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Author(s): Mary Lether Wingerd

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Rethinking Paternalism: Power and Parochialism in a Southern Mill Village

Mary Lethert Wingerd

In the restive summer of 1934, waves of worker insurgency shook the textile South. Years of unanswered industrial grievances culminated in a general strike unparalleled in the region, with over 170,000 southern mill hands ultimately joining ranks in protest. In Durham, North Carolina, the operatives of Mill 1, flagship of the Erwin Mills Company, immediately presented a united front of organized opposition. Picket lines also quickly sprang up around Erwin Mill 2, located eighty miles southeast of Durham in the town of Erwin. But such was not the case at Erwin Mill 3. In the village of Cooleemee, nestled in the western Piedmont of North Carolina far from any urban center, the mill whistle blew as usual and the full complement of hands reported for work. Despite pleading, persuasion, and even coercion from flying squadrons of organizers and operatives from other mills, the people of Cooleemee refused to go out.¹

According to historiographical tradition, this seems a predictable scenario. Workers in isolated mill villages should logically be among those least likely to organize. Locked within a framework of social control loosely described as “paternalism” and without lines of communication to other workers, these operatives might seem wedded to a culture of quiescence, unable to visualize alternatives.²

Mary Wingerd is a Ph.D. candidate in history at Duke University. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 1994 North American Labor History Conference.

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¹ “Flying squadrons” were caravans of striking workers who raced across the Piedmont in cars and trucks, spreading word of the strike and closing down as many mills as possible. On the strike and the events leading up to it, see Janet Irons, “Testing the New Deal: The General Strike of 1934” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1988).

² The term *paternalism* has been used to describe systems as widely variant as southern slave society and systematized, industrial welfare capitalism. In characterizing southern textile labor relations, scholars have drawn from both ends of this spectrum. Textile paternalism, analogous neither to slavery nor to articulated welfare capitalism, represents an economic and social system in transition. While early studies of the industry romanticized the consensus of cultural values shared by workers and employers, more recent work has focused on tensions in

Though a richly varied body of literature exists on paternalism in the southern textile industry, scholars tend to agree that oppositional consciousness and resistance to management practices were least likely to manifest themselves in small, rural villages where paternalistic control was either draped in the garb of benevolence or too deeply oppressive to allow room for articulated protest.³ But it would be a mistake to categorize the mill people of Cooleemee as merely quiescent. Formal organization and militant opposition are not the only measures of resistance. Such a narrow definition fails to take into account the cultural and social contours that inform protest.

In 1937, just three years after the crushing defeat of the general strike, with the textile unions broken across the South, the operatives of the Cooleemee mill organized to form Local 251 of the Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC), which was affiliated with the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO). This action led to unionization of all Erwin's North Carolina mills—a feat of no small significance since Erwin was one of the “big four” in North Carolina textiles, employing over 5,500 workers in its three mill towns. Organized labor was facing virtual obliteration in the Piedmont when Erwin's workers organized, led by Cooleemee; they thereby *doubled* the union presence in North Carolina. The local continued to function in its members' behalf until the closing of the mill in 1969. Moreover, the union was described by the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) representative assigned to Cooleemee in 1941 as “the best local I've ever seen.”⁴

The explanation for this shift from apparent passivity to activism lies in the community's interior dynamics, what the political scientist James C. Scott has described as “infrapolitics”: “the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups” in their confrontation with an unequal balance of power. The significance of infrapolitics is its central importance in the shaping of more overtly “political”

the system and the complex working-class culture that opposed management's efforts at social control. For emphasis on the extraordinary cultural and economic power that management wielded, limiting the social space for organized protest, see Melton Alonza McLaurin, *Paternalism and Protest: Southern Cotton Mill Workers and Organized Labor, 1875–1905* (Westport, 1971), 16–40; Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia, 1988), 88–105; and Bryant Simon, “Choosing between the Ham and the Union: Paternalism in the Cone Mills of Greensboro, 1925–1930,” in *Hanging by a Thread: Social Change in Southern Textiles*, ed. Jeffrey Leiter, Michael D. Schulman, and Rhonda Zingraff (Ithaca, 1991), 81–89. For emphasis on independent working-class culture and the means of resistance that mill hands created, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (New York, 1989). Douglas Flamming has argued that southern paternalism was a thoroughly modern strategy employed by industry to resolve a regional labor crisis and that social and labor relations were worked out within mill communities more as rational responses to fluctuations in the economy than as a result of preexisting cultural values. Douglas Flamming, *Creating the Modern South: Millhands & Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884–1984* (Chapel Hill, 1992).

³ See McLaurin, *Paternalism and Protest*, 97; Irons, “Testing the New Deal,” 422, 425; and David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880–1920* (Baton Rouge, 1982), 162.

⁴ Donald McKee interview by Mary Wingerd, May 31, 1993, audiotape (in Mary Wingerd's possession), side 1; Paul David Richards, “The History of the Textile Workers Union of America, CIO, in the South, 1937–1945” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1978), 164. In 1938 the CIO changed its name from the Committee for Industrial Organization to the more permanent Congress of Industrial Organizations. The next year the Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC) followed suit, renaming itself the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA). The other companies comprised in North Carolina's big four were Marshall Field, Cone, and Cannon.

action. As Scott explains, infrapolitics provides “much of the cultural and structural underpinning of the more visible action on which our attention has generally been focused.”⁵

The underpinnings of the highly personalized world of southern industrial paternalism can be understood clearly only at the local level. Each community was fundamentally shaped by specific contingencies of personality and place, and identity of interests was determined by more than the sum of material circumstance. A close look at Cooleemee reveals a culture neither of resignation, of accommodation, nor of historically learned defeat.⁶ Instead, below the surface of apparently placid labor relations, an elaborate culture of resistance operated within a locally circumscribed system of negotiation. In ways that were neither illogical nor peculiarly southern, workers used insularity to their advantage in complex negotiations of their rights. The strategies they employed were not exceptional. Rather, they corresponded to the modes of resistance practiced with differing success by a variety of rural people in their encounters with cultural and economic transition.⁷ Drawing on ties of kinship and neighborhood and a precisely drawn definition of community, the settled workers of Cooleemee labored to hold management accountable within a social contract. Furthermore, the strategies they developed to negotiate paternalism led directly to their unionization and deeply influenced the union they constructed.⁸

The system of dependencies that traditionally undergirds paternalistic control was firmly in place in Cooleemee. Its physical and social terrain conformed to the well-known profile of the industrial company town. The village was archetypal in its isolation and the degree of control the mill seemed to wield. At the turn of the century, when James and Benjamin Duke, the financial power behind Erwin Mills,

⁵ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990), 183–84. For an elaboration of Scott's concept, see Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History*, 80 (June 1993), 111–12. On the experiential basis of politicization and social change, my work is particularly indebted to Lawrence Goodwyn, *Breaking the Barrier: The Rise of Solidarity in Poland* (New York, 1991); and Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York, 1976).

⁶ A culture of defeat has certainly existed elsewhere. See John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana, 1982).

⁷ For uses of cultural analysis to explain the apparent lack of sustained, class-based protest among southern workers, see McLaurin, *Paternalism and Protest*; Allen Tullos, *Habits of Industry: White Culture and the Transformation of the Carolina Piedmont* (Chapel Hill, 1989); and I. A. Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Cultural Persistence, 1880–1915* (Baton Rouge, 1989). I am *not* arguing within a framework of southern exceptionalism. Southern textiles present an exceptional case, not because of culturally deterministic traits of the region, but because of timing—the belated appearance of industrialization in the South—and the rapid domination of the industrial landscape of the Piedmont by textile manufacturing. In the nineteenth century, the developing textile industry in the Northeast employed similar strategies of residential worker villages and paternalistic management. See Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810–1860* (Cambridge, Eng., 1983); and Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860* (New York, 1979). In the twentieth century, similar resistance and accommodation could be found outside the South in situations where power relations were articulated in terms of personal relationships, community, and moral accountability. See Gerald Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism: The Shoeworkers and Tanners of Endicott Johnson, 1890–1950* (Urbana, 1988).

⁸ On the logic and structure of resistance among rural people in cultural transition, my analysis is particularly informed by James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985); David Thelen, *Paths of Resistance: Tradition and Dignity in Industrializing Missouri* (New York, 1986); and E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York, 1993).

began construction of their new state-of-the-art cotton mill community, they chose a site that would give new meaning to the term “isolated mill village.” Drawing on the Dukes’ extraordinary capital resources, Erwin Mills bought up approximately 5,000 acres of land surrounding the site of the new mill, effectively buttressing its workers from “outside influences.” An English traveler in 1901 described the village as carved out of a forest wilderness, “a place with no history at all, and not to be found upon a map that I have seen, but said to be somewhere about thirty miles along a single track of railway which connects Winston-Salem with Charlotte.” In their early years, the mill and village were virtually inaccessible by road; materials moved to and from the mill by rail to the Cooleemee Junction three miles up the river, and passenger traffic was ferried in and out of the village mainly by boat. As late as 1924, the village could claim only two cars. Both belonged to management.⁹

Internally, the Dukes lavished funds on their version of a model company town, taking pains to provide amenities designed to keep workers in place and to determine who would do business within the village. Not only did they own the mill and all the land on which the village was situated; they owned every cottage, storefront, lamppost, and road in the unincorporated village, as well as thousands of acres of surrounding tenant farms. Erwin Mills embarked wholeheartedly on a sophisticated strategy of “benevolent paternalism” well in advance of most of the industry. From the outset, the company meticulously maintained the village, underwrote the building of churches and schools, stocked the company store with varied goods at competitive prices made accessible through generous terms of credit, and furnished recreational amenities for workers and their families. Through the 1930s, management elaborated its system of community benefits regardless of fluctuations in either labor or cotton markets.¹⁰

The appearance of benevolence, however, was somewhat misleading. The Dukes had more at stake than labor peace in their individual mills. By 1900 the Duke brothers were deeply involved in the purchase of strategic lands that would provide

