

Interview with Maria Butler Meltzer and Brenda Lankford Mollett on February 8, 1988, in Maria Meltzer's kitchen by Mike Regnier. (M=Maria, B=Brenda)

R: Why should the history of Bibb City be preserved?

M: Because it is a unique community. It is very unique in the way it treated the people that lived there, the way it took care of people, the pride that we had knowing that we lived there when we were children. We never knew we were poor until somebody told us. We had everything we needed. We had recreation facilities at our disposal, the Comer Auditorium. We had a swimming pool.

B: A bowling alley.

M: We had a summer library of our own.

B: The clinic.

M: We had the shopping areas that were in walking distance.

B: The theater. Everything was convenient.

M: Everybody knew each other.

B: Instead of having one set of parents you had about 50 or 60 sets of parents. Because everybody looked after everybody else.

M: If you did something wrong it was reported to the parents. You knew that you could not sneak around and get away with it. Everybody took care of everybody's kids.

R: Did you actually live in Bibb City?

M: I lived on 2nd Avenue which was across the street from Bibb City. If you crossed the street then you were right at the Comer Auditorium. I didn't live in the village like Brenda did. But I lived close enough that I was in it. I went to the school. I participated in all the activities, and had use of the facilities.

B: We were extra nice to her because she was an outsider.

R: Brenda, where did you live in Bibb City?

B: I grew up on Woodland Circle. When I was a sophomore in high school, we lived at Hemlock Drive.

R: When were you aware that your father was a "mill worker"?

M: From the time I remember. I've always known it. Ever since I had a remembrance because he used to work on second shift. I remember when I was 3 or 4 years old him coming to pick me up at night at my grandmother's house when she used to keep me. I've always known it.

R: Did both of your parents work in the mill?

M: Right.

B: Both my parents worked in the mill. But the thing at my house was they did shop talk at the dinner table. The children weren't allowed to speak, just the parents. We got an education about the mill at supper.

M: We had shop talk at our table. I was allowed to speak. I was the only child. More than once I'd sit and listen to them talk. My father was a loom fixer. My mother was a weaver. So I listened to both sides of the story. The loom fixer would always come by and fix the looms for the weaver. The weaver had to make a certain amount of production in order to be successful in order to keep their job. They had to produce a certain amount of perfect cloth. They had so many looms to run. There was a lot of politics involved in the mill. The weaver, if she didn't get along with her particular loom fixer, he could flag her looms when they broke down and go do something else and make excuses for not getting to hers. If he liked her he'd fix them quickly if he could, and she'd make more production.

B: So your daddy fixed your momma's looms.

M: No, he worked at The Swift and my mother worked at The Bibb. They would talk about how the weaver was dumb and didn't know how to work the loom correctly. He'd go back and fix it and fix it, and they would shut it down. My mother would say the loom fixer would never fix it correctly, and it's causing me problems. I heard that talk all the time. I grew up with it at the supper table. That's what they talked about. My dad made my mother's reed hooks. They made their own aprons from the X-cloth that was taken out of the mill. They were self sufficient in everything they had. It was all to the mill.

R: What jobs did your parents perform?

B: My father was a doffer. My mother was a spinner.

R: Did either of you ever go to the mill with them?

B: No. Inside the mill. No.

M: No, they wouldn't allow us; we were under age.

B: Even when I got old enough my father was very insistent that I never set foot in the mill because the work was so hard.

R: What did he see as the way out?

B: Education.

M: Same here, I was threatened with every inch of my life, if I ever set foot in a mill. You will not go into a cotton mill, I don't care what you do. You will not!

B: Actually my father's stipulation to all of the girls, there were three of us, was you must finish high school and work one year so that if you marry a man too sorry to support you; you can support him. But that did not include working in the mill.

R: Did you know any young children or teenagers that went to work in the mill?

B: Yes. You weren't in DCT (High School work program), were you? Some of the people in DCT at Jordan High School worked in the mill.

R: But none 14 years or younger?

M: No. Usually the high school drop outs went to the mill if they didn't make it in school. If they weren't successful, when they got to 16 and wanted to drop out, you found a lot of those in the mill.

B: I know some people that I grew up with that are working at The Bibb today. They are not laborers. They are in management.

R: What about integration? Did blacks live in Bibb City when you grew up?

B: Absolutely not.

M: No.

R: Did they work in the mill?

B: Yes.

M: Yes.

B: Where would they live? Maybe in Beallwood?

B: Second Avenue.

M: That's true, on the other side, down the street toward downtown. We lived in the North Highland area, but I believe some of them did live on Second Avenue. It was Second Avenue going toward downtown. I don't remember seeing that many blacks. I remember some.

B: I don't know where they lived, but they worked there. Something that I always thought was interesting is that soldiers were not welcomed in Bibb City.

R: Regardless of race?

B: Yes.

M: That's true.

R: Did you get a reason for that?

B: No. Soldiers just did not come to the city.

M: They were transient. My dad would not even let me even look at soldier, and I know Brenda's wouldn't either. They were taboo. They were men away from home, away from their stable environment, sowing their wild oats. They were not stable at all. They did not have the same value system that we had; therefore, they were not to be included in our community. They were deviants of sort, and they would disrupt what we had there. They were very protective of the community we had.

R: You mentioned when you talked about why preserve the community that it was distinct. You mentioned that there was a clinic there for the workers. Was that workers families and anybody that was associated with the mill?

B: Yes, anyone.

R: Was it paid for totally by the mill?

