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More than a Game: Baseball and Southern Textile Communities 1880-1935

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**More than a Game:
Baseball and Southern Textile
Communities
1880-1935**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of History

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

&

The Butler University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

**Aaron Perch
Butler University Honors Program
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Introduction

Sports have always played a pivotal role in building and sustaining peoples' sense of community, regardless of time or place. In the Piedmont, textile mill workers played baseball, first as a means of filling their free time, but by the 1920s, as part of semi-professional competitive textile leagues. Though mill owners initially implemented baseball with an intent of occupying their impoverished workers, over time, baseball became an essential element in the industry's culture. Even after World War I, when conditions grew worse in the mills, baseball continued to grow in popularity, drawing hundreds of people to watch each game. In the Piedmont textile towns, where families were entirely dependent on their employers to provide wages, housing, public services, and hours, baseball was one of the only opportunities for them to escape the realities of industrial life.

The purpose of this research is to demonstrate how baseball played a vital role – especially from post -World War I to the Great Depression – in sustaining the mill towns which popped up all over the Piedmont during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. We find that this was especially true in the 1920s, when a labor 'stretch out' was implemented by mill ownership. Had baseball leagues not existed during this decade, the rip in the mill villages' social fabric might have proven to be their ultimate demise. Ultimately, the Great Depression marks a point where unions were finally able to solidify their presence in the mill communities, thus diminishing the social importance of baseball. However, the game played such a critical role in the lives of workers during the 1920s that the Piedmont textile mill story would be incomplete without an examination of

the game's significance to workers who had nobody and nothing else on their side at the time.

Historiography

Understanding the lives and struggles of Piedmont textile workers was not a popular topic of study until the late 1970s. Recognizing a waning opportunity, a University of North Carolina-based research team led a series of oral interviews with men and women who had worked in the factories during the early 20th century. The first academic works which sought to tell the story of southern textile workers emerged from these interviews.

Before the interviews were published, our knowledge about mill families was largely confined to broad generalizations about their transition from agrarian to factory labor. Thomas Clark's *The South Since Appomattox: A Century of Regional Change* (1967), served as one of the initial works which attempted to explain the lives of these poor mill operatives. He discussed the imminent need for industrial enterprise in the South following the Civil War, yet also highlighted the tendency for underqualified capitalists to end up running the companies and factories. For him, the issue was multidimensional, as carpetbaggers from the north struggled to accommodate southern social culture while ambitious Southerners simply did not understand how to operate a quality enterprise. In addition, Clark pointed to workers' traditionalist tendencies as a complicating factor in their adoption of urbanized mill life. Their resistance to modernization was elaborated upon by I.A. Newby in his *The South: A History* (1978). He used the term "Benightism" to characterize this phenomenon, arguing that

More than a Game: Baseball and Southern Textile Communities, 1880-1920

traditionalist attitudes caused southern industrial development to follow a more paternalistic trajectory than in the north. These works, though outdated at this point, provided a solid (albeit general) picture of what the mill workers were like and how they built their communities.

Following the Oral History Project came a surge of new scholarship in the 1980s and early 90s. David Carlton's *Mill and Town in South Carolina (1982)* discussed a clear alliance between political leadership and mill owners in the Piedmont. Referring to this relationship as "Bleasism" (named after South Carolina's governor Coleman Blease), Carlton suggested that because the New South's Democratic politicians went basically unchallenged every election year, they need not worry about winning over poor mill workers. This resulted in a laissez-faire style of governance, in which mill owners would be left to manage their own facilities. The multi-authored work derived from the oral histories, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World (1987)*, followed up on Carlton's political framing and suggested that mill workers felt a deep sense of betrayal by their owners in the years leading up to the textile strike of 1934. *Like a Family* used the oral histories to paint a picture of closely-knit, humble mill families who trusted everything they had to their companies. Both of these texts attempted to do more than "shed light" on the plight of textile workers; they created meticulously colored portraits of marginalized mill families' lives, experiences, and attitudes.

More recent scholarship on the mill communities was undertaken by Edward Ayers, Thomas Perry and G.C. Waldrep. While none of these three authors disagreed with earlier analyses of the Oral History Project, they tried to reorient the scholarly focus

so that the social lives – and not economic struggles – of mill workers came to the forefront. Ayers' *The Promise of the New South* serves as an analysis of the entire post-Reconstruction New South period though his section dedicated to textile mill development emphasized the industry's growing social importance in southern towns. Ayers pointed out that southern textiles were some of the first commercially successful enterprises during the New South era, and thus became a source of immense pride for southern communities. Drawing on Carlton's "Bleasism", he put forth the view that mill owners who once held a close alliance with their employees had sacrificed that relationship for political power and profit during the late 1920s, endangering their mills' continued existence.

Thomas Perry's *Textile League Baseball: South Carolina's Mill Teams (1993)*, marked the first and only research aimed specifically at textile baseball leagues. While *Like a Family* and *Life After Reconstruction* made brief mention of industrial baseball, Perry's work gave the first comprehensive overview dedicated to the teams. Rather than diving into immense detail about each ball club, Perry made sure no stone went unturned, noting every team for every South Carolina mill in every year from 1880 to 1950. Though he does not argue on behalf of a new theory or revelation, Perry's research is the foundation from which I am building this project, as I have consistently found that the baseball teams served a vital function in sustaining the fragile, alienated mill communities.