⁹ For James and Benjamin Duke, the perceived benefits of Cooleemee’s isolation apparently more than made up for added transportation costs. By 1900 labor protest was a troubling cost of doing business in their mill in urban Durham, where merchants often supported workers rather than management. See McLaurin, *Paternalism and Protest*, 155–57. With capitalization of over \$4 million, Erwin Mills had the latitude to implement sophisticated strategies to ensure labor peace and stability. Financial records, box 58, Cooleemee Series, Erwin Mills Papers (Special Collections Department, Duke University Library, Durham, N.C.). On Erwin’s holdings, see Jim Rumley, “Not Hemmed In,” *Cooleemee History Loom* (Spring 1991), 1. T. M. Young, *The American Cotton Industry: A Study of Work and Workers, Contributed to the Manchester Guardian* (New York, 1903), 58–60; James W. Wall, *History of Davie County* (Spartanburg, 1985), 276–82; Margaret Skinner Parker, interview by W. Weldon Huske, March 7, 1976, transcript, pp. 1–6 (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

¹⁰ The sophisticated systematic employment of welfare capitalism, generally described as southern paternalism, developed across the industry primarily after 1910 as a response to a tight labor market rather than to southern cultural imperatives. Once the system was in place, it became difficult to dislodge as workers interpreted what mill owners considered discretionary largess as contractual entitlements. See Flamming, *Creating the Modern South*. On model company towns, see Margaret Crawford, “Earle S. Draper and the Company Town in the American South,” in *The Company Town*, ed. John S. Garner (New York, 1992), 139–72. The description of Cooleemee here relies primarily on oral histories, photographs, issues of the *Cooleemee Journal* and *Salisbury Post*, Young, *American Cotton Industry*, and Wall, *History of Davie County*.

the foundation for Duke Power Company, which was to become the largest power company in the South. The management style of Erwin Mills appears to have been directed at a larger audience than its operatives, as the Dukes sought to lure industrial investment (and future customers for Duke Power) into the region, citing its exemplary labor force as “greater than any resource of Piedmont Carolinas.” Thus for James and Benjamin Duke, and by extension for Erwin Mills, labor peace was worth a considerable investment. Combining domination and incentive in Cooleemee, Erwin Mills seemingly had perfected a model of social control.¹¹

Despite the efforts of Erwin Mills, however, the new industrial workers who migrated from the farms of the surrounding counties saw themselves neither as passive beneficiaries of the company’s largess nor as helpless victims in the face of company control.¹² On the contrary, they considered themselves active participants in constructing the meaning of community that would shape social and labor negotiations between workers and management in Cooleemee.

Community is an ill-defined and elusive term that takes on a variety of meanings in different contexts. The authors of *Like a Family* have made a convincing case for a “southern cotton mill world” in which community was not defined by the boundaries of a single place. They describe a widening network of common ties that seemed to transform the Piedmont into “one long mill village.” In their words, “millhands’ ramblings did not so much undermine as reinforce a shared regional identity and sense of belonging.”¹³ In the village of Cooleemee, however, community encompassed only a certain category of worker and its meaning had real geographical limits. Partly because of Cooleemee’s isolation, partly in response to Erwin’s management style, but to a great degree because of the way women and men chose to characterize themselves as workers, their identity was inseparable from the specific context of Cooleemee.

The Scotch-Irish, English, and German farm families who became the first generation of workers had embarked on industrial life with mixed feelings, strongly influenced by perspectives of age and gender. On one hand, the mill whistle promised opportunity and escape from the uncertainty and drudgery of the fields, and the bustling village seemed an energetic antidote to quiet country life. The younger people, particularly young women, experienced a heady new freedom from parental control. Describing her first impression of the village, spinner Lillie Bailey vividly exclaimed, “My first trip to Cooleemee, I thought I’d been to New York, it was so big. I’d been somewhere—I’d been to Cooleemee.” On the other hand, town life and wage work appeared alien to traditional rural values; for already-formed families and males in general, they posed a threat to previous independence and status. As mill hand Giles Myers wryly observed, “We were farmers. We

¹¹ Tullis, *Habits of Industry*, 162–71; Robert F. Durden, *The Dukes of Durham, 1865–1929* (Durham, 1975), 177–85. The Erwin Mills management style played out differently in Durham and Erwin. This study is the initial phase of a project that will compare labor and social relations in the three communities.

¹² Most of the first generation of Cooleemee’s operatives were rural people encountering industrial labor for the first time. In oral or written accounts, I found no workers who had previous experience at another mill.

¹³ Hall et al., *Like a Family*, 144.

stepped up in the world on a cotton mill. Of course, don't know if it was a step up or a step down." Young Lillian Spry had been less ambivalent. She recalled that she had been eager to try mill work—"it was getting out of the farm, out of that hot sun"—and came to like her job in the spinning room "very, very much." In the country "we didn't go with *nobody* unless Momma and Daddy went with us." Indeed, her mother had serious reservations about her daughter's move to town. As Lillian packed her bags for the trek to Cooleemee, she was cautioned about proper behavior and warned to "stay out of drugstores and never go barefoot in public."¹⁴

Lillian's mother knew that to outsiders Lillian and her co-workers were simply "cotton mill trash" and the mill town where they lived a blot on the social fabric. By 1900, middle-class reformers regularly wrung their hands in print over the ominously labeled "mill problem." Though Cooleemee's isolation protected its residents from the daily slights that demeaned workers who lived on the edge of urban centers, they were well aware of the widespread scorn for their way of life—most intimately personified by the *hauteur* of middle-class Mocksville, just seven miles down the road and the only other town in Davie County. The antagonism between the two towns became legendary, and for generations Cooleemee people were typically accosted in Mocksville by taunts of "linthead" and "mill trash." Even in later years, when fully a third of the mill's labor force commuted from Mocksville, Mocksvillians who worked next to Cooleemee people every day on the mill floor often would "cut them dead" if they met on the street in Mocksville.¹⁵

To protect themselves from the stings of Mocksville's disdain, mill people in Cooleemee used isolation as a fortress. Drawing on a culture of rural localism and kinship, they constructed a new identity, banding together behind a wall of community pride and solidarity. When spinner Sadie Hodges encountered a Mocksville man who advised her, "Now don't you tell nobody you're from Cooleemee. You know what Cooleemee is," Sadie staunchly replied, "I'm going to tell you something—I'm from Cooleemee and proud of it." That community pride was fixed on both cultural and geographic underpinnings, defined equally by workers' skill and their quality of character—virtues that, in their eyes, were specific to Cooleemee. Working people in Cooleemee did not refute the reputation of mill hands in general. Instead, they closed ranks and described themselves as a "better class" of mill worker—better workers, more cultured, more educated, and, overall,

¹⁴ Lillie Bailey interview, in *Cooleemee: Memories Not Lost* (Cooleemee Historical Association, 1990) (videotape, 40 min.); G. A. Myers interview, *ibid.*; Lillian Spry interview by Wingerd, May 14, 1992, audiotape (in Wingerd's possession), side 1.

¹⁵ On members of the rising middle class as critical, though indirect, actors in the evolving configuration of southern industrial paternalism, see Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina*. On the "mill problem," see *ibid.*, 78–88, 129–70. The enduring antipathy between Cooleemee and Mocksville appears in every interview I conducted. For example, the annual Mocksville / Cooleemee high school football game was once canceled for fear of violence; and in the 1980s, when a Cooleemee girl married a Mocksville boy, her father told her that he would never visit her as long as she lived in Mocksville. Ray Jordan interview by Wingerd, March 25, 1992, notes, p. 3 (in Wingerd's possession). See also John Henry Nail interview by Lynn Rumley, March 13, 1990, videotape (Cooleemee Historical Association Archives, Cooleemee, N.C.); Sadie Hodges interview by Wingerd, May 28, 1992, audiotape (in Wingerd's possession), side 1.



This turn-of-the-century postcard touts the exceptional rural charms of the emerging village of Cooleemee, a characterization that drew workers to the mill and became an enduring element of community identity. Courtesy of Louise L. Dickinson, Mocksville, North Carolina.

"different." Rather than contesting the mill hand stereotype as universally unfair, they worked out a definition of themselves as exceptions to the rule.¹⁶

Thus, they identified themselves in opposition both to middle-class culture and to broader cultural characterizations of the working class. In fact, the young men of the village were known to greet "outsiders" from other mill towns as well as stray intruders from Mocksville with a hail of rocks, a practice commonly known as "rocking them out of town."¹⁷ Their identity and loyalties were intrinsically tied to place—which helped ensure their persistence over generations and their commitment to an intensely parochial outlook. It also linked workers, across class, with resident management in a shared, though contested, common culture as part of the "community" of Cooleemee.¹⁸

¹⁶ Hodges interview, May 28, 1992, side 1. Every person interviewed emphasized the unique qualities of Cooleemee and contrasted mill workers there with the supposedly lower class of hands elsewhere. Although some scholars have suggested that mill workers suffered from a sense of inferiority due to middle-class denigration, workers in Cooleemee demonstrated and acted out of a well-developed self-esteem. See Flammig, *Creating the Modern South*, 164; and Dale Newman, "Work and Community Life in a Southern Textile Town," *Labor History*, 19 (Spring 1978), 207.

¹⁷ This practice prevailed when boys from outside the village came courting Cooleemee girls. Ray Jordan interview, March 25, 1992, p. 4. For a similar account of mill villagers policing their borders, see Flammig, *Creating the Modern South*, 161.

¹⁸ This "invented" identity resembles what immigration scholars term the invention of ethnicity. Ethnic identity, like the community identity crafted by workers in Cooleemee, is a response to unequal power relations, has both defensive and affirming components, and may create cross-class allegiances that mediate class tensions within the identity group. See Werner Sollors, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York, 1989); John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, 1985); and Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, 1990), esp. 202–6.

Such pride in place was not unique to this village. Throughout the textile south, workers in isolated mill towns similarly defined themselves as “different” and “unique.” The significance of this strategy lies in its capacity both to empower and to limit workers’ struggles.¹⁹ Local historian James Wall described the village residents as “fiercely loyal,” declaring that “people who worked in the mill might criticize it up one side and down the other” but would not stand for anyone from outside to criticize either the village or Erwin Mills.²⁰ As Wall’s account indicates, the geographic definition of community existed in tension with a parallel and more class-centered identity that recognized workers’ interests as in opposition to management demands. But even the borders of working-class community had precise and narrow limits.