B: Yes. In fact the nurse would visit when someone was sick. She would make house calls. But everybody went there for their immunizations and scraped knees. Whatever happened to you.

M: I had a fish bone caught in my throat one time, and didn't realize how bad it was until the next day at school. I walked right to the clinic right near the school, and they took care of it.

B: They had a nursery school right there too. That's how I remember the clinic. I jumped on a nail, and they took me to the clinic. I got my shots, got bandaged, and they took me back to the nursery school.

R: This nursery was for preschool children provided by the mill? Was anything ever deducted from wages that you know of?

M: Yes, it was provided by the mill. Nothing was deducted that I'm aware of.

B: I don't believe there was. The only thing that my parents paid for was their rent. It was not deducted from their wages. I think their rent was \$3.00 or \$4.00 a week.

R: How much did the mill ownership control those houses? Were people evicted for reasons?

B: The only time I knew of anyone moving out was because they left the mill.

R: Did they maintain the houses or was that left up to the workers?

B: Constantly. They repaired the houses. Whether the house needed it or not, they would come by and paint the outside. Then the next year they would get the inside. All houses were painted white trimmed in black.

M: New roofs.

B: All the plumbing was done. All the electrical things were done. All the people had to do was live there.

M: And maintain it by just cleaning the house.

R: Do any one of you have younger brothers and sisters?

B: No.

M: No.

R: Were there other women around when they were pregnant and worked in the mill, were they taken care of by the mill in terms of their pregnancy and delivery?

M: I don't know. I didn't have any association with that.

B: I know one lady that was pregnant, but rephrase your question. .

R: Did they get paid for maternity leave?

B: No. If you didn't work you didn't get paid.

M: That's right.

R: What about injury? Did that apply to injury also?

B: Yes. But she had a job when she was able to go back to work.

R: Management, did you ever see an owner or an upper manager? Did they ever come around or visit? Did your parents ever talk about the upper management?

B: Yes, they always talked about the upper management.

M: I think some of them came on a social basis, but they didn't come on a professional basis. Brenda mentioned something about a stratification in where you lived in Bibb City. Where the foremans and the higher ups and...

B: Supervisors lived on 1st Avenue. The regular workers lived on Woodland Circle, on the most northern side, furthest away from the mill, is the best way to put it.

R: Marie, when we were talking, you talked about first shift, second shift, third shift. Was it a promotional system where you worked your way from third shift to first shift?

M: Usually if you came on board, you got the graveyard shift. You would work until you had proven yourself, or they could see a vacancy on one of the other shifts, then you could be moved to the second shift. First shift is 7:00-3:00, second is 3:00-11:00, third was from 11:00-7:00. If you had first shift, you were in good shape. I don't remember my parents working on the third shift, but I do remember them working on the second shift, until I was about 9 or 10 years old. Then one of them was promoted to first shift, and a couple of years later the other one got first shift. They thought they had it good when they could go in at 7:00 and come home at 3:00. They could have a normal schedule. Usually when you came on board, you got graveyard shift until you stayed there a while or somebody vacated and you could move in. It was a hierarchy that way too. The older people who had been there longer and the best workers, usually got first shift.

R: Did your parents end up on the same shift at all?

B: They both worked on first since I was very young. They started at the mill when they were very young. In fact they were both working there when they met.

R: Was there a certain sexual segregation to mill work? Were there certain things men did and women did?

M: Women were usually weavers

B: ...or spinners.

M: Men were usually loom fixers or foremen

B: ...or heavy manual labor. The job my father did is called doffing. Since I never seen anyone in action, the best I can say is this consists of bending over constantly and taking a spool off and putting another one on. There is supposed to be great pride in the amount you can do in so many seconds. Women never did that either. The more strenuous the labor, they didn't do.

R: Was there also a pay difference for those jobs?

B: My parents never talked money in front of us.

M: I believe there was, but I couldn't prove it. It seems like I remember a little bit of pay difference in those jobs. Mother being a weaver, made pretty good. My dad being a loom fixer made pretty good. Those were pretty good jobs.

B: But they had people that just swept the floor.

R: There is a church right by the mill. Was that built by the mill that you know of and staffed by the mill?

M: Porter Memorial?

B: I don't know if it was built by the mill or not, but I know that a Mr. Porter was a big shot with the company. It was named after him. I would venture to say probably.

M: We probably have the information in some data we just collected. We can get that information to you later. There are a lot of newspaper clippings that we are going through right now. I think we saw something about Porter Memorial in it.

R: Was attendance ever expected or checked on in the church?

B: No.

M: No. It wasn't a mandatory thing.

B: It was there for convenience.

M: My parents never went to church. We were raised Catholic.

B: The only church in the village is the Baptist Church.

R: Did you ever attend it at all?

B: Yes.

M: I attended it, but my parents didn't.

R: Was there ever any sort of mill message that was associated with the church, like hard work, the work ethic?

M: Yes.

R: Did it come through loud and clear?

B: Yes, you don't get anything unless you work for it.

M: Work hard, do good.

B: You'll be rewarded.

M: That's right.

R: That the mill will take care of it's own?

B: No. They never mentioned the mill. Just the scriptures, hard line scriptures.

R: Did they run a Sunday School?

B: Yes. It's a part of the Southern Baptist Association. Their doctrines were basically the same as all the other Southern Baptist Churches. I think at that particular time that Marie and I were growing up, all Southern Baptists were teaching hard work, big rewards.

M: They did pull that religious thread through the school.

B: Oh, yes!

