

Wade Harter Memories of Growing up In the Town Of Ninety Six

Cotton Mill Life by Wade T. Harter

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To the best of my memory and knowledge, and I am now 86 years old, I will share my thoughts, memories and experience of being reared on a Textile Mill Village in Ninety Six, SC. I think my sharing, as such, is much the same as that on the [Pacolet Mill village](#).

On January 9, 1937 God gave me my first breath being born as a product of the union of W. J. (Buddy) Harter and Katie Louise Highsmith. The event happened on Sirrene Street in a mill house located behind Greenwood Mills Ninety Six Cotton Mill. The mill houses behind the mill were usually the starting place for young couples. Work ethics, good behavior, larger family and seniority made one eligible for the more “lucrative” locations.

My father and his 9 living siblings were growing cotton on the family farm in up-state SC until the depression. Like so many farmers of this time, the farm was lost to Bank foreclosure. Grandpa Harter, having carpenter skills, was able to obtain a job building houses for the Mill Company. My father finished the 4th grade before starting to work on and off for the Mill. His skill was operating slashers and did so until he retired. I have an envelope where, on January 30, 1943, Daddy made \$23.00 that week. \$0.23 was taken out for social security and \$2.25 was taken out for rent. Although Daddy only finished the 4th grade he lettered in high school football.

My grandfather Highsmith was reared in the [New Holland, Ga.](#) area. Rabbit Town, just outside [New Holland](#), was named after Grandpa and his brother Dave. They raised and sold rabbits as teen agers. Grandpa worked in the [New Holland](#) Cotton Mill before moving to Anderson SC where he worked in one of the Abney Cotton Mills. All my grandfather Highsmith’s siblings, Dave, Mertie, Maye, Lonnie, Maudie and Katie worked in the [New Holland Plant](#). While visiting I can recall being scared to death having to go to the storm shelter every time a storm came up because of the lingering fear of [the devastating tomodo](#) which almost destroyed [New Holland](#). As a side note, not unlike many women mill workers, they all dipped snuff. Grandpa later moved to Ninety Six where he worked at the Ninety Six Cotton Mill.

My mother only finished the 6th grade due to the death of her mother. Until marriage she was “mother” to her brother and 2 sisters. The story goes that mother and daddy met at a carnival after daddy volunteered to wrestle with the “Great Swede” and threw the Swede out of the ring.

Oh, how many wonderful memories of life on the mill village. We children owned the roads and the streets. They were used for skating, bicycles, scooters and home-made wagons made from wheels, wood, leather and axles from the Mill.

That is until the Mill Sheriff ran us off which lasted only until he was out of sight. We played cow pasture football and baseball, sometimes with hog bladders during hog killing time. Almost all flew home made kites made out of newspaper glued together with starch. Flying paper airplanes, stick built airplanes and sail boats were many of our hobbies, especially mine. I also designed, built and flew gas powered control line planes and gliders. This was with my own money.

In 1943 Daddy was only making \$23.00 a week before \$2.25 was deducted for weekly rent and \$0.23 for social security. Once a month he had to pay for electricity and fuel in winter. The take home pay was then only around \$10.00. Laundry was free. It was delivered in a sack reeking of Clorox.

BB guns and sling shots kept the sheriff busy chasing us boys which generally led to a good spanking with a leather belt (leather from the mill). Shooting marbles for keepers usually caused some skirmishes. You could generally find a bunch of girls jumping rope and playing hopscotch. Sliding down the "big" hill on cardboard from the mill was a real treat. There were always groups of children playing and eating homemade biscuits and cornbread with molasses and jelly. Boy can I remember picking blackberries for pies and jelly while scratching those chigger bites. Saturdays meant it was movie show time where most of us children spent hours watching "Cowboy and Indian" movies. Yes growing up on the village was almost like a big party for kids, but must admit there were a few skirmishes here and there.

Most people walked to work. In the late afternoons the streets were generally full of people walking, visiting whomever was sitting on the front porch. The talk always got around to mill talk or just village gossip. Mill talk was generally the subject at Sunday family dinners. Us children, having to sit at the table until we had eaten every bite on our plate, could almost run any job in the mill from just listening.

All was not peaches and cream. There was wood to be cut for heating and for the cooking stove, coal for the coal grate, chickens, cows and hogs to be fed and watered, grass to be cut with a manual push mower. The Mill Sheriff made sure the yards were kept neat and there was no "hanky panky" going on with somebody's spouse, yes this is true. In winter only the kitchen and "living room" were heated. Baths were in a tin tub in the kitchen with water heated on the wood stove. Summers were often steamy with only a fan for relief. No refrig. Had ice box and ice delivered from the ice house. Many Sunday get-togethers would find a chunk of ice in a pan with a fan blowing across it.

As mentioned I was born on the Mill village and lived there until my senior year in High School. I attended the Mill Village School which went thru the 6th grade then went to the uptown school where we met many children whom we did not know existed. ([See story about similar school in Pacolet Mills.](#)) After all the

train tracks divided the town and to a great extent divided the people.