Place was a defining factor, but not the only factor. Of equal importance was participation in a value system that supported workers’ established culture as well as Coolee’s claims to exceptionalism. The solidarity that allowed workers to present a united face to the outside world was based on strict understandings of internal mutuality and morality, enforced by traditional ties of kinship, neighborhood, and church—as well as a prickly assertion of independence and pride. As extended families of the original workers poured into the village and those families intermarried, the web of obligation and support thickened and strengthened over generations, and residents’ assertion that they were “just like a family” took on more than a metaphorical meaning.²¹

The shift from agriculturist to industrial worker was neither sharp nor immediately completed. Many first-generation families initially attempted to retain their homesteads by sending out sons and daughters to supplement the family income with cash wages earned in the mill, setting off a gradual chain migration from country to town. Workers often traveled between town and farm as the growing season dictated. For many years even those families who settled permanently in the village tended livestock, chickens, and gardens as well as power looms, accommodating rural rhythms of work to the demands of industrial time. Mabel Head rose every morning at five A.M. to slop the hogs before heading off to a day’s work in the mill, and Fred Pierce fondly remembered the sight of a dozen cows trailing down Davie Street at day’s end, coming home for milking.²²

Some version of this rural / urban life-style existed in most of those southern mill villages located away from urban centers. But Coolee was exceptional in the scope of Erwin Mills’ vast landholdings and the degree to which the company made them available for workers’ use. Not only did the company provide common pas-

¹⁹ My understanding of the widespread use of this strategy is indebted to the research and forthcoming work of G. C. Waldrep III.

²⁰ James Wall interview of Wingerd, March 13, 1992, notes, p. 2 (in Wingerd’s possession).

²¹ In 1902 the widow Ida Jane Nichols moved to the village to support her six children, who accompanied her. By 1929, twenty-five families of her kin had followed—a number that would more than double over the next ten years. Boe Turner, “They Came from Wilkes,” *Coolee History Loom* (Fall 1991), 3, 12.

²² Mabel Head interview in *Coolee: Memories Not Lost*; Fred Pierce, Jessie and Fred Pierce interview by Wingerd, May 14, 1992, audiotape (in Wingerd’s possession), side 1.

ture for livestock, land for large-scale gardening, and common woodlots, it also gave workers free rein to hunt and fish its lands. Thus, though residents of Cooleemee had taken up wage work, their access to the countryside gave them breathing room and allowed them to retain a sense of self-sufficiency and independence. According to loom fixer Claudie Boger, “you could use their land just like it was yours.”²³

Just as workers adapted rural practices to town living, so they brought the values and social relations that had given order to their preindustrial lives, reshaping them to fit a social landscape fundamentally transformed by the looming presence of a cotton mill. Corn shuckings, hog killings, and, particularly, church activities formed the social nexus of village life, providing—even demanding—reinforcement of neighborly mutuality and community ties. Cooleemee became home to four mainstream denominations—Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian—and members of each congregation participated enthusiastically in activities sponsored by the others. Bazaars, oyster stews, “wienie roasts,” and an array of other social activities supplemented Bible study groups and church services to fill out Cooleemee’s social calendar.²⁴

Workers put great store by the personal relationships that developed within the village confines, declaring that “most everybody stayed put” and “hardly nobody ever left.” However, the community they remember is the story of those who stayed. The core families, those who lived within the village and who by their persistence defined the meaning of community, tended to remain in place throughout their working lives, creating stable and interlocking relationships that persisted over generations. But for those who floated in and out of the mill or who resided outside the boundaries of the village—possibly at times a third of the work force—the bonds of solidarity were more tenuous and depended on how well they individually conformed to group norms. In short, employment in the mill did not confer automatic membership in the community, nor was social control the province of management alone.²⁵

The churches were more than the social center; they provided the institutional means to define acceptable behavior within the village and to mediate class distinctions. According to lifelong resident Jessie Pierce, church attendance was “number one” and attendance was “a must.” Ray Jordan remembered approvingly that “some of [the churches] was pretty strict . . . there was people cast out of the church because of the bad things they did. It was pretty important.” Nor was management exempt from community codes. Unlike the practice in many other mill towns, man-

²³ Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview by Wingerd, May 27, 1992, audiotape (in Wingerd’s possession), side 1, tape 2.

²⁴ Jessie and Fred Pierce interview, side 1; Ray Jordan interview, May 14, 1992, side 1; Spry interview, side 1.

²⁵ All those interviewed emphasized the stability and generational persistence of the villagers, as do newspaper profiles written in the 1930s. See *Salisbury Post*, May 31, 1931, Cooleemee Clippings File (Davie County Public Library). It is not possible to estimate with accuracy the number of transient workers who passed through the mill. In 1938 only 565 workers, slightly more than half the mill’s work force of 1,102, resided within the 321 dwellings in the village, but before the mill began running two shifts in 1933, village residents might easily have filled most of the operative positions. Statistics compiled for the War Labor Board, June 1942, War Labor Board Folder, box 49, Erwin Mills Papers. On the floating population of mill workers, see Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina*, 151–53.

agers did not cluster in a single elite congregation. They could be found in all of the denominations. Perhaps their dispersion reflected a strategy of social control, but its obverse effect was to increase supervisors' personal accountability as members of the congregations. Clearly, this obligation had its limits, of which workers were fully aware. Mill hand John Henry Nail remained unimpressed, declaring scornfully that "there wasn't much mixing between the hands and management at church." Still, as Sadie Jordan observed, "they made more money than we did, and they could have more than we could have. But we still went to church together. Everybody knew everybody else." Daily personal interaction obligated managers as well as mill hands in a mutually binding, albeit unequal, social contract.²⁶

Though the residents of Coolemeec insist that Erwin Mills was not particularly intrusive in their private lives, without question company rules infringed on personal freedoms. However, management often turned a blind eye to the transgressions of valued workers, and regulations were enforced selectively to police the behavior of transient or less conventional operatives. For instance, though the company maintained a "strict" policy forbidding alcohol consumption in the village, Frances Boger recounted that her father, a skilled loom fixer deeply loyal to Erwin Mills, was also quite attached to local moonshine.

He'd go around the square, somebody'd start giving him a few drinks of whiskey and he'd get pretty tipsy, get a little out of the way and talking pretty loud. Well then, the management would bring him home. He'd take them out back and show them his wild geese and his chickens and they'd talk it up with him and then get in the car and go home.²⁷

That same policy, however, might justify evicting a less valued employee from the village.

The expulsion of obstreperous elements from the village often supported the values of the settled cohort of workers, as evidenced by general acquiescence in the casting out of unfit church members. In addition, people expressed little disapproval of company policy that expelled unwed pregnant women from the village (though they considered it unduly harsh to force the entire family to leave town).²⁸ When one lifelong resident was asked what happened to people who did not fit in, he replied:

They didn't stay here too long. New people came in but they wasn't here long until they realized what the company expected of them, and they kind of got in

²⁶ Jessie Pierce, Jessie and Fred Pierce interview, side 1; Ray Jordan interview, May 14, 1992, side 2; Nail interview; Sadie Jordan interview by Wingerd, May 14, 1992, audiotape (in Wingerd's possession), side 1.

²⁷ Frances Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*; Sadie Jordan interview, side 1. No comparable policy existed to discipline sexually reckless males. Workers interviewed cited sexual misconduct, domestic abuse, and the use of alcohol as the primary areas of company regulation. Women may have particularly valued such regulations as protective measures. See Hall et al., *Like a Family*, 164–67. Generally, village residents regarded these strictures as a means to keep "trash" out of town. Mill workers in Dalton, Georgia, had similar attitudes, which reveal the exclusionary side of community and its inherent psychological borders. See Flamming, *Creating the Modern South*, 165. On the complicated moral codes of community, see G. C. Waldrep III, "The Politics of Hope and Fear: The Struggle for Community in the Industrial South" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1996), 240–72.

the same mood as everybody else was—because the company didn't put up with no *trash* coming in here. . . . couldn't just nobody come in here—they had to be *requested* to come in.

It seems that community was defined narrowly by management and residents alike. Indeed, evidence of Ku Klux Klan activity in Cooleemee in the 1920s indicates that some workers occasionally played a very active role in enforcing a sanctioned code of conduct. According to one mill hand Klansman, the order was “just as Christian as any organization” and mobilized primarily to discipline white transgressors of community mores, “women and men not doing right, [such as] wife beating.” In his words, “We had a right good secretary who'd write them letters—a warning. We wouldn't have to write a second one.”²⁹

The ominous march of the Klan through town also served as a chilling reminder to local African Americans that they were definitely not part of the community. Nor were they welcome as workers in the mill. Textile work throughout the Jim Crow South was almost exclusively the province of white labor. No African Americans resided in the village of Cooleemee proper, and black workers comprised only a minuscule proportion of the mill's work force, limited to janitorial roles and the dirtiest and most difficult tasks in the mill yard. Yet, though they were excluded from the self-described community, the small African American population nonetheless played a critical role in the construction of its identity. White workers enhanced their self-esteem and narrowed the gap between themselves and management through a common culture of white supremacy. While it is not clear to what extent managers participated directly in Klan activity, local merchants mingled with mill hands in Klan ranks—tacitly endorsing racial attitudes that strengthened white cross-class allegiances. In addition, white mill workers regularly employed black women as domestics, an arrangement that enabled poorly paid whites to act out their own version of paternalism, with a distinctly racial cast. Thus, membership and status in the community of Cooleemee were determined by an intricate weighing of class, race, gender, and conduct.³⁰

The complicated web of social relations extended vertically through the mill hierarchy as well as laterally among the operatives. Management nurtured the concept of Cooleemee's exceptionalism to further its own ends. The qualities that workers ascribed to themselves neatly fit the profile of an ideal work force. It is too simple, however, to attribute Erwin's style of labor management to wholly cynical motives. As dedicated paternalists, both company president William Erwin and J. W.

²⁹ Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1; Russell Ridenhour interview by Rumley, Oct. 22, 1989, videotape (Cooleemee Historical Association Archives).