M: I remember very vividly one Monday a teacher asking everyone what they did on Sunday. My dad fished, and we had a boat. We used to go out on Sunday afternoon, and he'd fish and we'd stay

on the lake.

B: They make you want to lie if you didn't go to church.

M: She asked me what we did. I was very honest. I told her that we went out on Sunday afternoon, and my dad went fishing. I was stood up in front of the class and made to feel very guilty. They asked me if I went to church and I said, "No." And I was used as an example in front of the class. Then you just lied from then on.

B: Except they got real slick. If they thought you were lying they'd say, "What was your memory verse yesterday?"

R: Was this elementary school?

M: Yes, Bibb City Elementary School.

B: All the teachers were old maids.

M: And they didn't cut you no slack.

B: They were "school" teachers.

M: In the true sense of the word.

R: If you got in trouble at school then you got in trouble at home?

M: You got it. They were sitting on the doorstep waiting for you. Parents! By the time you got home. I was sick one time with an ear infection. The teacher came to the house every day to give me my lessons, to give me everything, to talk to my parents to see how I was doing. You didn't get away with anything. You were very well monitored in that area.

B: If you were sick, you were really sick, or you were in school.

R: Was that through eighth grade?

M: Yes, through eighth.

R: Then you went to Jordan?

M: I went to Arnold Junior High School.

B: I went to Columbus Junior High School.

R: Then you went to Jordan?

B: Yes.

M: Yes.

R: Did they change when you got out of Bibb City when you went to Arnold and Columbus? Did the mill feeling change?

M: Yes, definitely. In fact I had my eyes opened to a lot of different things. I realized that fashionable clothes were a thing that people really cared about. I realized that you were judged by the amount of money you had or what you didn't have. I realized more stratification in Junior High School than I ever did in elementary. We just weren't aware of it. We were all kids. We all had a good time.

B: ...and it didn't matter about the clothes. Brenda and I had a friend, Sue Brian Kirkland, (Wayne Kirkland is the principal of Jordan night school) who didn't have hardly anything. Wayne grew up in Bibb City.

M: Looking back on it, we realized that they were very poor. They lived in the Anderson Village, and there were a lot of kids and a small place. It didn't matter to us.

B: You may find it interesting too that Anderson Village, was not the village. It was separate. And there was a different kind of people that lived there.

M: But it didn't matter to us that Sue didn't have a lot. We just had a good time together.

R: When you got into that different setting did people have negative nicknames?

M: Yes. Lint head. River rat. All those we were labeled. I had a lot of people call me that.

B: Lint heads?

M: You laugh in high school in front of your friends, but it bothered me. I remember my mother coming out of the mill many nights at 11:00 with lint all in her hair. I knew what they were saying. She worked harder than anybody ever knew. She was a slave to the mill. It irritated me that people would do that. The people that were saying that, their parents didn't work that hard. They had management jobs or they were plumbers. They didn't know. They really downed us once we got out of our community environment.

B: At Arnold I think there was a higher class people than what was at Columbus Junior High School. I never saw any of that.

M: Arnold was a brand new school at the time. It had just been opened a year when I went there.

R: What year would that have been?

M: 1960-1961.

B: The difference that I noticed was that I no longer felt secure like I did in Bibb City. I'm out here in the middle of a part of town that I am totally unfamiliar with, and there is nobody to take care of me but me. That was frightening. Maybe there were so many of us from Bibb City that those other kids from Columbus Junior High didn't do this. Just a select few went to Arnold. Another thing at that time in 1960 is when we moved from 2nd Avenue to Nankipoo where my dad still lives. So we made a transition. One interesting note, I moved in April, 1960, I was in the band and in the eighth grade. Mrs. Bentley, just a great person, the principal at the time, did not want to see me transfer from Bibb City Elementary to Nankipoo from April to May. She talked to my dad, and told him that if he would bring me to the teachers cottage at 6:30 in the morning, that she would have the kindergarten room open. I was to go in there and sit down and play or entertain myself until about 8:00 when they opened the doors to the school. Mrs. Bentley's room was right next to the kindergarten room. I'd go in there and when she got dressed and ready she'd let me come into her house. I would sit with her until school started at 8:30 then go to school. Then my dad would pick me up in the afternoon. Not only did she do that for the extended period of time, but in the summer we had a band program. She drove out to Nankipoo once a week and got me in the morning, took me back to band practice so I could be with my friends, kept me all day and dropped me off at the mill at 3:00. That's what kind of devotion those people had to their students. She did not want to see me thrown out.

B: That's typical of all the teachers that were there. They were very dedicated.

R: You mentioned a teacher's cottage. Were the teachers employees of the mill?

B: They were employees of the Muscogee County School System, but the mill provided the teacher's cottage.

M: For them to live there. There was also a hotel that some of them lived in.

B: It's torn down. Some of the teachers preferred not to live in the teacher's cottage, but they got special rates at the Bibb City Hotel.

R: That hotel is no longer there?

B: No. It's been torn down. Much to our dismay. They even tore the jail down. The jail was never used all I ever saw in there was bicycles.

R: That was the Bibb City jail?

B: Right. This kitchen is bigger than the Bibb City jail was.

R: Is that where they have the courthouse now?

B: No. The Bibb City jail was next to the river. Think about that. Have you ever been on River Avenue?

R: No.

B: You've missed a real treat. The jail was on River Avenue.

R: Is that north of the mill or south of the mill?

B: North. There's not much of Bibb City south of the mill. The superintendent's mansion and that's about it.

