervisor came out and called me into the office and asked me did I want to train for the (cigarette) catching machines. I said, "I thought you would never ask. I been waitin' for it."

He chose a lady to train me. I knew just about as much as she did. Workin' around those machines, I had observed and I had learned a lot. I saw how they done the work and I said, "Shucks, that'll be easy." And it was. In three days, they turned me loose because I was already qualified. Then, too, they didn't want to pay me because I finished early. But George Bond said, "Yes, you qualified her; you're going to have to give her top pay." So they gave me top pay.

We had a hard time (but) my time wasn't as hard as some of them because I wouldn't let it happen to me. I wouldn't let them treat me just any kind of way.

Mrs. Lucille Norris

I was born in Fuquay Springs, North Carolina on March 15, 1914. I first came to Durham to attend Hillside High School but went back home and then returned to Durham in 1932.

I knew about the tobacco factories. I had friends who worked at American Tobacco and I asked if they were hiring any people. So (my friend) told me to come down to the factory on Monday. I went down to American Tobacco Company. The foreman came to one of the doors and (my friend) was standing behind the door and pointed me out. One of the foremens called me and hired me. It was on New Year's Day, 1932.

I started out working on the belt. They'd move me around to different jobs but most of it was where you'd pick out stems, trash and stuff

out of the tobacco. I worked on that side for years. Way on down the line, when they began to want to cut off people, they told me that I had the seniority for (another) job. Those jobs paid more money. I didn't take that job until I saw that if I didn't take one of those jobs, I probably would be cut off. Then I went and took one of those jobs, workin' on a machine, dropping bundles (of tobacco) which was a great bit of work. They had a bell and every time that bell would ring, you had to drop a bundle of tobacco on a (belt) and it would go on down the line.

Later on, they moved me from dropping bundles to where I was spreadin' out the tobacco onto the belt which would carry it into this machine. This machine would stem it and make scrap. I did that for years. They they decided that they was going to take the machines out of the plant. Then I went up on the dryer (where) they had these hogsheads of

tobacco. You had to take bundles out of these hogsheads and put them on a big belt and that belt would take it on back through the dryer. It would come off on a belt and on this belt it would go on down through another machine which would tear it up and make it into scrap. I stayed there over at Number 9 for twenty-nine years.

You had fifteen or twenty machines (in one room) with something that was carrying the tobacco and pulling the stems, just a-clack-clack-clacka....you couldn't hear nobody (if) you was standing right beside 'em. You'd have to get right up to 'em, right close to 'em and talk to 'em. If your machines broke down, that'd be a time for you to talk to the person who was next to you on the same belt that you was on. (Otherwise) if you said anything, you'd have to holler. So, you know there was quite a bit of noise if you had to holler.

I was a shop steward (for the union). I belonged to the CIO and I could complain. When the union had a meeting, people had a right to come to me and tell me that the foreman had done something to 'em or they didn't like something that was goin' on. We'd go into the office to have meetings with the head people. We'd make complaints on whatever was happening. Sometimes it did good and sometimes it didn't but still we let 'em know that we complained about some things that was goin' on.

A lot of times we had a head man who was kind of mean but whenever he got around me, he never did curse or carry on at me 'cause I stopped him just looking at him. I would look at him when he got to doing anything and he would just go on. A lot of times, he'd ask me what was I looking at him for but I didn't open my mouth 'cause they couldn't fire me for lookin'. I just looked at him, that's all.



Lucille Norris

When I first started off in 1932, (I was paid) eighteen cents an hour. Before I quit in 1968, it was about seven to eight dollars an hour. I liked the pay and I liked the hours. We went to work at seven o'clock and we got off at four and we never worked Saturday or Sunday. What I didn't like was there was too much dust. But after all, when you got a job, you just go on (and do) that job. I reckon that I'd been there right today if they had an agreement (and) if they had women there working (at) my age. I'd been there today.

Mrs. Annie Mack Barbee

I was born in Manning, South Carolina on March 6, 1913. I came to Durham in 1925. At fourteen, I began working at Liggett & Myers as a sweeper, probably making fifty cents an hour. I worked from seven a.m. in the morning, a half hour for lunch, until five p.m. in the evening. I did do seasonal work as a stemmery worker, too. The work was real hard. I worked with dusty, dirty burly tobacco from Virginia. I worked in a large room with one window. There was very little air circulating and it got real hot, so hot that I would be wet to the bone. I would bring a change of clothes so I would not have to leave the factory so sweaty....I did not want to catch a cold on my way home.

Black women worked in the stemmery which was in a separate building. White women worked across the street in the building that manufactured the tobacco. Well, we're over here doing all the nasty, dirty work. And over there in the cigarette side, white women wore white uniforms. We're over here handling all the nasty tobacco, it ain't right. Them white women think they are something.

There was a union organized at Liggett but it just wasn't too effective. Well, them machines began to do the work we once did by hand, stemming tobacco. I left Liggett in 1963, probably making ten dollars a day.



Annie Mack Barbee

Miss Audrey B. Wilson

I was born in Durham, April 28, 1919. My mother taught school in Oxford and my father was a cook. They didn't ever work in the factory and were determined that I wasn't, saying, "Not in the factory." But I always wanted to, for some reason; I don't know why.