³⁰ The introduction of African Americans on the mill floor was the single issue on which workers would invariably erupt in unified protest. Gary M. Fink, *The Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills Strike of 1914–1915: Espionage, Labor Conflict, and New South Industrial Relations* (Ithaca, 1993), 150. On African Americans in southern textile work, see Hall et al., *Like a Family*, 66, 157. Given mill workers' low wages, their ability to hire black domestics suggests the poverty of the wage scale of black workers. On mill workers' employment of African American domestics, see Jessie Pierce, Jessie and Fred Pierce interview, side 2; Hodges interview, May 14, 1992, side 1; and Harold Foster interview by Rumley, Feb. 15, 1990, videotape (Cooleemee Historical Association Archives). On merchant membership in the Klan, see Foster interview. On racism and constructions of working-class identity, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991).

Zachary, manager of the Cooleemee mill for over thirty years, became deeply invested in their self-justifying role as moral guardians and father figures to “their people.” Much as slave owners developed and made themselves believe in a defensive ideology that legitimated an inherently unjust system, so these executives responded to criticism of textile industry practices in a somewhat similar fashion. Summing up his career as head of Erwin Mills, William Erwin wrote: “I would be glad for you to know that in dealing with several thousand operatives and families of same that I have striven unceasingly to uplift and make them better. In this work I have found pleasure and trust that in it I may be permitted to broaden my field of labor.”

Zachary cultivated an even more personalized and beneficent fatherly image. Living in the village, amid the workers’ cottages, and interacting with workers daily, he mediated disputes in the mill, dispensed favors in the village, promoted the concept of Cooleemee’s uniqueness, and carefully fostered “family loyalty” among managers and workers.³¹

Though long-term village residents universally remembered Zachary with affection, theirs was not an unexamined allegiance. Nor did workers confuse employee-employer relations with organic family fealty. Instead, management practices achieved what Gerald Zahavi has termed a “negotiated loyalty” based on an understanding of rights and obligations on both sides. Beneath the highly ritualized professions of family, workers and managers maneuvered as wary opponents in protecting their interests. When either side transgressed the rules of the game, “family” loyalties quickly evaporated and the players realigned themselves along more class-based lines. When conflicts arose on the mill floor, workers most often walked out without a backward glance. As one spinner proudly declared, “we always stuck together.” In a typical dispute, workers demanded that the windows be raised, complaining that the heat in the mill was unbearable. The assistant foreman warned the supervisor, “they ain’t going to stay in.” When the order came down that the windows must remain closed, “everybody walked out, said they was sick. And the next morning the windows was raised.” Thus, the effectiveness of personalized management cut two ways. In return for a stable, loyal work force, managers were obliged to tread with some care for workers’ rights.³²

Herein was the hidden component of incipient worker power embedded in the social contract. If Cooleemee’s workers were indeed exceptional, then they must be treated with the respect that their character demanded—both in the village and in the mill. Within the close confines of Cooleemee, neighbor worked next to neighbor at the looms and management lived right down the street. Workers and managers attended the same churches and sent their children to the same schools, and even managers’ children usually worked for a time in the mill, all of which reinforced the respectability of mill work, in opposition to derogatory cultural stereo-

³¹ For theoretical insights on the self-legitimation of dominants, see Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 70–87. For William Erwin’s letter, see *Durham Morning Herald*, Feb. 29, 1932, p. 2. Without exception, the workers I interviewed emphasized J. W. Zachary’s fatherly character and the respect with which he treated people in the village.

³² Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism*, 99–119; Sadie Jordan interview, side 1; Nail interview.

types. By articulating a community identity that included managers, workers seized some power to hold them to its norms. As long as managers tied their own identities to the constructed conceptions of family and community, they were doubly bound. As James Scott has observed, “any dominant group is . . . least able to take liberties with those symbols in which [its members] are most heavily invested.” In this way, managers entered into a contract that limited the ways they wielded power—so long as the agreement had meaning for them and served their needs.³³

This is not to say that Cooleemee’s workers had achieved a cultural coup. The unwritten compact maintained by elaborate, customary social rituals was fragile. The cultural lure of paternalism for managers was always inextricably linked to economic self-interest, and paternalism had arisen as a justification, rather than a foundation, for the labor relations in place. Workers’ negotiating leverage was effective only so long as management identified a stable, settled work force as a priority in its long-term profit projections. In the increasingly competitive international textile market, managers eventually discarded paternalistic practices for a more rationalized industrial capitalism. But in Cooleemee, for some thirty-four years, the compact remained largely intact. Throughout his tenure as manager, Zachary seemed committed to insuring the persistence of Cooleemee’s core work force, and he carefully nurtured the illusion of democratic social relations and company largess.

That illusion carried a price for management prerogative. According to village residents, supervisors who ignored the rituals of conduct that guided Cooleemee’s labor or social relations seldom lasted long in the mill. Those who stayed quickly learned the acceptable code of etiquette. When Margaret Skinner Parker arrived in the village in 1934 to work in the company store, the manager cautioned her: “Now, of course all these people work in the mill. But the people in Cooleemee are above the average mill people. They’re very nice people . . . and they’re, I think, sensitive to the fact that a lot of the mill communities didn’t have the best reputation. . . . You want to be careful.” Managers, too, had to be careful and negotiated the shaky ground of labor relations with some circumspection. For example, in 1914 after four years in the mill, Dora Cope had earned the position of a skilled hand. When a certain supervisor began shuttling her arbitrarily between the drawing room where she usually worked and the weave room, Dora was insulted and soon “got fed up with it and quit.” Her extended family (composed of multiple families of Cope relations) considered her treatment an affront to family honor, and they all walked out with her. The superintendent had to make some quick apologies to get them back, commenting “this is a lot of trouble over just a little sixteen year old girl.”³⁴

Within the limits of the self-described community of Cooleemee—and they were real limits—workers responded to breaches of the social contract with a soli-

³³ Through the 1940s, teenagers commonly worked part-time in the mill, regardless of their parents’ status in the village. Pierce interview, side 1; Wall interview, p. 2. For evidence of the long-standing nature of this practice, see Manuscript Population Schedules, Davie County, North Carolina, Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 (microfilm: reel 1107). Records of the Bureau of the Census, RG 29 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.). Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 106.

³⁴ Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 2, tape 1; Parker interview, p. 8; Dora Cope Pierce interview by Baxter Pierce, n.d., audiotape (Cooleemee Historical Association Archives), side 2, tape 1.



Spinning room work force, 1911, showing the assignment of jobs by sex and age. The job of spinner was categorized as women's work. "Doffer boys" removed the filled bobbins and quills from the spinning frames; as young as nine or ten years old, they were considered particularly adept because of their size and agility. The men were probably supervisors, machine fixers, and sweepers, the highest and the lowest occupations in the mill.

Courtesy of Frances Wood Boger and the Cooleemee Historical Association Archives.

clarity that placed management decidedly outside the bonds of family. To mediate such tensions between management and labor and to undercut incipient class solidarity, Erwin filled its low-level management positions almost exclusively from the local work force.³⁵ The fact that the second hands and overseers—all male—were the fathers, sons, and neighbors of those they dealt with did smooth labor relations, but it also gave workers increased leverage in negotiating. As Ray Jordan explained, "you could talk to somebody you'd known all your life about a problem you had quicker than you could somebody who was partly a stranger to you." On the other hand, "some people who rose up through the ranks, when they get to be supervisors just become jackasses." But if an overseer began to think too highly of himself, workers were quick to remind him, "I know where you came from." Work relations on the floor were inseparable from the dynamics that played out on the streets of the village—or even, in some instances, at the kitchen table. Members of a single family might find themselves on opposing sides of a labor dispute, further complicating loyalties and obligations.³⁶

³⁵ Promotion of workers to low-level supervisory positions was common in southern textiles. Hall et al., *Like a Family*, 96–98. Former mill workers provided the characterizations of Cooleemee's management and of the mill's style of labor relations; the ascription of motive, however, is mine.

³⁶ The Jordan family faced Cooleemee's only prolonged labor dispute with both parents, a son, daughter, son-in-law, and daughter-in-law on strike, while two other sons continued to work as low-level managers. When asked how this affected family dynamics, Ray Jordan declared, "pretty good. The ones that was working kept the food on the table for the ones that was on strike." Ray Jordan interviews, May 28, 1992, side 1, and May 14, 1992, side 1; Sadie Jordan interview, side 1. See also Boger and Pierce interviews.

None of this is to suggest that Cooleemee's workers fundamentally changed the balance of power in the mill, nor did they delude themselves about their autonomy in this company town. Management's authority was a stifling presence at times. As one mill hand recalled: "He [the manager] was the king. You had to do what was his policy. He told my momma, 'Either get rid of the dog, keep him [tied] up or move out of Cooleemee.' That's the way the hammer was."³⁷

To soften the reality of "how the hammer was," working people turned to the one plot of land where the manager was not "king." Just beyond the village limits, in the midst of Erwin Mills' domain, lay the enclave of North Cooleemee, privately held and beyond the company's control. The same settled workers who prized church attendance, sobriety, and domestic peace within the village gleefully described North Cooleemee as "Dodge City in North Carolina" and "just like the wild west."³⁸

North Cooleemee was a world apart. Within its environs, notorious taverns and numerous bootleggers carried on a thriving business. It also provided a home to independent storekeepers, Pentecostal sects, and the small but vibrant black community, as well as a haven for less conventional workers. One mill hand who found village life repressive asserted that he moved to North Cooleemee because he "wasn't going to let no one-horse town run [his] life."³⁹

Undoubtedly, the company could have drawn on its enormous resources to eradicate North Cooleemee if it had chosen to enforce its published policies of behavior. Instead it turned a blind eye and managers stayed away, probably regarding the settlement as a relatively harmless safety valve for worker discontent. To workers, however, it had a subversive function that was both material and symbolic. North Cooleemee provided the physical free space to interact independently, away from the company's watchful gaze. It is not surprising to learn that in 1937, when the local union advocates met to plan their organizing campaign, they held their meetings in a back room in North Cooleemee.⁴⁰

Perhaps of equal importance was North Cooleemee's symbolic function in workers' lives. Whether or not individuals chose to participate in the unsanctioned activities it harbored, its very existence asserted their right to direct their lives as they pleased. As one worker proudly stressed, "The company didn't have anything to do with that. . . . That was *individually* owned and they done it like they wanted to." North Cooleemee represented independence and was as much a part of workers' identity as was the respectability of the village mores. The taverns primarily attracted male mill hands, but neither men nor women necessarily risked their reputations by socializing there. Claudie and Frances Boger took pains to emphasize that "the regular people went up there too." Not even the most proper members

³⁷ Dave Hancock interview in *Cooleemee: Memories Not Lost*.