M: We even had a nursery. When you talked about jail, it came to mind. There was a time when I stayed in the nursery. The mill ran the nursery, first, second and third shift nurseries. I think Brenda stayed in it for an extended period of time too.

B: Yes I did. They wouldn't keep my brother very long.

M: We were inmates together.

R: You mentioned the band. Was that the school band?

M: Yes.

B: Actually it was Muscogee County Elementary Band.

M: What they had was those students interested in band at Bibb City Elementary. You had maybe 20 kids. Out of these 20 kids, if you were good enough you could join the Muscogee Elementary Band, which had rehearsals at Columbus High School on Monday night about 8:00. We could if we were selected join that band if we were selected. Esto Smith, now the principal at Wood Elementary, was our band director at the time. He was an itinerant part for our music teacher, and one of his school was Bibb Elementary. We went to the Comer Auditorium and had band rehearsals.

B: The musical instruments were furnished by the mill.

M: That's true.

B: There was no cost to the parents if the children wanted to be in the band. If the children wanted to participate in anything there was no cost. They had a Mr. Porter who left a trust fund to the school. They had Girl Reserves, which could be interpreted as discrimination, because he didn't leave anything for the boys. From the time you were in kindergarten to the eighth grade, they had Girl Reserves. The smaller girls up to the sixth grade went to Atlanta to Grant Park every year. It cost the parents nothing. They toured the Cyclorama. Seventh, eighth, and ninth graders, (even though the ninth graders no longer went to school there) were treated to a trip. One year they went to Florida, the next year to the mountains, and the next year it was to Washington, D.C. It didn't cost the parents anything.

M: My daddy wouldn't let me go.

B: The only bad thing about it was that we had to wear silly looking uniforms, so they could keep up with us.

R: Your dad just want you that far away from him?

M: That got it. Everybody went but me.

B: I was the youngest of 5 and my parents were glad to see me go.

M: Everybody in the whole school went but "moi". I was sick and stayed home that whole week.

R: One time I heard you talk about Christmas time, that they provided a Christmas box.

M: They did. All the workers at the mill were given a pass or a slip of some kind. At given dates they could go to the Comer Auditorium. You walked down in the basement. What I remember is the

pretty Christmas boxes in stripes and different decorations for different years. They were Christmas decorated boxes. I remember them stacked up as far as I could see down the hall. You handed them a pass, and you got a box. I believe it was about as big as a place mat. It would have all kinds of nuts, apples, oranges, candy and raisins. It was fun to go to get it. It was a big deal to go down and get your Christmas box. You were lined up. They were coming out of the auditorium waiting to get their box. We just thought it was a big deal.

R: Was there any other time of the year that they had organized entertainment for kids? Like Halloween?

B: The Halloween Carnival. The clean up campaign was in the spring.

M: Now that was important. Tell him about that.

B: The clean up campaign was just what it says. You go around and pick up trash. The interesting thing that appealed to the kids was that we got to ride in the back of a pick up truck. When it was all over they treated us to some ice cream. That was our pay, but it was a big deal. The clean up campaign meant that you got your picture in the Bibb Recorder, which was the village newspaper.

B: Maria and I were talking about that the other day. Today's kids—I wonder how many of them could you get to get on the back of a pick up truck and pick up trash all day long. This was from early morning to evening.

M: One thing that Brenda mentioned, The Bibb Recorder, is going to be a very useful tool in the information we want to collect about Bibb City. It was a paper that was printed on a regular basis about Bibb City. Looking back on some of those copies that had kindergarten graduates and first grade does this, every school function, even the summer baseball club of random boys, was an article written. If a kid did something good, it was written in there. It was distributed throughout Bibb City. Everybody read it. It was something that they just took care of. I saw one article where they had a summer baseball group of boys about eight or nine years old. All of them were there but four kids, and they took a picture. The article read that we could not find the other four boys. They were somewhere in the neighborhood. The next Bibb Recorder the pictures of those four boys was in there and said supplemental to last edition. We just wanted you to know these were the ones that were missing that day that Mary Barnes could not find. That was one of the teachers. They constantly reinforced that community effort by that newspaper. By just showing everything like the clean up campaign, the Girl Reserves. Countless articles and the teachers that were involved with the different activities. They had all kinds of pictures.

B: The teachers were involved with every part of the community. I'd say they were the center. If the teacher said it, it was gospel.

M: They were very strong.

R: What about the Halloween Carnival?

B: After school we all went to the Comer Auditorium, and they would show films of the Little Rascal movies. After that it was similar to what the Halloween Carnivals are today, except that you really bobbed for apples. Face and head and everything down in the water. You really had someone to tell your fortune. It was an afternoon and evening of entertainment. People, supervisors and foreman from the mill, were there, playing with the kids. Anyone that wanted to go could go. It wasn't just for the kids. It was for everybody.

R: When you were in school, what did you do during the days during the summer?

B: They had a library in Comer Auditorium for us. That's where I spent a lot of my time. The auditorium was open, and there was basketball, ping pong, badminton.

M: They had ping pong tables, badminton. The boys could play basketball all year long. The girls

could skate out front where the brick is. There was a walkway in the front area. You went to the Comer Auditorium or the playgrounds. You knew you would have someone to play with.

B: There was no supervision there. They had one black lady there that was the caretaker who kept the floors looking good. But as far as adult supervision, there was none.

M: Fred Hyder might be seen around some.

R: Who was that?

B: He was the athletic director.

M: He is still around.

B: He lives over near the airport now.

M: Coach Hyder.