Mention must be made of G.C. Waldrep's more recent *Southern Workers and the Search for Community (2000)*. Though not solely focused on baseball, Waldrep argued

that social institutions like churches, bands, baseball teams, and bars allowed economically depressed workers to develop a sense of community during difficult times. He took the perspective that plummeting demand following World War I destabilized the textile industry and pushed the workers toward unionization. This view was crucial because it acknowledged the diminishing agency of textile workers who had developed strong relationships with their employers before the Great War. However, baseball was one of the few realms in which mill folks were able to not only congregate and discuss hardships, but also as an aspect of life that they had some degree of control over.

The regional historiography of baseball in the south is, by contrast, rather sparse. Some work has been done to trace the game's spread from north to south in the immediate post-civil war period, most notably George Kirsch's *Baseball in Blue and Grey* (2003) and William Ryczek's *When Johnny Came Sliding Home* (1998). While I commend Kirsch and Ryczek for their undertakings, their work highlights a larger void that exists on both the economic and athletic sides of the story. In searching for scholarship which connects baseball and the changing southern landscape, results are limited to journal publications and magazine excerpts. No comprehensive analysis exists.

A great deal of work has been done on the mills but, unfortunately, the majority of it makes little to no mention of baseball's importance in these communities. The game's presence is *accounted* for in post-oral history scholarship (1980s onward), but it gets treated as a fringe hobby rather than as a crucial aspect of the mill towns. If we revisit the sources – many of the same ones used by past scholars – and consider some of the oral history project's shortcomings, it becomes apparent that baseball was essential in

the workers' lives. The fraternity, pride, and sheer joy of playing organized baseball games held the textile communities together, even during the 1920s as changing industrial conditions jeopardized livelihoods they had grown used to.

The Mills

One of the most successful aspects of southern industrialization was the creation of cotton textile mills across the Piedmont. While mills certainly existed before the Civil War, the industry experienced explosive growth during the late 19th century. Ayers attributed this growth to the mills' versatility and ability to recruit unskilled labor. Unlike other resource-dependent industries like coal and timber, cotton textile mills could be built anywhere near a viable power source. The foothills east of the Appalachian Mountains, abundant in streams and running water, served as the primary center for mill development. As steam power was phased out by coal in the early 20th century, mills were constructed practically everywhere. In addition, mill operatives did not require extensive training or background knowledge in order to work. Thus, labor was readily available across the South. The construction of a textile mill would coax entire families out of the mountains and off their farms in search of employment.¹

Once they were employed, families could expect the mill company to provide housing and social services. Because most textile factories were constructed in the countryside – usually far from population centers – owners had no choice but to build homes for operatives and their families. W.D. Anderson, president of Bibb Manufacturing (which owned a number of mills in Georgia), explained his vision of

¹ Ayers, E.L. (1992). *The Promise of the New South: life after Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 111-113

welfare capitalism in an address given to his mill's superintendents. He reminded them that "it is the duty of all to promote, as far as possible, a healthy religious and social tone in the village".² However well-intentioned mill owners may have been in their paternalistic management style, the approach ended up causing as many problems as it did benefits. In his discussion of these "mill towns", Ayers emphasized that while the initial allure of company-provided libraries, schools, stores, and hospitals drove poor whites into the industry, the novelty of these services quickly wore off when the operatives realized they had been given second-rate facilities in exchange for their labor.³ What had certainly served as tempting commodities on the surface turned out to be poorly constructed, under-funded facilities left for the mill operatives to maintain.

Workers – not earning enough money to independently care for their families – could be coerced into compliance with their financial situation if their homes were provided by the company. By 1900, 92% of people employed in southern textiles lived in "mill towns".⁴ These towns were largely independent of urban centers until after World War II. Combined with the fact that political powers tended to leave the industry alone, large textile mills became autonomous villages in their own right.⁵ Mill management typically possessed absolute power over their respective towns with little advocacy or intervention on the behalf of elected officials.

Welfare Capitalism

² "How a Cotton Mill President Safeguards His Employees," *Manufacturers Record*, December 5, 1929, pp. 58-59

³ Ayers, 116

⁴ *Ibid.* 118.

⁵ Carlton, D.L. (1982). *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880-1920*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 235.

As companies constructed libraries, public works, stores, bars, and even schools for employees, their mill towns took on the shape of independent, isolated municipalities. The relationship between operatives and their employers in this system of welfare capitalism has been framed as paternalistic.⁶ The paternalist interpretation of corporate welfare diverges into two varying camps though, one suggesting that the practice coerced employees to “acquiesce to authority” and another emphasizing the strong bond between owners and workers that it forged. Bart Dredge’s analysis of the *Southern Textile Bulletin* and company libraries focuses on ownerships’ desire to control every aspect of their workers lives. However, Anette Cox, in her discussion of North Carolina’s largest mill – The Loray – says this was not the case until after World War I, when college-trained northern management took over the industry. Both views are correct, contingent upon where in time we situate ourselves and if we consider what it truly meant to be paternalistic in the Southern sense.⁷

In discussing paternalism, the desire to maintain a “southern way of life” amidst industrial transition has been used to explain the deployment of welfare capitalism in the textile industry. We must remember that the southern breed of paternalism was inherently rooted in the notion of control. White men, well-intentioned or not, meant to ensure that wives, workers, children, and all other property remained under their watchful eye. The concept of ‘paternalism’ euphemistically describes a deliberate attempt to maintain supremacy both in public and the household.