³⁸ Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 2; Hodges interview, May 28, 1992, side 1. Although such enclaves on the outskirts of mill towns were not uncommon, local residents claimed that North Cooleemee was exceptionally notorious. See Hall et al., *Like a Family*, 164–68.

³⁹ Bill Davis interview in *Cooleemee: Memories Not Lost*.

⁴⁰ *Textile Challenger*, June 1957, p. 6.

of the Cooleemee working class lobbied to close North Cooleemee down, attributing its unsavory reputation to “outsiders” coming in and causing trouble. For others, the distinction between “rough” and “respectable” was even more complicated. When Russell Ridenhour was asked to become a deputy and “clean up the rats over there,” he replied, “those rats are my friends and I won’t put my friends in jail.”⁴¹

The folklore of the village attests to the critical importance workers imparted to assertions of independence and self-respect as they battled in this arena of unequal power relations. Three related themes dominate workers’ reminiscences: talking back, walking out, and acting up in ways that were beyond the mill’s control. They point to the brawls and rampant bootlegging in North Cooleemee as evidence of the limits to company control and retell instances where they spoke up to managers, wearing these stories as well-earned badges of courage. Mill hand Lawrence Miller attested that he would not let the managers “push him around”: When a supervisor told him not to allow one of the mill’s known drinkers in his car, Miller retorted, “I’ll tell you one thing—I’ve not had him in my car, but if I want him in my car, I’d not ask you!”⁴²

When management transgressed customary work practices, workers stress, they responded with immediacy and solidarity in spontaneous walkouts. One prized story recounts an occasion when the spinners walked out over an increase in work load. A top mill official, vacationing nearby, was called into town to settle the dispute. He announced that “he was going out on the line and talk to the ladies.” When he attempted to parlay with them, an incensed striker shouted, “you bald-headed so-and-so! Don’t you come out here so soft-spoken to us or I’ll spunk you right here on the spot.” According to popular memory, the shaken official turned on his heel, retreated to the office, and told the superintendent, “I’m going back to the mountains. You settle the strike.”⁴³

The details of this confrontation remain vivid in workers’ memory. The results of the spontaneous walkout, however, have been forgotten. For them the meaning of the story was in the act of assertion more than in its outcome. Self-evidently, such acts had limited effect on basic power relationships; however, they had far more than theatrical value. Workers used the rituals of social custom to articulate their sense of dignity and rights. In doing so, they reinforced their self-esteem and developed a collective confidence that, as events were to demonstrate, would serve them well in later years.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 2; Hodges interview, May 28, 1992, side 1; Ridenhour interview.

⁴² Lawrence Miller interview in *Cooleemee: Memories Not Lost*.

⁴³ Ray Jordan interview, May 28, 1992, side 1. Variations on this theme of assertiveness recurred in numerous workers’ reminiscences. This episode highlights the complicated position of women in the community, as militant defenders of workers’ rights as well as guardians of respectability. In their eyes, both were “family” roles. Indeed, their respectability may have provided “the ladies” more latitude for protest than their male counterparts had. See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South,” in *Unequal Sisters*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York, 1990), 298–314.

⁴⁴ On the psychological importance of public, collective action by subordinate groups—even in what appears to be a purely ritualistic or theatrical context—see Goodwyn, *Breaking the Barrier*, 138–39; and Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 65–66.

The rhythms of life and work were inseparable, and the grievances that moved people to protest were conceived in broad, holistic terms. Workers recollect that wages were seldom an issue of contention, declaring, "we were poor but we didn't know it." Indeed, from at least 1920 through the mid-1940s, Erwin's wages, though never generous, outpaced the prevailing southern scale.⁴⁵ The wages were combined with noncash benefits provided by the company, and they were supplemented by family-raised livestock and produce. Thus in Cooleemee through 1934 the standard of living was less dependent on wages than in many other mill towns. When discontent periodically erupted, it was almost invariably over issues of respect, work practices, or traditional rights.⁴⁶

By the time of the 1934 general strike, cutthroat competition in the industry and the resultant demands for increased productivity had created abysmal conditions in most southern textile communities, with workers subjected to ever-increasing workloads and deteriorating working conditions. The chief grievance was what mill hands called the stretch-out—the practice of assigning increasing numbers of machines to individual workers, reducing workers' control over both pace and method of production. Some manufacturers had begun implementing time-management practices as early as 1921, and by 1934 people were desperate for relief.⁴⁷

But in Cooleemee, though mill management was tentatively experimenting with new combinations of piece rate and incentive schemes, time management and the attendant stretch-out had not yet invaded the mill in any systematic fashion. Several factors may account for this aberration. First, efficiency of production may have been less an issue since Cooleemee regularly produced sample patterns, reproducing and testing weaves and textures sent from agents in New York. This required frequent repatterning of machines and thus a diminished rate of production; correspondingly, the company first instituted new technologies that intensified work loads at its mills in Durham and Erwin. Second, the depth of private capitalization that undergirded the company may have allowed it to concentrate on the long-term benefit of retaining its experienced, loyal work force, even in the face of short-term profit reduction. Finally, the prevailing system of rights and obligations may have been so firmly entrenched that customary work practices were not easily dislodged. Whatever the reason, workers characterized working conditions in the mill as generally "pretty good" in 1934, in sharp contrast to conditions in other mills in the South. Perhaps workers saw this as further proof of their exceptionalism, or at least as a testament to the efficacy of community-based negotiating tactics.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ "Report to the National War Labor Board, 1942," National War Labor Board Folder, box 49, Erwin Mills Papers.

⁴⁶ Janet Irons persuasively argues that discontent about working conditions, rather than wages, fueled textile insurgency throughout the South. The AFL United Textile Workers of America (UTWA), focusing on wages and hours, failed to address southern workers' central concern. Irons, "Testing the New Deal," 2, 14, 267. Specific evidence on Cooleemee is visible in Boger, Ray Jordan, Nail, and Sadie Jordan interviews.

⁴⁷ On the early implementation of the stretch-out, see Daniel James Clark, "The TWUA in a Southern Mill Town: What Unionization Meant in Henderson, North Carolina" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1989), 19–20; and Irons, "Testing the New Deal," 46–53.

⁴⁸ On sample production in the mill, see Wall interview, p. 3; and Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1. On working conditions, see Sadie Jordan interview, side 1; Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1; and Spry interview, side 1.

Thus it was that in 1934 Cooleemee's workers, with an ingrained suspicion of outsiders, saw little to induce them to cast their lot with mill hands in other textile communities. Nor were they receptive to the overtures of outside organizers.⁴⁹ Spinner Sadie Hodges turned a deaf ear to the flying squadrons who came from nearby Salisbury. "They weren't nice to Cooleemee folks when we went to Salisbury," she succinctly explained. Altercations at the mill gates only reinforced old antagonisms. Hodges recalled that a girl from Salisbury pulled her hair and slapped her face as she tried to enter the mill. "You were at their mercy when you were going in that gate. I didn't think I'd ever get clobbered, but I did." Holding themselves apart from broader working-class struggles, Cooleemee's workers chose instead to depend on one another and on a known quantity—their ability to negotiate personally with the management of their mill. According to Claudie Boger, a union leader in later years, "people in town felt like the company was part of them. They wasn't interested in fighting the company *at that particular time.*"⁵⁰

To reenlist any wavering loyalties, Kemp Lewis, William Erwin's successor, came to town at the onset of the strike, called a general meeting of the operatives, and promised, "you all stick with us and we'll stick with y'all later. If y'all will vote to work, we'll send the National Guard up here to protect you."⁵¹ The workers did stick with the company, led by the older generation of workers who reassured themselves that the bonds of custom would provide immunity from the changes ripping apart the Piedmont. The younger people, who would later become the union's leaders, were held in check by the reins of parental authority. In 1934 young Draper Wood, who would play a key role in the organizing effort in 1937, decided to picket at the gates with the flying squadrons from other mills. But when his father heard that his son had stayed out, he put a hammer in his pocket "in case there was any trouble" and set out to "bring his boy in." Old Mr. Wood's motivations were complex; "he thought there was nobody like Erwin Mills," but at the same time he knew his son "would have been fired just like that." Other workers, skeptical of Erwin's good faith, may have been silenced by the intimidating evidence of the company's partnership with the state, manifested in the National Guard. Some people felt equally threatened by the strikers on one side and the National Guard on the other. Caught up in a war not of her making, Lillian Spry was afraid that the union people might force her to lose her job or convince her husband to join them. At the same time, she remembered hesitantly, "I never been scared so bad in all my life because they brought in the National Guards, and I just knowed they was going to come in to kill us all!" Power relations in Cooleemee were seldom so overtly displayed, and as townspeople anxiously awaited the arrival of the troops, they filled the churches in prayer services that besought the salvation of their community.⁵²

⁴⁹ The most successfully organized mills built their solidarity through indigenous, local leadership. The use of outside organizers hampered organization efforts where local leaders were absent. See Griffith, *Crisis of American Labor*, 101–2, 167–69.

⁵⁰ Hodges interview, May 14, 1992, side 1; Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1.

⁵¹ Nail interview.

⁵² Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1; Spry interview, side 1; Parker interview, p. 45.



The National Guard patrols in front of the Cooleemee mill during the 1934 general strike. The arrival of the National Guard, ostensibly deployed to "protect" workers, was an unmistakable reminder of the power relations that underlay claims of community in this company town.

Courtesy of Claudette Roberts and the Cooleemee Historical Association Archives.

The decisive historical juncture for these workers occurred shortly after the defeat of the general strike. Despite Kemp Lewis's promise, time-management experts appeared in the Cooleemee mill. As John Henry Nail ironically observed, "In place of them sticking with us, they really stuck it to us. They brought a bunch of checkers in here and put more work on us."⁵³ Company records do not reveal the circumstances that finally brought the stretch-out to Cooleemee. Perhaps its late appearance there was due only to lag time as Erwin "streamlined" its mills one by one—a coincidental delay that proved propitious during the general strike. Or possibly the fear of New Deal reforms may have caused the company to revise its strategy of labor relations to remain competitive. Certainly, anticipation of regulated wages and hours made efficiency of production a more pressing issue than it had been. In any event, by early 1935 the company had determined to bring the Cooleemee mill in line with its competitors' practices. In the face of the continuing depression, Erwin Mills abandoned any pretense that its workers were partners in the enterprise. With the bottom line at stake, profit took precedence over Erwin's vaunted paternalism and contracts of custom were unilaterally breached.