B: He remembers us all even to this day.

M: He says "Hey, Maria." Tell him about Ethel Bentley, what she said the other day when we called her.

B: Maria coaxed me into talking to Miss O'Kelly, one of the school teachers at the Bibb for years and years. She and Mrs. Bentley live together now. I said "Miss O'Kelly, this is Brenda Lankford." There was a long pause. I said, "Do you remember me?" "Oh yes, Brenda." I said, "Maria Butler and I are thinking about working on this project, and would like some information from you." "Who'd you say?" I said, "Maria Butler." "Well, let me check with Ethel. Oh, Ethel remembers Maria."

M: That gives you a good feelin' after this many years.

R: What is your most vivid memory of your years in the mill village?

B: I always felt secure there. I never was afraid. When I was growing up people left their doors open 24 hours a day 7 days a week. There was nothing to be afraid of. You didn't have one set of parents, you had a whole village full of parents. That was just a warm comfortable feeling. It was a rude awakening to go to Columbus Junior High School and Jordan High School. That's not there. As we all know that's not any where any more.

M: That's why attention should be brought to what was there.

B: They kept the kids occupied all the time. I can't remember any of the boys or girls either one getting into any serious trouble with the law. I don't even remember any of them attempting to smoke until they were in high school.

R: Until they were corrupted by Jordan.

B: The outside sources.

M: Social workers would do well to examine that community.

B: The village had a social worker too. Her name was Miss Skipper. She is still around. She just remarried.

M: Is she the one who worked at Flossie's'?

B: No. But they were related.

M: Another thing The Bibb did for kids in the summer was that all of us collected in front of the mill at shift changing time. Especially for those kids who had to be down at the mill at 11:00 at night to wait for their parents, as I often did, they showed cartoons. They set up the movie camera. They had a screen just as you walked into the mill on the left hand side. They would show cartoons in the summertime for us kids, on Friday and Saturday night all during the summer, so we would have something to do while we waited for our parents. I remember watching many cartoons out there, just sitting on the steps that lead down to the mill. They would line us up there to sit on the steps.

B: Let me tell you something that I think is important. The mill workers not choice whether or not they gave to what was called the Red Feather. It is no United Givers. They were forced to give to Red Feather. My parents would really gripe and complain about that.

M: One reason today that I do not give to United Givers is because I have memories of being at the table at 11:00 at night. We usually got together. I remember many a night my mother sitting at the table crying. My dad would talk to her and say we have to get through this together.

What happened was they were told to give a week's wages to United Givers. Twelve or thirteen dollars was big money to us back then. If she did not give the amount they thought was right to the mill, they would harass her. They pulled her into the office. The loom fixer would tear up her looms. She would be excommunicated all together. They would not talk to her. They would do things to her. They would make her cry. She came home many a night crying until she finally gave in and had them take the money. Until this day I will not give to United Givers, because I hate it so bad.

B: There were other women up there that were a little spunkier than Maria's mom. With Maria's mom's being like it was that's understandable. If they felt like they were being harassed they could go over their bosses head to the superintendent of the mill. He usually would tell the foreman to back off and leave them alone. It was cut throat with the Red Feather stuff.

R: There is a strong sense of community in the Bibb Mill Village. What was the need for donations for this Red Feather? Did it go outside the community?

M: It was for fat cats. The top administration getting pats on the back from somebody else from a higher source. It's like United Givers today with their quotas...

M: ...with their banquets and dinners. They get accolades for having the whole organization giving 100%. We have it in the school system. It's everywhere to this day.

R: But if someone in the mill village found himself in need, would they go to this organization or would they go to someone else?

B: No. They had a tornado hit here in 1953. Our home was one of the homes that was totally destroyed. My mother lost everything but a mirror. The mill found us a place to stay the next day. The woman's club (another little outlet of the mill village) replenished her towels and sheets and all of her linens. They helped my parents until they got settled again. When the house we were living in was repaired, they moved us back in there. It wasn't just the mill. It was the neighborhood as a unit. They had volunteer firemen in each block. When a fire broke out, everybody went to the fire to put out the fire. It's like something you would read about in the 1800's in the West. When they had barn raisings. That's what the community was like.

M: The business men in Bibb City cared about the kids. We had a man named Mr. Hirsh. He owned Hirsh's Department Store. He would give a nickel for every A that the students of Bibb City made.

B: You had to carry your report card around there on report card day.

M: You carried it around there. I remember having five A's one six weeks. I went up there, and he had this huge container with nothing but nickels. The CB&T bank was right next door, so he loaded up. That afternoon when the kids got out the first thing everybody did if they had an A was go to Hirsh's. Everybody would sit there and talk. We had a Bank's Pharmacy, Forte Pharmacy, Talley's Hardware, plenty of places to spend it. He would do that. The money would go right back into the little businesses there, but we all knew that if we made an A, Mr. Hirsh would have a nickel for us at the end of six weeks. We all went there, every one of us.

R: You mentioned a Woman's Club? What was that?

B: Women got together every so often, and it was like a little social group. They compared recipes, the latest in patterns. I don't know of any woman in the village that didn't sew.

R: Did the men have anything comparable?

B: Yes, they had the Progress Club. A couple of years ago it was still there. The Woman's Club was in a room in the back of Comer Auditorium. The bowling alley was in the basement. They had the

little bowling balls without the holes in them.

R: Duck pins?

B: Yes. The Progress Club was next to the mill. I don't know what went on there, because I was forbidden to even peep into the window. But I do know that they had pool tables, and I'm sure they drank beer and did all that other stuff. That was for the men.