My grandmother worked at Liggett & Myers when I was small. I remember her leaving early in the morning and sometimes it would be near dark when she came home. She would talk about the foremen and say, "They are the meanest people in the world." And I asked her, "Well, why do you work there? You don't have to." And she said, "Well, I have to work someplace. I guess if I had to just sit around home and do nothin', I would die."

When I first started down at American, They had seasonal work. If I saw anyone who knew my parents, I would duck down the alley, 'cause I was standin' out there to get hired. I got hired and they called it "green season" and it would last about three or four months or maybe a little longer. (I started) in the forties 'cause we had the war in '42 and I think I was there maybe a year or two before the war. Then I got hired regular. I was a machine operator in the leaf department.

My mother knew one of the foremen there, a man by the name of Mr. K____. Oh, he was a mess! And she tried to get him to fire me from workin' in the factory. He said, "Well, I asked your mother (whether) you had ever worked before. She said, 'No', but she didn't want you to work there. But I had to have a reason to fire you."

The people that had been workin' (at American), you know, had their heads down and if you touched them to say somethin', they said, "Shh-h." I said, "You don't talk in this place?" They said, "You better shut up. They'll put you out. All they'll do is show you the door and the way to go home." They were afraid to talk, afraid of the foreman. He would holler, "Hey, hey." And I would say, "What's wrong with him!" It was funny to me.

When I got home (from work), I took my bath so I could play softball. Our ball team was the "Sun Spots" and we had a plant in Raleigh that sponsored us. I just about run up Jackson Street to get home, take my bath and put on my uniform to play ball.

The union did make (conditions) better. But in the sixties, they called it automation but it wasn't automation, they didn't want the black (workers) with the whites. And they completely cut the stemmery out.

After I was regular, I was put back on seasonal work. We were workin' maybe six or seven months out of the year and we were makin' good. I forget now how much I was makin' but we could work seven months out of the year and make it. And then they dropped it down to about four months out of the year and it was time for me to leave. I left in '66.

Mr. James P. Morgan

I was born in July, 1917. My family moved to Durham when I was five years old. They were from a rural district in Lee County, in the neighborhood of Goldsboro. My father went to work first at Liggett & Myers. Just as soon as he got a chance, he went to work at American Tobacco where he stayed for thirty-six years as a machine operator.

I started working at the American Tobacco Company in 1936. I retired in 1980. When I was in school, I never gave any thought about goin' behind (my father's) footsteps and goin' to American. At that particular time, American Tobacco Company or Liggett & Myers, either one, was not payin' any money.

In 1936 I started workin' at American Tobacco Company for thirty-five cents an hour. Of course, thirty-five cents an hour on a job back then for a single man was good money.

Regardless of how you look at it, back in the late thirties and early forties, indirectly and directly, everybody that lived in this part of North Carolina made their money from tobacco. Somewhere along the line, you were affected. Whatever you were doing, your job, your existence, your livelihood was connected someway with the tobacco industry, directly or indirectly.

I started out at the Bull Durham factory on the "Bull Jack", the smokin' tobacco (sacking) machine. I didn't operate the machine. There were two of us that operated the machine; there was what we called an operator and a sacker. I started out by sackin', learnin' how to sack the machine. That was the hardest job at the American Tobacco Company or any other tobacco factory.

We were runnin' one small department on Pettigrew Street near the railroad. There were something in the neighborhood of twelve or fourteen machines in that one little small room. Then we had two other big floors of the Bull Durham (plant) with forty to forty-five machines in each room. They were that big. That was before the war. I stayed on the night time shift until I went into the service in 1942.

My impression when I first went there was of the overwhelming smell of tobacco. My first thought was, "How can anybody work all night with that smell?" But it's just like anything else, you get where you don't notice it. It's that simple. It wasn't anytime before I just wasn't paying any attention to it.

That small building that fronted Pettigrew Street was not air conditioned. In the summertime on those two big floors where the women worked, when you'd get out and go home, it was like somebody had thrown a bucket of water on you. You had big exhaust fans but that was no good. The noise at first was just like the smell — overwhelming. Before the war, we were transfered to a new air conditioned building. Then everything was fine. We had comfortable working conditions

and everybody knew everybody else and there was no women in there, only men. I had to leave for the service just before I was to become an operator (of the Bull Jack).

When I went back (after the war), they put me in training to operate the cigarette machine. I operated the cigarette machine for years. It wasn't hard to learn. You had to be on your toes to be able to make a good operator. In other words, a lot of people operated the cigarette machine for years until they finished or died and they still couldn't operate it worth a damn. I thought I was as decent an operator as American Tobacco had. Later, I was trained in the engineering department. I had a real good job, a job that I enjoyed doing. I never had any problem with bosses. I felt like I owned American Tobacco Company.

I am currently the president of the American Tobacco Retirees Club. This club was started about nine years ago by a black man, G. Edward Watson, as a social club for ex-employees of American Tobacco who were black. Later on, the club members found out that there was a possibility of securing an increase in their retirement benefits from American Tobacco. Due to the racial discrimination laws, they couldn't do anything without whites. So they invited a bunch of whites to join the club which a bunch did. We accept only American Tobacco retirees and their spouses. We meet once a month at the Duke Street Senior Citizens Center.

AFTERWORD

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Beverly Jones and Claudia Egelhoff