The intrusion of time-management experts not only increased work loads; it also affronted workers' dignity and skill. Claudie Boger was insulted to find his every move timed. "If you had to go to the bathroom, they'd follow you over to the bathroom door, stand there 'til you come out—note how much time you spent. . . .

⁵³ Nail interview.

You was supposed to have six minutes of rest an hour and under the time system, every second that wasn't actually working was rest time. . . . Going to the bathroom, getting a drink of water, that was all rest time." Moreover, experienced mill hands were frustrated by the flaws in the evaluation system that would henceforth set the pace of their work. The "experts" seemed not to understand the intricacies of textile production: that coarse thread filled the spindles more quickly than fine, requiring more frequent tending of the spinning frames; that moving people from job to job upset important working relationships. As one worker explained, "You got used to a certain person doing your repair work, maybe doffing [removing filled bobbins from the spinning frames], but as you moved around, you changed the people that would do that for you. And that relationship that you'd worked up between you and your fixer and your doffer changed. That made a lot of difference—the people you worked with." Nor did the checkers take into account the way their watchful presence distorted normal work rhythms. "People would be nervous and they'd get shook up and scared they wasn't doing it right," or "some would work like a Trojan" at a pace that could not be realistically maintained. Frances Boger's work assignment went from sixteen looms to thirty-two. As she recalled:

Before, folks had a job they could keep up, make a little rest on it, and talk to the next operator beside them, and everybody was just friendly-like and talking amongst themselves. But when they started the stretch-out, they didn't have nothing to do but just run, run, run on that job. And they resented it.

The new work patterns reduced workers' control over their labor; they also ended lunch breaks and informal social time in the mill and signaled a disrespect for the expertise in which Cooleemee mill hands took pride. When workers attempted to point out the problems in the system, they were frustrated to discover that their knowledge counted for little. Frances Boger ruefully remarked, "We had the experience and they had it on books."⁵⁴

Initially, workers attempted to utilize traditional methods of resistance and self-assertion to stave off the hated changes, expressing their discontent in frequent, spontaneous walkouts, but old strategies no longer seemed effective. The first time a checker appeared with his stopwatch in the weave room, outraged workers picked him up and threw him out the window.⁵⁵ Though this story has become one of Cooleemee's most cherished bits of folklore, the checkers stayed and the stretch-out continued. Ironically for Erwin Mills, however, the illusion of democratic social relations that managers had fostered to defuse worker protest had a power they had not anticipated. By acting out their independence and dignity in seemingly small and inconsequential ways over the years, workers had gradually developed the confidence and sense of entitlement to assert themselves when more was at stake. Drawing on a history of successful self-activity, rather than one of defeat, workers turned to unionization as a new means to enforce company accountability.

⁵⁴ Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 2, tape 1; Sadie Jordan interview, side 2; Ray Jordan interview, May 14, 1992, side 2.

⁵⁵ Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1; Fred Pierce, Jessie and Fred Pierce interview, side 1.

The social contract had been broken. Still, in their recollections, workers were reluctant to lay the blame squarely at the company's door. Instead, they pointed to outsiders and impersonal forces as the determining factors. The turn to two shifts in 1933 that brought an influx of new workers who commuted to the mill from beyond the village boundaries, the replacement of the old guard management by new "college boy" managers who failed to understand the way labor relations operated in Cooleemee, the federal regulations mandating changes that upset traditional work rhythms—all these shared culpability in workers' eyes. The company's image remained curiously untarnished.⁵⁶ It would be a misinterpretation, however, to read this deflection of blame as simple self-delusion by the workers. Rather, it represents their attempt to craft a new form of defense without discarding the effective elements of former custom. To discredit the mill totally would destroy the dynamics on which their precarious negotiating leverage was founded.

When workers organized in 1937 their actions did not represent a sharp break with past practices, but an attempt to formalize and protect the negotiating parameters they had so carefully constructed. Just as their parents and grandparents had translated traditional social understandings to serve their interests as waged workers in a company town, so the union generation would structure their union using the social strategies that had protected them in the past, in an ongoing dialectic of continuity and change.

In the years following 1934, traditional ways in the village were challenged as the hamlet became less of a cultural island. By 1937, door-to-door salesmen had discovered Cooleemee, hawking a variety of consumer goods on "easy credit" terms. Automobiles were no longer a rarity. The village square now boasted a movie theater, and strains of the *Saturday Night Barn Dance* could be heard from radios in nearly every home. Clearly, more than work loads were changing in this company town.⁵⁷

Of course, the outside world was changing as well. New Deal reforms and victories for organized labor (outside the textile South) seemed to promise a new day for working people. Most southern textile workers, however, battered by the defeats of 1934, had neither the resources nor the optimism to take up the fight again. But in Cooleemee, where workers had been untouched by the consequences of the

⁵⁶ Workers' explanations for the deteriorating working conditions are drawn from interviews. Scholars note that often the death of the company "patriarch" marks a shift from paternalism toward rationalized, impersonal labor relations. See Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism*, 211; and Simon, "Choosing between the Ham and the Union," 91. But in Erwin Mills, especially at Cooleemee, Kemp Lewis, who succeeded Erwin as president, and Edwin Holt, who became manager at Zachary's death, attempted to maintain at least the appearance of benevolent paternalism. Both were native members of the Piedmont elite, schooled in Erwin's management ranks, and invested in the style of labor relations that in their eyes made Erwin Mills and themselves paragons of the textile industry. Holt declared to workers "the more I've lived here [Cooleemee], the more beautiful it got." Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 2, tape 2. Workers pointed to new secondary managers, rather than the top echelon, to explain the erosion of the social contract.

⁵⁷ In 1942, among the 321 households in the village proper, there were 204 automobiles and 412 radios. Cooleemee Village Census, War Labor Board Folder, box 49, Erwin Mills Papers. See also Hodges interview, May 28, 1992, side 1. On the impact of mass culture on southern textile villages, see Hall et al., *Like a Family*, 137–62. On its similar effect in ethnic communities, see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990), 99–158.

general strike, unions had new appeal as a means to protect working-class interests. Some undecided mill hands were persuaded to sign union cards because they believed President Franklin D. Roosevelt had pledged his support and protection for labor's cause. Claudie Boger recalled that "FDR said in a speech that if he worked in a plant, the first thing he would do is join the union."⁵⁸ Even the considerable authority of Erwin Mills must have seemed no match for that of the president of the United States. Thus the drive to organize was fueled by a sense of expanded possibilities as well as by new pressures in the workplace. Still, the meaning of union and the way it operated would be determined as much by past understandings as by the new structures of industrial unionism. The Cooleemee union would not be a classic oppositional union like the other CIO unions that formed in the same period, nor a company union. Instead it was a hybrid of the two. Perhaps it can most accurately be described as a community union.

To understand community unionism as it was practiced in Cooleemee, it is helpful to look at the organizing campaign that formed the Cooleemee local and its distinctive approach to contract negotiations. When workers in Cooleemee determined to organize, the thrust came initially from within the community, rather than from an outside organizing drive. Unionization represented a shift in leadership to the younger generation, but it did not entirely jettison the old social contract. All the leaders were children of the first generation of workers, less convinced of the company's reliability than their elders, but still known and trusted insiders, tied through kinship and friendship to nearly everyone in the village, and well versed in traditional Cooleemee modes of negotiating.⁵⁹

Company management also had a stake in its long-standing style of labor relations. Most southern textile magnates stonewalled union efforts regardless of cost. In contrast, Erwin Mills put up little overt resistance when faced with the prospect of unionization, surprising workers and organizers alike.⁶⁰ The reasons were complex. Though Kemp Lewis seemed the ultimate authority to workers in his mills, in reality he had to answer to Duke interests in New York for any misstep that affected the company's margin of profit. Cutthroat competition, government regulation, and labor unrest all posed threats to that bottom line—and attempting to balance this assortment of evils gave Lewis many sleepless nights. His voluminous correspondence indicates that he and his advisers in New York were deeply uncertain and fearful of how new legislation and regulation in Washington might interfere with their ability to do business. In their minds, with Franklin Roosevelt in the White House, anything might happen! In 1937 Lewis expressed his dismay to a fellow textile industrialist: "It would seem almost unbelievable unless we were witnessing it for a man of the ancestry and the family surrounding of Franklin Roosevelt to be sitting calmly by and watching the forces of disorder making rapid strides

⁵⁸ Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1.

⁵⁹ Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1; Ray Jordan interview, March 25, 1992, p. 5; Foster interview.

⁶⁰ McKee interview, side 2; Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1. See also Richards, "History of the Textile Workers Union of America," 196–98.

in dominating this country without opening his mouth.” Lewis consistently opposed wages and hours legislation, seeing it as “an entering wedge for much more drastic bills later” — this despite his admission that “we would be given a considerable advantage in improving competitive conditions if a minimum wage were established which would bring up to our present basis of wage the balance of the mills.”⁶¹

Even more distressing was the undetermined role that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) would play in future labor negotiations. The company counsel, William R. Perkins, regularly warned Lewis of possible NLRB actions “in these days of wild laws and decisions against employers.” In addition, directives from New York repeatedly cautioned him to act with care:

The Wagner Act is now the law of the land and must be obeyed. You are compelled, as I understand it, to negotiate with properly accredited representatives, but you are not obliged to comply with their demands. We can only hope that your discussions, whenever they take place, will lead to an amicable settlement.