R: There doesn't seem to be many night clubs or bars in Bibb City. Was that something that was looked down upon?

B: Yes it was.

M: You worked too hard. You didn't have time.

B: When my parents were younger in the early 50's when Phenix City was wild, they loved going to Phenix City. But I think they kept those things away from their families. I think that was the intent.

M: I don't remember any of that. My parents didn't drink anyway. That was just never a place we would have gone to.

B: I don't know about Maria's family, but my family instilled in me, they thought you should be peaceful and never start any trouble, but never walk away from a fight.

M: Amen!

B: I remember a girl that had bullied me for months and months. She was older, bigger, and taller. I went home one day crying, and my father would not let me in the house to have supper until I went back and beat her up. So I did. They just taught you to do basic things.

R: Survive?

B: Yes, how to survive in the real world. We didn't even realize it. Another thing you might find interesting is the mills effort during the war.

M: They also had a vocational school for the men at Bibb City. We were looking over some of the articles in the Bibb Recorder, and they gave a lot of attention to the vocational graduates of the Bibb Mill.

B: The military recognized the textile worker during the war.

R: What about injuries or debilitation as a result of working at the mill? Either one of your parents suffer? There is a lot made of the brown lung that they suffered from inhaling the dust.

B: My father died from lung cancer. But he never blamed the mill. My father was one of those kinds of people that was given the opportunity for promotion to foreman, and he refused to do that, because he said he was not a politician and didn't want to be. He was extremely devoted to the mill. He never missed a day of work that I can remember. Sick or well, he was there doing his job.

M: My mother died of cancer. She never directly related it to the mill. Although I suppose it's in the realm of possibilities. We will never know.

B: I know a carpenter that worked for The Bibb, that repaired the houses, who lost three fingers. They continued to let him work. He had a job as long as he wanted it. He worked. He wasn't a free loader.

R: If he had not been able to work then he would not have been provided for?

B: I don't know of anybody that happened to.

M: I don't either.

B: That's an interesting question. I know when anyone died, and their family was living in the village, they didn't stay there long after.

M: My dad or your mother could probably answer that.

B: or my mother could.

R: When you were around were there people that lived in Bibb City that had retired from the mill? Were there retirees that lived there?

M: I don't remember having any association with them. The age and the people I was with were usually my mother and daddy's age.

B: I do know of one couple that lived there. Maybe there were others. It was the Lawson family's grandparents. I don't know if they were providing a service to the mill, or why they were still there. I know that both of them were too old to be working. They didn't work, 'cause they entertained us in the summer.

R: You said you were strongly warned about never working in the mill. On the other hand there is an awfully lot of pride that the workers expressed in devotion and loyalty to the mill. Was it strictly the work?

M: It was the fact that our parents wanted us to have better. My parents worked on the farm. He worked hard. He came to the mill after the war. It was hard work. He just wanted me to have better out of life. He wanted me to have a higher type job. He wanted me to be a professional. He really wanted me to be a school teacher. He didn't want me to have to work as hard as he had to work his lifetime. He wanted me to have a higher standard of living.

B: At the time my parents worked there, there was no such thing as air conditioning. It was just physically hard. I could see how it could kill people before they were 40 years old. The temperatures would get up to 120-130 degrees in there. My daddy would brush his arms everyday when he came out. There wouldn't be a dry thread on their clothes anywhere. It's just extremely hard manual labor.

M: There was a dress shop in Bibb City, Flossie's. She would sell a certain type of clothing to accommodate the females working in the mills in the summer. It was a sleeveless cotton thin shirt and peddle pushers, blue jeans that would come right below the knee. They were light weight.

B: Most women wore dresses, because they were cooler.

M: Because she was a weaver and the kind of work she did, mother wore the blue jeans, because she was scared of the dress getting caught in the looms. They wore peddle pushers or slacks. In the summer time she wore the ones that came to the knee plus a thin sleeveless cotton blouse. When she came out in the afternoon, she had lint all in her hair. She was soaked. Her clothes were absolutely wet. She had to come home and totally change clothes.

B: I think it was because it was just hard physical labor. And it's standing eight hours a day...

M: ...walking and running.

R: You said there was very little time for breaks, even to eat a meal. They were there for eight hours.

B: Yes, they went to the dope wagon and the dope room. They called it that because they primarily drank coca-colas and ate cheese crackers. It doped you up. They ate candy bars, and it gave you a high. The junk food would give you an energy surge. You had a certain amount of time to eat lunch. You didn't linger around the bathroom. From what I remember my mother and daddy talking about it, you had to tell somebody where you were going when you left the job. She was in charge of 40 looms, and she would say I'm going to the bathroom. The foreman would come around. If he didn't see you he would come back a few minutes later, and you'd better be there. You didn't leave that job. You didn't leave those looms running without any supervision for any extended period of time.

R: Did either of you ever hear your parents talk about unions?

B: No. It was forbidden.

M: You don't say union.

R: Why?

B: You would have lost your job if you had talked union. That's what I picked up from my daddy.

M: Even to this day my dad will tell you that unions are bad.

B: I remember somebody came to the mill and wanted them to form a union in the '60s. Nobody talked to them. It was during Norma Rae. You just did not talk about the union, or you would lose your job. If you lost your job, these people who worked in the mill didn't know anything else to do.

M: You didn't talk to one. You didn't want an organizer to come around.