Village people were called “lint heads”. Our need from the other side of the racks, except for the \$0.10 store and movie theatre, was small given that the Mill owned a grocery/hardware store, clothing store, gas station and built Churches for us. ([See story about similar Company Store in Pacolet Mills.](#)) We also had a [textile league baseball team](#) which brought loads of fun for all of Ninety Six. We boys would chase fly ball outside the stadium which were redeemed for free admission. Yes life was fairly simple back then. The [Mill steam whistle](#) blew at 5:00 am to awake the first shift, again at 6:00 as a warning and again at 6:15 to be on the way.

There were many opportunities for work to keep us out of trouble and develop a sense of responsibility. The Mill hired dozens of summer help to paint and mend fences, spray for insects, clean out the mill ponds and do non manufacturing jobs inside the plant. Instead of working with the Mill I chose to deliver newspapers, both morning and evening routes, and cut grass. The morning route was brutal. The first shift workers wanted their paper by 6:00 am which meant I started delivery at 5:00 am. I also worked in a grocery store and worked on a farm in the summer. Daddy co-signed a loan at the local bank for a 1939 ford car when I turned 14 and had my driver’s license. He said I needed to learn a little more “money management”.

I checked into Clemson A & M College, better known now as Clemson University, in September 1955. Clemson was then full Military. We thought we were sharp in those Cadet uniforms. We were not allowed to leave campus for the first 6 weeks and no cars were allowed for the freshman year. Saturday classes were until 12:00 noon. In May, 1959 I graduated with a BS degree in Mechanical Engineering and a set of 2nd Lieutenant Bars for the US Army. Taking a job with Alis Chalmers in Cincinnati I worked there until having to report for active duty in October. The Army was taking control of all the light tactical aircraft from the Air Force and all college engineering graduates were sent to the US Army Material Command in St. Louis. About the only way I knew I was in service was wearing my Military uniform to work in the engineering dept.

It was while at Clemson I met my wife, Joyce Porter, on a blind date. As with blind dates I knew not what to expect but when she opened the door, her father right behind her, I said to myself WOW I hope she likes me. Her father was not impressed and said she could not go anywhere with me (I was in College and she in High School) but we could sit in the swing on the front porch. Well, to make a long story short we were married and “the good Lord willing and the creeks don’t rise” we will celebrate 65 years this year.

Joyce’s parents were “cotton mill people” having worked at Catechee Mill in Catechee, SC. (there is a great book named “The Catechee Story by Jerry Alexander” which presents village life and the changing face of textiles”. They were working for a Greenwood Mills plant in Greenwood when I met Joyce. I lived

and breathed work in cotton mills from both sides of our families and they were mutually disappointed when I, we, decided to enter another field and move away from Ninety Six/Greenwood. I sorta promised Joyce that we would come back home after a few years.

After Military service, I took a job at Arnold Engineering Development Center (AEDC) in Tullahoma Tenn. Tullahoma was a “mill” town having several shoe and baseball mills but no mill villages. AEDC which at this time was the largest wind tunnel test facility in the world. It was moved from Texas in the early 1950’s to Tullahoma because of the cheap TVA power, the lake and abundance of land which was part of a WWII Air Force Base

My wife was highly disappointed with the town at first sight and even refused to live there at first. I told her about the beautiful lake, tennis courts, golf course and hunting reserves but that had little effect in winning her over. A promise to go shopping in Nashville and maybe stay here only 3 or 4 years did the trick. Well, we bought a boat the second year and built a house the third year. I then got a promotion and asked Joyce for another 3 years. This kept on with another promotion and shortly after I was named to Manager of the Design Section. By this time Joyce had settled in and she loved this “little” town and all our friends and the schools for our 2 daughters.

The love of textiles never left my mind/blood and I had a couple interviews with Greenwood Mills over the years but none seemed right. Our move back “home” came quite sudden. I was in a meeting one day with my big boss when our secretary came in and said I had a phone call which sounded like long distance. I told her to take a message but my boss told me to go ahead and take the call. This was a call from Greenwood Mills offering me a job as Supt. of Shops in the Engineering Dept. Upon asking me if the call was important I must have stuttered a couple minutes before answering with a “made up story”. Upon telling my wife the good news, just like a woman, she said she wasn’t sure she wanted to move now. We had been there almost 14 years and our oldest daughter was in the 11th grade and Joyce was taking classes at Motlow College.

Well, we did move back to Ninety Six in 1976 and built a house on some land we had previously purchased. My job was great. Greenwood Mills like so many other textile companies was almost self sufficient with in-house capabilities for maintenance and manufacture of parts of which I was Manager. However, some 10 or so years later all of these facilities were shut down. This was really the start of the overseas imports and soon thereafter plant closures. I was moved to manager of Engineering Design and Environmental.

In 1995, I was named Vice President of Engineering. I worked full time until I was 68 and then part time until the day before I was 75. I had told them I was not working past 75 but I did come back now and then until I was 80 working on environmental matters. The last years were so sad as we continued to shut down plant after plant. We shut down 3 plants in Ninety Six, 6 in Greenwood, 3 in Jo-

anna, 1 in Liberty, 2 in Orangeburg, 1 in Lindale, 2 in El Paso, 1 in McMinville, 1 in Cookville, 1 in Cleveland Tenn. and numerous Sales offices. We had gone overseas with plants in Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina and Pakistan and I saw all of these lost. Greenwood Mills has one plant now in operation. Our Government allowed a viable industry to go away along with a way-of-life so cherished by many.

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