In the spring of 1937 Lewis was under exceptional pressure as Erwin Mills’ business began to rebound from depression lows. He reported over a half million dollars gross profit in the first quarter, declaring, “If we are just let alone and have no labor trouble, we ought to have an unusually good year.” He knew, however, that labor trouble was on the horizon, admitting “in our mills here there is quite an active campaign on the part of the C.I.O. movement to unionize our people, and they claim to have made great progress. They are working very quietly, however, and we have no way of telling how they are really getting along.” He believed the company would be “wonderfully lucky” to “come through without trouble,” and that if the company could “get through it with no more than an agreement to bargain with the members of the union it would be wise to compromise.” Duke interests in New York agreed, but they let Lewis know that the terms of “compromise” had best be in the company’s favor, warning “you should not only have a written contract, but . . . this agreement should have the most careful thought of yourself, your associates, and your attorney.”⁶²

By December workers had petitioned for a representation election, and Lewis unburdened himself to his brother: “I am having a terrible time dealing with these labor union representatives, and working under tremendous pressure and tension.” As the date of the election approached, Lewis cautioned his managers, “We are exceedingly anxious that no one in our employ, or out of our employ, do anything to try to influence this election, except to give the people the opportunity of voting without any pressure or coercion from any source. . . . please do everything you

⁶¹ Kemp Lewis to B. B. Gossett, April 6, 1937, Correspondence File, box 46, Kemp Plummer Lewis Papers, Southern Historical Collection; Kemp Lewis to Louis Graves, July 23, 1937, *ibid.*; and Kemp Lewis to George Fooshe, May 11, 1937, *ibid.*

⁶² William R. Perkins to Kemp Lewis, April 11, 1940, William Perkins Folder, box 49, Erwin Mills Papers; J. C. Thorne to Kemp Lewis, May 14, 1937, Correspondence File, box 46, Lewis Papers; Kemp Lewis to Thorne, May 10, 1937, *ibid.*; Kemp Lewis to Fooshe, May 11, 1937, *ibid.*; Kemp Lewis to Thorne, March 15, 1937, *ibid.*; Thorne to Kemp Lewis, May 14, 1937, *ibid.*

can to see that our Company keeps hands off so far as trying to influence the people in any way." Lewis, in consultation with the Duke shareholders in Erwin Mills, had apparently determined that the wisest course was to eschew outright opposition, try to avoid NLRB sanctions, and keep the mills running. At the same time the company would focus its energies on crafting an institutionalized version of existing forms of negotiation, one that would bypass regional or national union representatives as much as possible in favor of personalized, local mediation. Lewis recognized that the success of this endeavor would depend on the quality of face-to-face interactions between workers and management, with or without a union. While he wasted no sympathy on the union itself, he attempted to draw a distinction between CIO organizers and local union activists in the work force:

If trouble should come, we are not going to be a party to take any measures which will result in violence and personal injury, which will contribute toward antagonism, disrupting the morale of our mills. . . . the effect of which cannot be easily wiped out. If our employees should force this type of trouble on us, we would very much prefer to think of them from our standpoint as being mistaken and to refrain as far as we possibly can from having our minds dwell upon the individual cases. We must all recognize and keep it in our minds that these people are going to be promised a great many things by the organizers and the future will be painted in a very rosy hue to them if they join in this co-operative movement. . . . We are sincerely hopeful that we can get through it without any disruption of our relationship with our employees, and without appreciable lowering of the morale of our employees.⁶³

Clearly, Lewis's response to "this co-operative movement" diverged from that of most of his fellow industrialists, in strategy if not intent. Thus, throughout the organizing campaign and the ensuing contract negotiations, neither workers nor management completely repudiated old bases of accountability, though the social fabric on which they relied wore increasingly thin. The TWUA may have treated the company as its implacable opponent, but at the ground level, at least in Cooleemee, the new order was not quite so apparent. Workers maneuvered to maintain customs that would protect community authority, and management strove to convince workers that problems could still be worked out in the company "family."

The result left labor relations in Cooleemee straddling old and new forms of negotiation. When the ballots were counted, the TWUA easily won representation rights as Cooleemee workers voted by more than three to one in favor of the union. But as contract negotiations (intended to cover all Erwin's North Carolina mills) stalled for over three years, grievances continued to be handled in much the old way—by individualized mediation between employees and management, with the added participation of local union representatives, and rituals of courtesy and respect protected valued bargaining chips on both sides of the table.⁶⁴

⁶³ Kemp Lewis to R. H. Lewis, Dec. 4, 1937, Correspondence File, box 46, Lewis Papers; Kemp Lewis to P. B. Parks, Feb. 5, 1938, Correspondence Folder, box 48, Erwin Mills Papers; Kemp Lewis to E. M. Holt, April 2, 1937, *ibid.*

⁶⁴ See boxes 47–48, Labor Relations Series, Erwin Mills Papers.

During this period workers developed an enhanced collective confidence as members of a legally sanctioned bargaining group. At the same time, the company, hoping to minimize the union's demand for contractual constraints, practiced extreme caution both in implementing new work practices and in handling employee complaints. Lewis bombarded his managers with advice on "keeping discussions on a friendly basis, with no bitterness creeping in," and Edwin Holt, manager of the Cooleemee mill, in turn assured him, "we will do everything possible to keep these meetings harmonious and will see that every consideration is given for requests for hearing and what is said in the hearings." Working people in Cooleemee put increasing faith in the demonstrated ability of their representatives to negotiate successfully with management and drew the reasonable conclusion that they had succeeded in restabilizing labor relations to their advantage. In workers' minds the union had achieved precisely what they had intended. All that remained was to formalize the existing parameters of negotiation within a contract.⁶⁵

The TWUA understandably put little faith in the informal constraints of community accountability and adamantly pressed for a binding arbitration clause in the contract. As negotiations threatened to break off once again in 1941 over this issue, Cooleemee's spokesperson, Dock Walker, put both management and TWUA officials on notice, announcing that the people in Cooleemee wanted a contract *now*; they "wanted something, were expecting it, and were going to get it." At the insistence of Cooleemee's rank and file, Local 251 overrode the objections of union negotiators, broke with workers in Erwin's other mills, and signed a contract *without* binding arbitration. TWUA regional director Roy Lawrence later acknowledged that, against his better judgment, he had bowed to local pressure; "they [TWUA] had signed the Cooleemee contract, and while they did not think it would work properly, they were going to make the best of it." Despite a superficial alliance with textile operatives in Erwin's other mills, to Cooleemee workers the meaning of union remained parochially circumscribed by a definition of community exceptionalism that set them apart from other workers.⁶⁶

Mill hands in Durham and Erwin, along with those in Cooleemee, seized the opportunity to form a union, suggesting that the company's willingness to negotiate was the pivotal factor in the successful organization of the Erwin mills and also that southern textile workers in general lacked the means, rather than the desire, to unionize. But even within the Erwin mills, class loyalties operated on a number of levels, and parochial concerns were only intermittently subsumed in a larger group identity. In short, local issues moved workers to organize, and community dynamics, more than company policy, determined the particular meaning of union and the way locals would operate.

⁶⁵ Holt to Kemp Lewis, March 5, 1941, Correspondence Folder, box 48, *ibid.* On workers' attitudes, see Erwin Mills and TWUA contract negotiation meeting, minutes, March 26, 1941, TWUA Negotiations Folder, box 49, *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Minutes, March 21, 1941, *ibid.*; C. R. Harris memorandum re contract meeting, July 16, 1941, *ibid.* Union negotiators used the Cooleemee contract as a negotiating base to work out contracts with the other Erwin mills. When binding arbitration was incorporated into the remaining contracts, it was extended to Cooleemee. Thus, there is no basis of comparison to determine how much it protected workers' rights. For workers' emphasis on the exceptional success the Cooleemee local achieved in parlaying directly with resident management, see Frances and Claudie Boger interview, tape 1, side 2; Foster interview; Ray Jordan interview, May 28, 1992.

Tellingly, though Erwin Mills was consistent in its overall management policies, the tenor of labor relations varied widely at different times and places. Durham operatives had a long history of contentious opposition to company control, and both Durham and Erwin had participated in the 1934 strike. Yet, when the ballots on union representation were tabulated, Durham and Cooleemee chose the union by seven-to-one and three-to-one margins, respectively, but TWOC captured the mill at Erwin by a bare 51 percent.⁶⁷ Finally, Cooleemee's separate peace in the contract negotiations attests that despite structural similarities in the three towns, local dynamics remained central in shaping labor strategies.

In historical perspective the Cooleemee contract may seem to represent workers' short-sighted denial of the power relations in place, but from the workers' standpoint in 1941 their choice was not entirely illogical. Their union had experienced significant success in mediating grievances, and workers may well have believed that similar locally controlled negotiation would be the most effective strategy in battling future increases in work load. In fact, no version of the contracts that the TWUA presented Erwin Mills seriously contested management's right to control either the introduction of new technology or the pace of production. Thus, if the stretch-out were to be contained, it would not be by the union contract.⁶⁸

To union members in Cooleemee, the CIO provided a useful institutionalized form, but it was only one weapon in the arsenal of opposition. Labor relations in Cooleemee remained largely community-driven and dependent on personal relationships. The local leadership proceeded to steer the union's affairs vigorously with little assistance from the national office. Donald McKee, the TWUA representative assigned to Cooleemee in 1941, characterized the local as unique in the degree to which its officers ran the union—indeed, McKee declared in admiration that he “had nothing to do.” In his estimation, “the leadership was fantastic . . . not the kind I had previously encountered. . . . They were superb.” Though the Cooleemee mill remained an open shop in accordance with North Carolina law, the union quickly achieved and maintained high participation, topping 93 percent in 1941. Its shop steward system was unusually inclusive, assuring broad participation by the rank and file in the decision-making process. Stewards were elected for each of the three shifts in every department. As a representative body, they met in regular meetings (separately by shift, and, weekly, as an entire group) to discuss and vote on grievances brought before them.⁶⁹ In this way the union remained accountable and responsive to the needs of the settled cohort of workers and unswervingly parochial

⁶⁷ Reports to the National Labor Relations Board, Election Folder, box 48, Erwin Mills Papers.

⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that the TWUA acquiesced to management prerogatives in this regard from the outset of contract negotiations in 1938. Like the UTW before it, the TWUA was primarily concerned with eliminating the wage differential between northern and southern textiles, and it failed to address the issue of working conditions, the single most important factor driving southern operatives to protest and organize. In fairness to union negotiators, however, it must be noted that internal company correspondence makes it clear that the company regarded these prerogatives as paramount. Whatever strategy the union employed, it is highly unlikely that it could have wrested a compromise from Erwin on this front. Contracts Folder, box 49, *ibid.*

⁶⁹ McKee interview, side 1; Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1. McKee described the shop steward system as “remarkable,” a “quasi-judicial” court where workers themselves determined the legitimacy of grievances.