⁶ Dredge, B. (2008). Contradictions of Corporate Benevolence: Industrial Libraries in the Southern Textile Industry, 1920-1945. *Libraries & the Cultural Record*, 43(3), 308-326

⁷ Cox, A. (2012). The Loray, North Carolina’s “Million Dollar Mill”: The “Monstrous Hen” of Southern Textiles. *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 89(3), 241-275

Textile management's intentions were no different. In order for workers – a highly mobile workforce thanks to the universal, standardized nature of mills – to stay quiet about wages and remain in the mill town, ownership had to ensure there was no opportunity to leave. Ironically, baseball offered one of the rare opportunities to temporarily escape from the mills' monotony without having to venture into town or spend money.

If we consider paternalism in its true, southern context, then disagreements over ownership's desire to control are irrelevant. Whether referred to as paternalism, corporate welfare, or simply capitalism, an intent to tie operatives to their employers was the driving force behind the practice's implementation. Ownership's objectives never changed over time, but workers' perceptions of the companies did, and at a very specific point in time; after World War I.

The Stretch Out

After the First World War, mill owners responded to declining demand by attempting to increase individual workloads without altering wages. Much of this change was brought about by automation in the workplace. Mill employees, understandably frustrated with new conditions brought about by the “stretch out”, perceived an increasing distance between themselves and their employers.⁸ To them, what started as local, paternalistically driven industrial experiments had transitioned in to profit driven, corporate enterprises.⁹

⁸ Hall, J.D. (2000). *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*. 121-124

⁹ Waldrep, G.C. (2000). *Southern Workers and the Search for Community: Spartanburg County, South Carolina*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. Pp. 32-36.

For most mill workers, their day to day experiences were best represented in a statement given by Thomas McMahon, president of the United Textile Workers of America, to a Senate committee. Speaking in 1921, McMahon explained that the mill towns were populated by large families, wherein everyone's wages were needed to keep the family afloat. Their company homes were inadequate, unfurnished, and - as was the case with most other mill services - unmaintained. Most importantly though, McMahon urged the Senate to consider the disproportionate power held by mill ownership as a result of the depressed wages and welfare given by the company to workers. Once a family entered the industry, it usually never left.¹⁰

Of course, this condemnation of mill conditions comes from a labor president, so the view of mill ownership must also be considered. In 1929, *The Manufacturers Record* of Baltimore spoke out against unions representing Piedmont textile workers, associating the groups with Communist interests and suggesting that northern labor advocates worry about industries closer to home. The publication called for "a great campaign for the fuller industrialism of the south", expressing a desire for protective tariffs, anti-union legislation, and continued internal improvements.¹¹ Most mill owners, when pressed about their employees' living and working conditions, referred to the industry's paternalistic approach to management and blamed the union "agitators" for intruding on mill communities.

¹⁰ *Hearing on Working Conditions of the Textile Industry in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee Before the Senate Committee on Manufactures, 71st Congress., 1st Sess. (May 8, 9, and 20, 1921), pp. 51-55, 58-71*

¹¹ "Vigorous Efforts Being Made Against Progress of the South," *Manufacturers Record*, August 15, 1929, pp. 53-54

More than a Game: Baseball and Southern Textile Communities, 1880-1920

Workers felt that the drastic changes undertaken in their factories had been the brainchild of college-trained, northern ownership, new to the industry after the Great War.¹² In the late 19th and early 20th century, the mills' ascent up the economic ladder had been overseen by prominent local men who decided they would venture into new realm of capitalism - industrial capitalism. While a few instances of isolated protest were seen in the early 1900s – cases where unions failed in their intentional attempts to test their viability in the textile industry – mass, organized outcry against textile companies did not consistently occur until the 1920s. As their employers' backgrounds became less and less similar to their own, operatives' perceptions soured.¹³ This can be seen in both the oral histories and literature written during the period.

Local literature written during the period 1929-1931 in response to sporadic textile strikes emphasized the impossibility of familial cohesion between workers and ownership, something companies had hoped their welfare practices would cultivate.¹⁴ The strikes, mostly contained to the area around Gastonia, North Carolina, were attributed to a growing class consciousness among operatives as changing conditions forced them to reconsider the strengths and benefits of living in mill towns. A prevailing theme between the texts was an idea that mill hands, whether they noticed it or not, were becoming part of the modern American labor force. They were no longer agricultural traditionalists. By working in the textile mills, southern men and women had basically

¹² Freedmen, I. B. I. B. D. T., Maryland, S. S. P. A. T. U. O., & Emancipation., I. A. E. O. freedom: A. D. H. O. (1988, January 31). A BENEVOLENT AND BRUTAL PATERNALISM. *The New York Times*.