B: I think a couple of them approached The Bibb, and they just really had the employees scared to death. They met all kinds of resistance. But we are talking about almost 30 years ago that we remember.

R: They still are not union today are they?

B: No. I think they are coming around to a more participative type management, because they have a new thing called Quality Circles at The Bibb. The employees tell management that they think it would be more productive if they did it a different way.

M: Maybe it's a bit more humanistic.

B: At the time we remember it was just like working in mine somewhere. I can tell you this, by the time I got to high school, I knew I didn't want to work in the mill.

R: From everything you had seen and heard and been warned about?

B: Yes. Years ago they had windows in them. When they decided to air condition the place, they covered up all the windows, so they couldn't even see the light of day. That bothered my mother a lot, because she wanted to know what the weather was like since her house had been struck by a tornado. They blacked up all the windows, and they couldn't see out. The air conditioning helped, but it still wasn't cool. You just took a tour of that didn't you?

R: Yes. In certain parts they kept it intentionally cool, but other part they did not.

M: What you saw may have been modernized since then.

R: Definitely.

M: I remember going in the mill at Swift when I was 13 or 14 years old, and the sound was deafening. All you heard was thousands of looms running at high pitch. For a long time you didn't have any safeguard at all. When I was a teenager my dad started talking about having to wear ear plugs in the mill. They made him wear ear plugs. In the 60's there was a certain amount of awareness about health. The sound would just about...I remember my parents coming home talking about the sound still ringing in their ears.

R: They never made any attempt to put cotton in their ears?

B: No. I thought it was interesting the way they got each others attention while they were at work. They made this sound that was just ear piercing, but that is the only sound they could make that could be heard over the machinery. My mother does it sometimes now. It just tickles me to death.

R: You said you were poor, but you didn't know you were poor. When did you first know you were poor?

M: When I went to Arnold Junior High School.

B: I didn't know till I went to Jordan High School.

R: Did people tell you, or was it what you saw?

M: It was just what you observed. I remember my friends going to Kiralfy's to buy clothes. I just

looked at the price of the clothes, and I thought we never paid this amount for an outfit for me. My mother bought me nice clothes. They were bought at Flossie's Dress Shop in Bibb City, which was "the" dress shop for women. When people started talking about fashion and having X number pairs of shoes and a closet full of clothes or a car, that is when I realized that there were people with money out there. I didn't have as much as they did. Not what they said to me, but by watching them. You saw people with rings and jewelry. You just started picking up on a lot. Then you heard some comments about lint heads, especially with Columbus and Jordan High Schools having the friction that they always had. Columbus High with the "Blue Jews" and we were the "River Rats" and the "lint heads". We started hearing a lot of that, and started asking why do you call them this. You realize there was an attitude about you that you did not even know existed. You had not had time to form an attitude about them, because you had not been around or seen them. On a more positive note, if the teachers in high school knew that you went to Bibb City Elementary, they knew they had a good student.

M: That's absolutely true.

B: They made it a point for the other kids to know that. Not everybody made real good grades, but they were there. They tried, and they had the basic background. There were some fine teachers at Bibb City.

R: It seems like you had everything you needed right there. Did you ever go downtown?

M: We did a lot, every weekend.

B: We went on Saturday. That's when my mother put on her gloves and hat. We dressed up to go shopping.

M: We caught the bus to go downtown on Saturdays. You had to dress up. We got out. We knew what was outside of Bibb City. I have read articles saying that we didn't know what a McDonald's was. That's not true. We were exposed. We had T.V.'s, believe it or not. We just chose to stay there. It was safe.

R: What would you do if your daughter came home and said, "I want to be a textile engineer."

M: A textile engineer? I'd say all right.

B: Yes.

M: As long as she had engineer on the end of it.

R: Anything less and you would...?

B: I do not like to see anyone work as hard as my parents had to work, the physical labor. That is almost inhuman. Which is why I elected not to go to college. If I had gone to college that would have meant my parents would have to stay in the mill that much longer, because it cost a lot of money to go to college. To save them I didn't. It was not real smart on my part, but that's how it happened. Families were very close then. It really bothered me, and I think it did Maria too, to see parents coming home just exhausted physically, mentally, and emotionally from all the hard work. It really touched me. Maybe that's why we were determined people that come out of there, because we didn't want to experience the same thing.

R: Despite their fatigue, did they always have time for you?

B: Always. There were always happy times. I never saw my parents disagree. They never argued in front of me.

M: We were basically happy.

B: They were never affectionate in front of me either.

M: Mine were. Mine was a touching family. We always had times together. We always had weekends together. There were times when the mill would go on extended times. They would work

6 and 7 days a week. I remember that very vividly. If the mill had to run, you had to work. You didn't get two days off unless it was regular time. Or if they cut back to four days a week. They talked about the financial strain of not having that extra day's pay. They always had time for us.

B: I think most of the people that worked in the mill came from the Dothan area. I think all of them were raised with the same general ideas as to what living is supposed to be about and raising a family and family relationships.

M: They were also products of the depression. That's another element we have to consider. Our parents were teenagers during the depression, and they had to contribute toward the family effort of surviving in one way or another. My dad was a sharecropper. The family went and worked on the farm. They got some of the products of the farm, but the rest of it went to the owner. They traveled to whoever needed help. They all had to work together to survive at the lowest level. They knew what it was like to pitch in. That's the kind of thing my dad always tried to put through our household--that everybody works together to make it together.

I had to go to school to make good grades. That was my job. They went to the mill, and they worked to provide. We all had a job. We cleaned the house together. We worked in the yard together. We played together.