The “roosting pole” in the village square, traditional gathering place for male mill hands, informally supplemented the union hall as the site for discussions of union and community business. Tellingly, this was a masculine preserve.
Harold Foster Collection, Cooleemee Historical Association Archives.

in its concerns. Despite the national’s preoccupation with issues of wages and hours, in Cooleemee throughout the 1940s, grievances continued to focus primarily on working conditions, seniority, and “the arrogance of overseers treating people differently.”⁷⁰

The union rapidly became not only the vehicle for labor relations but also the focal social institution of the village, involving the entire community in its many activities. The union took over the social role formerly played by mill management, sponsoring union picnics, beauty contests, fund-raising drives, and classes, as well as the village’s annual Fourth of July and Christmas celebrations.⁷¹ These events were not restricted to union members; they were open to all workers and their families, to Cooleemee’s small merchant class, and to local management as well. Even as union activities began to demonstrate a more inclusive working-class consciousness, they maintained some of the old ties between workers and managers. Arbitration meetings were held in the union hall, but the hall itself was located above the company store on the village square.⁷²

⁷⁰ Foster interview; McKee interview, side 1; Ray Jordan interview, May 14, 1992, side 1; and Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1 and side 2, tape 2.

⁷¹ See *Textile Challenger*, 1951–1957.

⁷² Richard C. Franck, “An Oral History of West Durham: A Report Submitted to the Durham Bicentennial,” 1975, p. 9, Durham Bicentennial Commission Papers (Special Collections Department, Duke University Library).

The local's bargaining tactics also retained striking elements of the old, informal, face-to-face negotiating style, as deeply embedded in community as in the workplace—with many of the old strengths and limitations. Cooleemee became widely known for its brand of vibrant unionism and for the union's ability to mediate individual grievances at the local level, so much so that workers from other mill communities looked to Cooleemee as an example and regularly sought the union's assistance in their organizing attempts. Cooleemee's workers, in turn, began to see their interests as tied to those of a larger working-class community, including most immediately those employed in Erwin's other mills. In 1955 the membership made the significant decision to integrate the local, a step toward overcoming generations of inherited racism.⁷³

Nonetheless, it will not do to romanticize the efficacy of community unionism. Despite an evolving union consciousness and considerable success in protecting certain worker rights, institutional abuses that derived from conditions outside the Cooleemee mill remained beyond the union's control. Primary among them was the stretch-out, which ultimately proceeded despite all efforts to restrain it.⁷⁴ In addition, the union's negotiating leverage was always limited by its tenuous presence in southern textiles. Organized labor mounted only a single southern organizing drive in the late 1940s, Operation Dixie. Its disastrous results caused the CIO and American Federation of Labor (AFL) largely to abandon the southern field. Until their merger in 1955, the textile workers unions of the CIO and the AFL concentrated their energies and limited resources on fighting one another for the allegiance of already-organized workers. In 1952 the Cooleemee and Durham locals defected to the AFL-affiliated United Textile Workers of America (UTW), while the Erwin local voted to remain with the TWUA. The split further weakened workers' bargaining power. A broadside distributed in Cooleemee at that time demonstrates the continuing centrality of community in defining union issues: "Cooleemee workers are going to stick with the people who helped them build this union. These people are not *strangers*. They are the people you know best, who have proved their loyalty and devotion to you and your union. Don't let these TWUA-CIO disorganizers (strangers) split you up."⁷⁵

⁷³ According to longtime business agent Harold Foster, "the union became a showplace for arbitration"; the AFL-CIO and the government brought in observers from around the world to see Cooleemee's grievance process. Foster interview. On assistance to other communities, see also Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 2, tape 1. Integration did not indicate an end to racist attitudes. According to the local's business agent, integration of the local was marked by a decline in active participation by black members, who had previously been organized in a segregated sublocal. Nonetheless, for white mill workers long acculturated to the doctrine of white supremacy, the act of integration was a significant move toward a broader conception of the working class. Foster interview; McKee interview.

⁷⁴ The union may have retarded the pace at which stretch-out was implemented. Still, when spinner Lillian Spry retired in 1963, she was tending three times as many sides as she had when she began work in the mill in 1922. (Every spinning frame had two sides, each with about 130 bobbins or quills to tend.) Spry interview, side 1.

⁷⁵ Angered by what they perceived as the TWUA's excessive interference and poor decision making, and by charges of official corruption, the Cooleemee and Durham locals jumped to the weaker and more loosely structured United Textile Workers Union-AFL in the wake of an unsuccessful general strike by the TWUA. Foster interview; Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 2, tape 2; TWUA vs. UTW Folder, box 50, Erwin Mills Papers. Despite the fact that TWUA representatives had worked with the Cooleemee local for over five years, when the local leaders aligned themselves with the UTW, TWUA organizers quickly reverted to the category of "strangers." Broadside, 1952, TWUA vs. UTW Folder, box 50, Erwin Mills Papers.



A cartoon published during a 1952 representation battle depicts Emil Rieve, head of the Textile Workers Union of America, as a corrupt grafter. Despite pleas for unity from both national unions, workers did break the chain.

Erwin workers retained their affiliation with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, but the Durham and Cooleemee mills defected to the American Federation of Labor, thereby weakening workers' bargaining power.

Erwin Mills Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University.

Despite the weakness of organized labor in the South—or perhaps because of it—Erwin Mills came to terms with the union presence in its mills. Cooleemee's manager, Edwin Holt, looked forward to a signed contract in 1941, stating, "We do believe that a contract will do a lot towards straightening out questions that we are now having to answer with regard to work loads." In the opinion of workers and union representative Don McKee, the company regarded the union as a means to forestall costly, spontaneous walkouts and to regularize grievance mediation. McKee declared that he found "no antagonism coming from top management when they went in to negotiate contracts. They almost seemed to welcome collective bargaining." Thus, while workers used the union to preserve personal accountability, management viewed it as a move toward rationalized labor relations. Con-

sequently, in Cooleemee the union occupied a middle ground between paternalism and contractualism that appeared to offer certain advantages to both sides.⁷⁶

Workers had learned the skills to negotiate paternalism, and they continued to expand them, but the underlying structure of power was unchanged. The advantages accruing to them from community unionism persisted only so long as established relationships remained intact. These limitations were most vividly demonstrated when Burlington Industries purchased Erwin Mills in 1962. Following a corporate strategy unfettered by community constraints, Burlington swept unwritten and legally unprotected rights and obligations from the bargaining table. Workers became increasingly uneasy as one decision after another worked against their interests and against what they perceived as the long-term viability of the mill. Nonetheless, they were stunned by the magnitude of the consequences. In 1969 Burlington shut down the Cooleemee mill without discussion or even a day's notice, exposing the fragile base of community unionism and effectively destroying the community that had been built over generations. Frances Boger sadly recalled, "Not to brag, but we thought we had it made. It really knocked the breath out of you. At our age it was bad to have to get up and hunt for more work."⁷⁷

The limitations of community unionism notwithstanding, the critical insight to be gained from the history of Cooleemee is that the union there did not spring from a newly discovered oppositional consciousness. It grew out of workers' years of experience in self-assertion and resistance — though not of the sort to elicit attention beyond the village boundaries. Neither fully oppositional nor deeply co-opted by management, their version of union reflected workers' understanding of how they could best protect themselves, and it was built on an accumulated, experiential logic of infrapolitical resistance. It mined the usable elements of the old system of rights and obligations, seeking to institutionalize them to counter a rapidly depersonalizing environment. The union's essential role was to keep the social fabric of Cooleemee intact. In the end, it was only a holding action, but in an industry that often seemed committed to crushing workers' rights, that in itself was an achievement.

In the annals of southern labor history, even such a qualified achievement was rare. In many respects Cooleemee was an anomaly—as was Erwin Mills—and not

⁷⁶ Holt to Kemp Lewis, March 5, 1941, Correspondence Folder, box 48, Erwin Mills Papers; McKee interview, side 2; Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, sides 1 and 2, tape 1; Ray Jordan interview, May 14, 1992, side 2. Evidencing a desire to free itself from the intimate obligations of community, in 1953 the company sold the village housing stock. But the sales were negotiated in a personalized and paternalistic manner. The houses were offered to workers at affordable prices with company financing, worked out individually on terms that workers could manage. Fred Pierce interview, side 2; Claudie Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 2, tape 1; Spry interview, side 1.

⁷⁷ Frances Boger, Frances and Claudie Boger interview, side 1, tape 1; Ray Jordan interview, May 28, 1992, side 2; Sadie Jordan interview, side 1; Fred Pierce, Jessie and Fred Pierce interview, side 2. Workers in other industries proved to be equally unprotected against unilateral plant closings, even workers represented by the most powerful national unions.

representative of most southern mill towns. In fact, Cooleemee may present a best-case scenario of southern industrial paternalism at work. Therein lies its analytical value. The claims of family and community that undergird paternalism were highly articulated in this village in ways that bound all its residents in varying degrees. The exceptional social space that prevailed in Cooleemee provides an opportunity to examine fully both the authority and the limits of community codes, an endeavor with applications well beyond the world of southern textiles.

The logic of resistance that operated in Cooleemee was framed as an intensely parochial “inside” struggle, as working people labored to exact some control over their lives and to reduce the forces aligned against them to a human dimension. In constructing a community that encompassed both management and the settled cohort of workers, the mill people of Cooleemee attempted to protect their interests by calling on a moral accountability based on shared identity, an identity partly constructed as strategy but also partly internalized. The qualified success they experienced precluded enduring alliances with a broader working-class movement for change.

Similar modes of resistance have been employed by a variety of subordinated people across time and space, and though such localistic strategies suffer from obvious inadequacies—the insular nature and tenuous enforceability of community obligation—they have been informed more often by an acute understanding of the realm of the possible than by a mystification of existing power relations. For people struggling in a world of limited options against powerful adversaries, the imperfect bonds of custom and culture could prove, at least for a time, the surest weapons at hand.