¹³ Dowd, Like a Family, 201-203

¹⁴ The works considered are: Mary Heaton Vorse, *Strike*; Dorothy Myra Page, *Gathering Storm*; Grace Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*; Olive Tilford Dargan, *Call Home the Heart*; Sherwood Anderson, *Beyond Desire*; and William Rollins, *The Shadow Before* (all published between 1929 and 1931).

put their trust and livelihoods in the hands of the elite. While this may have created harmony as the mills grew and experienced success, post-war hardships unraveled these relations.¹⁵

The authors portrayed the stretch out as a moral outrage and not just an economic challenge posed to employees. This view was consistent with workers' belief that employers' attempts to increase efficiency and output during the 1920s violated the paternalistic code which they had grown accustomed to living under. All of the stories argue that management tried to solve post-war economic issues by pushing many of the burdens onto workers, something they were incapable of bearing.¹⁶

So what held these disenfranchised workers together? What kept them from leaving the mills and giving up on the industrial experiment? The answer is baseball. Since the early 1880s, textile mills had been organizing teams comprised of men who worked at the factory. Initially games would be played between men in the mill town. However, starting in the early 1900s, teams began to travel around the county to play against other mill teams in the "Textile Leagues". These leagues grew in popularity to the point where, by the 1920s, the startup capital for building a mill included a baseball field.¹⁷

Life in the mill town came to be defined by work and baseball because that is all there was time for people to do. People from neighboring conventional towns and blacks Americans did not get to participate; the teams were exclusively for people in the mill

¹⁵ Dowd, Like a Family 184-190

¹⁶ Whalen, R. W. (1998). Recollecting the Cotton Mill Wars: Proletarian Literature of the 1929-1931 Southern Textile Strikes. *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 75(4), 369-397

¹⁷ <http://desinationinman.com/textile-league-baseball-at-inman-mills.html>

towns, which were totally white enterprises. Everybody had a team representing them and their mill, developing a sense of pride and camaraderie within the community.¹⁸

While baseball served as an excellent recreational supplement during the mills' heyday from 1880-1920, the game became essential in maintaining fraternal order amongst workers as the stretch out diminished their faith in the mill owners who employed them.

The Game

Baseball can be traced back to the early 1840s when northern city dwellers played a game called town ball. Derived from the British version of 'rounders', town ball was played in open city lots, usually by working class men. Town ball eventually transitioned into the baseball game we know and love today, and Alexander Cartwright is typically attributed with overseeing this transition. During the late 1840s and early 1850s, Cartwright drew up a set of rules that defined the length of games, fair and foul lines, strikes and balls, and proper fundamentals to be followed by his quasi-professional New York Knickerbockers ball club. By the Civil War, baseball had become a staple in northern cities. Young men would get off work and play for their local teams, often run by profit-eager capitalists - a system not all that different from the one deployed by the textile mills.

However, the game was still relatively unknown in the South at this time. The war quickly changed this, however. Union soldiers would play baseball at camp and in prisons where Confederate soldiers were held. Inevitably, Southerners picked up on the sport, as it allowed them to put aside the struggles of war while also promoting unity

¹⁸ Waldrep, (2000). *Southern Workers and the Search for Community*. 23-25.

among the soldiers. Officers would even play alongside their men, and the childlike joy of hitting and running after a baseball with teammates provided a momentary reprieve from the bloody battles looming on the horizon.¹⁹

After Appomattox, baseball came home with the Confederate soldiers. Unfortunately, the planter elite – the same men who took advantage of the “twenty Negro law” to avoid going to the front lines – detested the sport, claiming it was too democratic and tied to northern values. In their effort to nationalize baseball, the game’s promoters (like Albert Spalding) tried to disassociate the game from its northern origins, hoping that sport could play a role in the project of national unity. Despite elites’ opposition, baseball made inroads with common Southerners who showed a great affinity for the game, as anybody could learn to play, work hours were not disrupted by participation, and all men were equal on the field of play.²⁰

Ultimately, the baseball promoters had their way, and the sport spread rapidly, not just across the South, but throughout the entire nation. Local, semi-professional teams began to emerge all over the country during the post-war period, and the Cincinnati Reds became the first professional organization in 1869. In the south, as was the case across the country, baseball teams popped up in cities, with teams stepping across neighborhood, occupational, and ethnic (but not racial) lines.

In Richmond, Virginia, local capitalists organized a professional club in the hopes that it would generate revenue and bring the community together in support of the team. Baseball – both organized and recreational – had the power to defuse class tensions and

¹⁹ Aubrecht, Michael. (2004). Baseball in the Blue and Grey. *Baseball Almanac*.