B: My daddy mopped and cooked. My mother only cooked breakfast on Sunday. He did it the rest of the time. If I remember, when my father came to Columbus to work in the mill, his three brothers came with him. Then his cousins came with him. When he died in 1976, he had been at the mill 47 years.

R: Did all those brothers and cousins stay with the mill work?

B: Yes, they did.

R: But your family wasn't like that?

M: My dad brought three brothers with him, and my dad was the only one that retired. One went back to the farm. One went to Atlanta to work as a mechanic and butcher. The other one left. He was a carpenter.

B: I thought it was interesting when my father's brothers came to Columbus his sister came too, but they wouldn't let her work in the mill. She worked at Schwob's as a seamstress.

M: There was a sister in my situation too, and she worked in a finance company. Because she had a high school diploma, she had a better job.

B: I don't know how much education Maria's dad has, but my daddy only went through the sixth grade. He was raised on a farm, and farming chores came first. These people were very intelligent people. They were not dummies by any means. They had more common sense, and I guess it's called survival sense. That always bothered me, because we came from Bibb City, well your parents are stupid because they worked in a mill. They weren't stupid. They were practical.

M: My dad had a fifth grade education, because he had to quit to work. My mother had a good education in Europe, but it really did not do her a lot of good over here. She had that cultural difference. She was looked down upon to begin with. She was Austrian, and they equated that with German, which was equated with the enemy to begin with. It was right after the war in the 50's. She had the cultural difference to overcome. Once they got to know her they cared about her. Her education over there didn't help her any over here at all. Because she married my dad and because my dad had his educational level and the mill was all he could get, she followed suit. She may have been able to do better had she married someone else with a different type job.

R: Speaking of marriage, they didn't want you to work in the mill, and they didn't want you to have anything to do with soldiers, would they allow you to date people worked in the mill or people from Bibb City?

M: They didn't really say anything about who I dated, just so it wasn't a soldier.

B: My parents preferred that I date someone with the same upbringing that I had, which was fellows in that village. But it's strange that you say that because I ended up marrying a soldier. I told him that he could never wear his uniform to the village. Just because he had a funny haircut, we could explain that away. I did marry a soldier. After they met him, they took him as an individual. My parents were always very open minded. A lot of those people were not open minded.

R: That was a pretty big victory for you.

B: Yes it was. I don't know how I pulled that one off, but it worked. They did not know he was a soldier. He came to the house three or four times before I told them he was in the Army after they had a chance to get to know him. Even after we had been married four years he wouldn't wear his uniform.

M: You just don't do that. They say you aren't from around these parts, are you?

B: It was really strange. The first time he went to church with me at Porter Memorial, everybody stared because he was an outsider. To this day they look at people strangely if they think they aren't supposed to be there.

R: I got that feeling the other day when I drove through there.

B: My art teacher was going up there to take pictures, because she thinks it is absolutely beautiful in the spring with the dogwoods blooming. She got out of the car once, and got back in very quickly. She said she didn't know if they would bother her, but those looks were enough to make her leave. I think that's sad because it is a beautiful part of the city.

R: Is there anything you would like to add at this point?

M: I enjoy Bibb City. I always remember having kids to play with. I look at my two children. I raised them in a middle class neighborhood, with no recreational facilities. They spent a lot of their pre-adolescent years in their room or in their yard without anyone to play with unless you took them in a car to someone's house. I feel sorry for them in a way, because they did not have a lot of the advantages we had when we were growing up. They did not have the comradeship, the bonding we had because of the way we structured ourselves into little suburban areas without recreational facilities. The developers don't take that into consideration when they develop a neighborhood now. They don't even have a ball field or a place for the kids to collect. The kids usually have to make a place. I wish they would start looking at that. I think some of the kids could really use a place to go. That's one thing we had as children, a recreation facility and enough adults around that we knew they cared about us. They had an interest in us, and we felt it very strongly. The kids today I don't think have enough of that. That contributes to a lot of our delinquency problems.

B: We didn't have a lot of material things, but we had the support that young children need.

M: We had structure. That's another thing our kids don't have.

B: I discovered that to this day, if I'm in trouble and I know somebody that grew up in Bibb City with me, if I were in trouble and asked for help, they would be there. Look at mine and Maria's friendship. After all these years, she's there, and I'm here. There's other people in town that we could call on just because we grew up in Bibb City. They would be there. My children haven't even been out of high school that long. I don't know if they could do that.

M: I don't know if they have a friend that they could say they went through...with all the swapping of schools, the neighborhood situations, and the busing as it is today. I don't know that they have had the chance to make friends and make those bonds like we had to do. We knew where we were going. We knew we were going to Bibb City School. There was no doubt about it. We had a lot of stability and certainty there which our kids don't have today. If you move from this house to that house, even if it's across the street, you may be shipped to a totally different school. It's out of your control now.

B: The mill had a strong influence in one way that was really difficult for the parents. I think they tried to compensate in the community area, because of conditions in the mill. I think that's commendable in its own way.

M: Maybe that's why parents endured the hard work, because they saw other rewards.

B: I don't know how the other teachers were in Columbus at the time, but those were some fine ladies that taught us.

M: Excellent models.

R: All ladies? No men teachers?

M: Old maids.

B: There was one teacher that was married, and she was okay. All but that one were old maids. There were no men teachers.

M: There was no grey areas. It was black and white. You knew where you stood on all issues. There was no guessing as to what was right and what was wrong. I think some of our kids need some of that. There is too much grey.