²⁰ Greenberg, K.S. (1998). *Honor and Slavery*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University. 80.

represent reunion while also fostering a sense of local pride. The sport promoted industrial business values of collective effort, standardization, and systemization. Men had to work together to achieve a positive outcome and the rules did not change regardless of where games were played. Players, managers, and the fans could keep track of statistics and box scores, allowing them to quantitatively analyze progress and identify areas for improvement. On the surface, Richmond's professional baseball team rallied the community around a shared interest, but equally as important, the sport's introduction to southern society aligned with larger economic and sociocultural changes brought about by industrialization.²¹

To an extent, baseball was a democratic game; no player was more important than the others and anybody could walk out onto the field and learn to play. The nobility and honor associated with upper class hobbies such as fox hunting did not find their way onto the ballfield. To win a ball game required a total team effort – the entire community must pitch in. The lineup could always be changed, the pitcher could always be pulled, and players had to work together to record outs or score runs. Mill town people – the poorest of the poor, people suffering from an inferiority complex – were all capable of making meaningful contributions on the ball field.

Textile Baseball

In the textile mills, baseball was implemented as another means of corporate welfare, a practice that dominated the southern textile industry. Workers were expected

²¹ Gudmestad, R. H. (1998). Baseball, the Lost Cause, and the New South in Richmond, Virginia, 1883-1890. *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 106(3), 267-300.

More than a Game: Baseball and Southern Textile Communities, 1880-1920

to take on 50 to 60 hour weeks yet only earned three to five dollars per week²², so it made sense that owners felt compelled to provide recreational opportunities for energetic, young men.

The game proved so popular though, both among players and spectators, that organized leagues began to pop up around the turn of the century. These leagues, usually conceived in the minds of company owners, consisted of 6 to 10 teams. Initially, games would be played on Fridays – the players would get a half day of work – and Saturdays. By the 1920s though, games were being played Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.

Textile baseball leagues were most prominent in the region surrounding North and South Carolina's border, as this was where mills were most concentrated. Teams could take a bus to the neighboring mill, play a ball game, and be back home all in a day thanks to the mills' proximity to one another.

The period of transition from town teams to regional leagues also marked baseball's shift from local hobby to a community past time. I focus on the game's importance between World War I and the mid-30s, after it had completed this transition. The fraternity, pride, and sheer joy of playing organized, competitive baseball games allowed the textile communities to prevail even as the stretch out posed challenges workers had never faced before.

Looking at the Oral Histories, evidence of operatives' love for their baseball teams can clearly be found. Unfortunately though, many of the ninety minute interviews

²² Oral History Interview with Flossie Moore Durham, September 2, 1976. Interview H-0066. Southern Oral History program Collection (#4007).

also make no mention of the game. Historians have understandably taken this as an indication that baseball played little to no role in the communities. But, in reading the interviews from which baseball was omitted, it becomes clear that this occurred at the fault of the interviewers, and not the interviewees. The people conducting the oral history project simply did not bother to ask about baseball during many of the interviews. The ones who did ask though almost always got a detailed, impassioned answer about the game.

The best example of this was an interview conducted with Jefferson Robinette, who played for a short while. The interviewer, Cliff Kuhn, struggled to get Jefferson to talk about recreation in the variety of mill towns he had lived in.

CK: *“What did people do for recreation?”*

JR: *“Back then they didn’t do much of anything.”*

CK: *“Were there any musicians you can remember?”*

JR: *“There wasn’t too much recreation connected with this end of town.”*

CK: *“What about the women, was there any place they could gather together?”*

JR: *“No, not that I recall.”*

CK: *“Did they have a ball field down there?”*

At this point, the entire tone of the interview changed. The old man, monotonously responding to Kuhn’s questions, became audibly excited at the mention of

baseball. His responses to the ensuing questions came in paragraphs rather than simple sentences. Clearly, the topic of baseball brought Robinette out of his shell:

JR: *"They had a baseball field down there."*

CK: *"Did the company have a team?"*

JR: *"I don't know who managed that. This help of the mill, though, the boys played. That's about the only recreation they had, was the baseball. And the mill would let them have their truck to go to the games. I know one time, before they built this road, Webb Avenue up here, the road went up the railroad there, just a dirt road. The Plaid mill bought a truck. They used to have just a wagon, but they bought a truck with solid tires on it, and if you got in a muddy place, why, you'd stick up."*

CK: *"Were you on the team?"*

JR: *"Yes."*

CK: *"What position did you play?"*

JR: *"They'd just get a whole load of folks that wanted to go, would get on that truck, and they'd carry them to the baseball game. It didn't cost them nothing to go. And this game down here, I think they had it closed in one time; you had to pay when it was down here, to get in, I think, one time. But most of the time, if baseball was in, you just went to see them and they'd take up an offering and you'd chip in a little, but not no regular pay to get to see a game."²³*

²³ Robinette, J.M. (n.d.). Oral History Interview with Jefferson M. Robinette, July 1977. Interview H-0041. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. A Laboring Life in North Carolina [Text]. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/H-0041.html>

A critical point is made here by Robinette: “It didn’t cost them nothing to go”. Mill operatives earned such low wages that spending money on leisure was almost always out of the question. Baseball games, which apparently offered free attendance, were one of the rare instances where people did not have to dig deep into their pockets if they wanted to have a good time. This suggests why both men and women were so drawn to the game. While men fought it out on the field and debated batting averages, matchups, and managerial decisions from the stands, mothers could bring their entire family to enjoy a game of competitive baseball. The sport offered something for everybody yet asked for very little in return.

Lloyd Davidson, interviewed by Alan Tullos, said that he would go to the baseball games every chance he had.²⁴ The game provided an opportunity for men to assert their masculinity in a new environment. During the textile mills’ development, the transition from farm to factory forced families to reconsider traditional gender roles; husbands could no longer be relied on as the sole breadwinners. People in the mill town depended on the family wage, earned by all members of their household. For men who had grown up in a culture of paternalism that now had to cope with a transition of paternal obligations from themselves to mill companies, baseball served as a means of reasserting themselves in the spirit of competition. A hard slide into second base or a booming home run alleviated some of the anxiety men certainly felt as their wives’ financial contributions became more and more important.²⁵

²⁴ Betty Davidson, Lloyd Davidson, and Allen Tullos, conducted by Oral History Interview with Betty and Lloyd Davidson, February 2 and 15, 1979. Interview H-0019. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007). (n.d.). <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/H-0019/menu.html>

²⁵ Beyer-Sherwood, T. (2006). From Farm to Factory: Transitions in Work, Gender, and Leisure at Banning Mill, 1910s-1930s. *The Oral History Review*, 33(2), 65-94

Louise Riggsbee Jones, a woman from Bynum Mills in North Carolina, revealed that women too, were immensely interested in the games. When asked about baseball in her mill town, Jones remarked, “They had real good ball teams here then, and ooh, I would go and just holler my head off for them”.²⁶ Women, who made up nearly half (if not more) of most mills’ workforces, must have taken immense pride in the work they did alongside men. Supporting their mill’s baseball team was an excellent way to channel that pride and put it on display for the other mill towns to see.

Baseball – on top of rallying the community around competitive games – was also one of the few forces which promoted a positive relationship between owners and workers during the 1920s. One of the men interviewed was Alester Furman Jr., the son of a mill owner. He said,

AF: *“I used to play baseball in the summer with the mill boys while working in the mill. You were supposed to get a job working and you'd do a little sweeping.”*

Brent Glass: *“Now what mill was this that you worked in?”*

AF: *“I worked in Brandon Mills and I worked in Monaghan Mill and I played baseball at all of them. We used to have good baseball in these mills here. I played college baseball. Of course, I couldn't play baseball for money so I had to get a job working for them to play baseball with them and I did that. I wasn't any great baseball player, don't misunderstand me, I was just an ordinary outfielder.”*²⁷

²⁶ Jones, L.R. (n.d.) Oral History Interview with Louise Riggsbee Jones, October 13, 1976. Interview H-0085-2. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. A Southern Woman Describes life and Work in a Cotton Mill Town [Text]. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/H-0085-2/H-0085-2.html>

²⁷ Furman, A.G. (n.d.). Oral History Interview with Alester G. Furman Jr., January 6, 1976. Interview B-0019. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. Southern Businessman

More than a Game: Baseball and Southern Textile Communities, 1880-1920

As Furman pointed out, he came to the mill town to play baseball, and was only given a job afterward. As the Textile Leagues grew in popularity, winning became more important to the hundreds of operatives who would attend games. Mill ownership responded to this demand by bringing on college players and retired pros for the teams. To make their participation in the league legal, the new players would be given menial jobs in the factory.

By contrast, this type of responsiveness on the part of ownership was not seen in the factories themselves. In fact, the stretch out did the exact opposite of what operatives desired. It was not until unions got involved that meaningful changes meant to benefit workers were instituted. Whether by intention or not, ownership responded to operatives' interest in baseball by fielding teams and bringing on the best talent available. When we consider Dredge's view that corporate welfare led workers to "acquiesce to authority", baseball flipped this relationship to a certain extent, to the mutual benefit of both employers and those employed.

The Strikes

One moment in the Piedmont's industrial history has been of particular interest to scholars; the union-led strikes in September of 1934. Letters sent from the textile workers to President Franklin D. Roosevelt revealed their waning faith in mill ownership. Complaints about the stretch out and violations of workplace codes passed in previous years dominated these letters.²⁸ Basically, the mounting disaffection workers had with

Describes His Family's Involvement in the Textile Industry and Higher Education in Greenville, South Carolina [Text]. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/B-0019/B-0019.html>

²⁸ Salmund, John A. *General Textile Strike of 1934: From Maine to Alabama*. Columbia, US: University of Missouri Press, 2002. 148.

their employers reached its tipping point thanks to the stretch out. The treatment they had experienced for the past decade was the driving force behind the mass-organized public strikes against their respective mills.

It should be noted that each mill town responded differently to the union's strike call; participation was largely contingent on the relationship between management and its employees. Regardless of the size of resistance though, most strikes involved the mass walkout of workers, use of local police to maintain order, and loud, energetic groups of people picketing outside the factory. On September 6, 1934, five protesting workers from Chiquola Mill in Honea Path, South Carolina were gunned down from the windows of their mill.

If we look at mill town newspapers published during the strikes, it becomes apparent that baseball did not disappear during periods of tension. Even as workers walked out and protested, textile league baseball games continued to be played, even if they had to be slightly modified.²⁹ Most leagues were nearing the end of the season during the strikes with playoff games in full swing. As a matter of fact, during the 1934 season, 150 teams were fielded across the Piedmont and in 1935, 138 played games.³⁰ These numbers compare favorably with those from the years before and after the strike.

If we look at publications from around the Carolinas, the trend continues - baseball persisted, even during the strikes. An issue of the *Chatham Blanketeer* (a mill newspaper) published on September 1st, the first day of mill walkouts, discussed how

²⁹ North Carolina's newspapers have been extensively documented and digitized, in contrast to those published in South Carolina during the early 1930s.

³⁰ Perry, T.K. (2004). *Textile League Baseball: South Carolina's Mill Teams, 1880-1955*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland. 180-193.

popular recent baseball games had become. While their disaffection with ownership neared its tipping point during August, the *Blanketeer* noted that “the baseball league that has been formed in the mill is drawing good crowds, as well as players”.³¹ Chatham’s league, interestingly, was an *inter-mill* team, meaning that it consisted of four teams made up of players only from the mill town. The four teams were Night Shift, Day Shift, Finishing & Shipping, and Foremen & Office. According to the article, the league had been formed in order to draw as many people together in competitive recreation.

On September 6th, the *Waynesville Mountaineer* attempted to inspire workers going on strike with a baseball-themed message.

There's a good, old baseball maxim that is true of life, as well.

And it ought to be adopted by the folks who try to tell;

Whether fortune will be better in the days that lie ahead,

Or be full of disappointments and unhappiness instead.

It's a mighty helpful doctrine for a man to contemplate;

When he's facing loss or failure, whether trivial or great.

It will give him hope and courage, it will show him at a glance;

That you never are defeated while you have a fighting chance.

Any baseball star will tell you, that he plays to get the breaks.

Bearing down just so much harder in the face of bad mistakes.

And he wins a lot of ball games, for he knows beyond a doubt;

³¹ *The Chatham Blanketeer*. Online resource (None) 1933-19??, September 1, 1934

*That a game is never ended till the final man is out.*³²

As mill workers prepared to defy their employers and protest against the stretch out, turned to baseball for inspiration. Given that most leagues were nearing their end, meaning the final games to be played were also the most important of the season, operatives' passion for baseball traveled with them from the ballfield to the picket line.

The next day, September 7th, an article discussing the textile strikes appeared in *The Pilot*, a newspaper for Vass County, North Carolina. The column suggested that a satisfactory agreement could never be reached between workers and owners because the root cause of the issue was the buyer. Since cotton textiles' demand had decreased, mills were forced to alter their operations. While this accurate diagnosis is noteworthy, the section which appeared right next to it under the "Local" section read:

*"Baseball may be approaching the end of the season in the big league, but here in the Sandhills [Vass Co.] it seems to be making more of a daily occurrence than earlier in the season."*³³

Again, in the face of strikes, tension, and violence, baseball persisted. A week later, *The Pilot* published a recap of the textile league's final games in an article titled: *"BASEBALL OVER AS ABERDEEN-WEST END TEAM WINS: Games Attract Crowds"*.

³² *The Waynesville Mountaineer*. (Waynesville, Haywood Co., N.C.) 1925-1972, September 6 1934.

³³ *The Pilot*. (Vass, N.C.), 1920-current, September 7, 1934

In the midst of the strike, an estimated 700 people showed up for the Labor Day championship game between Aberdeen-West and Pines-Vass.

On September 10th, as the strikes were winding down, the *Journal-Patriot* of North Wilkesboro, North Carolina published its own recap of the textile leagues. Though North Wilkesboro's team was fielded by a chair factory, "Home Chair" played host to textile teams such as Adams-Mills and Moravian Falls.³⁴ Even as the mill towns broke down into chaos, their baseball teams did not miss a game, traveling upstate to take on other semi-professional teams like "Home Chair" of North Wilkesboro.

The Space

Perhaps it was not the game itself but the space created by baseball which engrained it into the culture of Piedmont textiles. Penniless operatives could sit with their families and take in a competitive game of baseball, all without having to spend a dollar. The pride and joy that came with cheering on co-workers in a game against a rival mill just could not be matched elsewhere in their communities.

Most mill workers came from rural backgrounds where socialization tended to take on a different form than in urban centers. Generally speaking, folks were more concerned with subsistence rather than a sense of belonging to a community. The proximity introduced by mill towns and their universalized housing was something most operatives were unaccustomed to. Baseball games and their daily availability helped to ease this transition as they provided residents with a common interest and a public realm in which they could discuss it. Even if the game itself was not of particular interest, the

³⁴ *The Elkin Tribune*. (Elkin, N.C.) 191?-1969, September 13, 1934

More than a Game: Baseball and Southern Textile Communities, 1880-1920

laid back nature of watching a game – people could talk freely, sell food to each other, and heckle the other team – served as a unifying factor within the mill communities.

Though the people coming to work in the mills were largely unfamiliar with the social aspects of living in close proximity to one another, the game of baseball served as one of the few forces outside of work which helped to facilitate the operatives' social transition.

During the stretch out, supervision of employees vastly increased. At work, folks would be timed at how quickly they could complete work and reported if they failed to meet benchmarks. Outside the factories, many superintendents – residents of the mill towns themselves - kept a close eye on employees, making sure they went to bed on time, kept their houses in good condition, and did not frequent the bars too often. In this system of ever-increasing control, baseball games served as some of the few activities that were not shunned by ownership or frowned upon by other townsfolk. The man who spent his nights drinking at the pub was certainly viewed differently than the man who pitched for the baseball team. Though the mills expected complete subservience from their employees, the ball field provided an opportunity to escape the company's iron grip and genuinely express oneself in the spirit of competition, all without drawing the scorn of other townsfolk.

Coupled with the nature of factory work, the space created by baseball truly served a crucial purpose in the mill towns. Sports' unpredictability was both refreshing and exciting for folks who worked ten to twelve hours a day at the same repetitive task, whether it was looming, weaving, packing, or sweeping. When listening to the oral histories, the genuine excitement people felt about baseball can be easily discerned. The

game brought life to communities where corporate mandates, monotony, and mastery were the norm.

Baseball's presence in textile communities also helped to establish the "class consciousness" which preempted the strikes of the early 1930s. Sociologist Harriet Herring published a study of the textile strikes in 1934. She attributed operatives' growing dissatisfaction with ownership to a collective sense of inferiority that had been brought to the surface by changes in the workplace. The socioeconomic inferiority of textile workers, previously abated by the powerful sense of community fostered by mill ownership, served as a unifying element among mill people.³⁵

Baseball, unlike other sports, moves at a pace that allows conversation to occur while the game progresses. One at-bat could take up to five minutes, with long breaks in between every pitch also slowing things down. Naturally, disgruntled mill workers would discuss their shared gripes while in attendance. These complaints could not be uttered while on the clock or in the street, especially as mill management's relationship with employees worsened.. By the 1920s, baseball was largely independent from the mill's direct oversight and provided a space from which workers could escape their shared daily hardships. Watching their co-workers succeed on the baseball field certainly imbued spectators with the pride, motivation, and inspiration needed to rise up against their employers.

One last element to consider in the formation of this class consciousness is that of race. Specifically, the utter lack of racial diversity in the textile mills which fed into the

³⁵ Couch, W.T. (2012). *Culture in the South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 347.

More than a Game: Baseball and Southern Textile Communities, 1880-1920

shared sense of community among operatives. Most mills did not employ African Americans and those who did usually gave them jobs that segregated them from whites. The racial attitudes of the textile villages were best represented by David Clark, longtime author of the *Southern Textile Bulletin*, a paper written for mill superintendents to read. The general consensus among mill owners was that excluding blacks would prevent unionization efforts, as white and black labor was quite comparable during the New South industrial transition. This may have actually had the opposite effect, as the sociocultural customs shared by mill operatives served as the foundation of their “class consciousness”. Everywhere they looked, workers saw others just like themselves: poor, white, blue-collar, second class citizens. Baseball brought these commonalities to the public eye, as mill families realized that even outside the factory they were all facing the same challenges.

A quick word on agency, an interesting concept when considered in the context of Piedmont textiles. Although company owners made an initial capital investment in baseball with the innocent intention of giving workers something to do in their free time, the players and community took on the sport as their own over time. By the 1930s, many teams had players who did not even work for the mill. Spectators reveled in wins, and ownership acutely addressed their passion for baseball by creating near-professional leagues across the Piedmont. This same responsiveness was not seen in the factories themselves, at least until unions advocated on behalf of the workers, an uncommon practice before 1930.

Conclusion

More than a Game: Baseball and Southern Textile Communities, 1880-1920

From their inception during the 1880s until their gradual demise following World War II, the textile mills towns of the Piedmont were truly communities. Although wages tended to be among the lowest in the country, company welfare ensured that mill workers and their families would remain in the mill towns for the entirety of their lives. This system proved durable and effective until the period following World War I, when declining demand for textiles forced mills to alter their operations. The increased hours and disappearance of services previously provided marked a violation of the paternalistic code in the eyes of workers. Even though mill ownership had no choice but to “stretch out” their factories, the 1920s saw a sharp decline in the previously favorable relationships they held with operatives.

Baseball – played in the mill towns since their inception – served as a unifying element which brought mill operatives together in the spirit of competition. During the 1920s, the game was essential as families struggled to cope with the new conditions brought about by the stretch out. As everything changed around them, one of the few constants was baseball. Free to attend and played every weekend for six or seven months, baseball games provided a space where people could voice their frustrations, socialize with their co-workers, and enjoy a competition against another mill.

Unfortunately, the game has been largely unrecognized by scholars, as they have elected to focus on economic hardships, worker-owner relations, and the textile strikes of 1934 in their analyses of the Piedmont textile industry. Some of this blame can be attributed to the source material; the folks who conducted oral histories with mill workers often failed to ask about baseball or even recreation in general. However, the game

More than a Game: Baseball and Southern Textile Communities, 1880-1920

clearly manifested itself in nearly every textile community, with organized leagues eventually coming into existence during the early 20th century. Ultimately, the teams and leagues became some of the only institutions not affected by changing mill management and practices. Games were always played, and the players seemed to get better and better every year. Both the nature of baseball - the way the game was played - and the lack of other opportunities to fill leisure time cemented the game in textile mill towns, as folks who had nothing on their side could attain a sense of agency, equality, and accomplishment at the ball field.

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