Oral History Interview with WESLEY BRUMBELOW at the Aragon Baptist Church, Aragon, on February 13, 1988. Interviewed by Sam Spence.

(Note: I, Sam Spence, was born in a cotton mill village in north Georgia called Aragon. When I was five years old, we moved to LaGrange where my father went to work for Callaway Mills, Hillside Plant.)

I have some memories of Aragon, so I decided to try to interview someone near my age who lived his life in Aragon. I found a telephone number for the Aragon city clerk in a Rockmart, Georgia, telephone directory in Columbus. The clerk directed me to Mr. Wesley Brumbelow, who invited me to come up. On Friday, February 12th, I drove to Rome and on Saturday, February 13th, met Mr. Brumbelow at the Aragon City Hall. We set up our tape recorder in the adjacent Aragon Baptist Church office and recorded the following interview. Voices heard are S (Sam Spence) and B (Brumbelow).

B: In 1898, my grandfather, Robert Milton Brumbelow, who worked for the Southern Railroad at a small place west of here, met two men from New York. The two men that he met, one was Mr. Walcott and one was Mr. Campbell, and they built a mill here and started in about 1898, and it started up in 1900.

The city government, or the village government, you might say, was controlled by the cotton mill, or up until 1914 when, for some reason unknown to me, they decided they needed a city government. So they got a charter and elected three commissioners at that time. I remember one's name was Mr. Arnold. The other two I don't remember, but at any rate, the city government operated for two or three years and then they abandoned it up until about 1970, when the mill closed down and the city people here in the village decided we needed some type of government because the mill controlled everything and we had nobody to refer to except the county.

It was controlled by the county, as a group of men went to work on getting the charter updated and they elected these commissioners and the governor of the state of Georgia came down and swore the commissioners in, and that was a big day in Aragon, you know, having the governor of the state of Georgia come down to Aragon.

And the three men served as councilmen for about a year and they decided to change the type of government from commission to a mayor and council. And the mayor and council were elected. Then they had a four man government, three councilmen and a mayor. Today we're still operating that way. We now have our third mayor in office. He was just elected. I mean our fourth mayor, yes, our fourth mayor, just elected this year.

S: Walcott and Campbell who started the mill. Did they own everything?
B: Yes! They owned everything. When they sold out, they really sold out. They sold sometimes in the late or early 30's. The people who bought it was A.D. Julliard Company. They sold everything except the farm that my grandfather lived on.

They wouldn't sell that because they had him a lifetime job, you see. So they had to hold that until sometimes about 1941. Then they decided to sell it. By that time, my grandfather was dead and they offered my father, who was then living in that house, the chance to buy it. He had the first choice to buy it but he did not buy it.

So A.D. Julliard bought it from Walcott and Campbell in about '41 I guess it was. Sometimes later, about the late 40's or early '50's, another company merged with A.D. Julliard which was, you know, United Merchants and Manufacturers, and they took control of the mill and sold some of the property off that they had here.

In the 70's, they closed down, but another company, Integrated Products, out of Rome, Georgia, bought the mill and the property that was left. Then they sold off all of the property except what the mill sits on.

The big spring here in Aragon was taken over by Polk County. They used that for country water now, and all of Aragon is on county water. They have built a shed over the spring but not the channel.

But we now have a new fire department which is rated an A-1 fire department and we have a police department which is a A-1 police department. We're proud of our city.

S: In comparing the city as it is now with the city as it was when it was first built......

B: Well, there ain't no comparison. No comparison!

S: Were the village houses that were built here first single family houses?

B: Some of them were, but there was two family, and even some three family, particularly where they had upstairs. Just a few of them had an upstairs. Now, in most of the houses there's just one family. In some instances where relatives bought homes, there may be two families living in, like, two apartments.

S: When first built, did the houses have electricity?

B: No! There was no electricity. And the only water they had was an outside hydrant. They had to go outside to get the water. They did not have indoor plumbing.
They had the houses out in the back alley which were known as outhouses, I guess.

And in about 1945, I guess, they built indoor plumbing. They built indoor bathrooms in all the houses. And in 1944, I believe it was, they paved all the streets. We had ... all the streets were dirt up till 1940 when they started paving the streets. You had horses and buggies, wagons before automobiles. I can remember the time when I was in school in the early '30's, you would walk through Aragon and you wouldn't see an automobile on the street. And now you have a problem getting up the street in another automobile because of the cars parked on the street. That's quite a difference.

S: Do you ever see a horse now?

B: Never see a horse. The only horses you see is if some youngster likes to play cowboy around here. There may be one or two in the pasture outside the village here. Occasionally you might see some kids riding a horse just because he likes to play cowboy.

S: On the way into town from Rome this morning, I saw a sign with the image of a fire truck. You now have a fire station and a fire truck. Do you remember what sort of fire protection there was when the village was young?

B: Yes! They had a big reel with two huge wheels, and they rolled the hose up on it. It was pulled by men. They didn't even have a horse drawn fire wagon. That's what they had then. At least one of the early fire houses is still there. It's brick, about eight foot square with a hip roof on it.

S: I remember those buildings. I was born right next door to one of them. I think it was on a corner not far from the store.

B: We'll go take a look at it and you can take a picture of it.

S: Tell me something about the store over here.

B: I didn't mention it, but when the company built the mill, they also built a general store. In this store, they sold everything. They sold wagons, groceries, dry goods, and everything you could want to buy. Caskets, even. And they had a horse and wagon to deliver things in. If somebody died in the community, they delivered the casket to the house. Some of the people would put the body in the casket, then the horse and wagon would take the casket to the cemetery, even in a funeral procession. We didn't have an undertaker. There may have been one over five miles away but they just used the local business here. I can remember when I worked at the mill, even after I went to work at the mill after 1940, if a person wanted to get paid early in the week, they paid them on Wednesday, and they paid them off in what they called "loonies" and those "loonies" could only be spent at the
Aragon store. And some people who wanted money would get those "loonies" on Wednesday and sell them to somebody at a cut rate price, and get the cash. Then those other people would take "loonies" to the company store to buy their groceries with. That's sort of unusual, I thought. It was something the company could do for its employees who couldn't go from pay day to pay day without running out of money. On pay day, you see, they paid off in cash. Credit then was almost unknown to those people, because if you didn't own anything, you couldn't borrow anything or get credit.

S: A couple of minutes ago, we were talking about the fire house and the horse cart. How did they get water to a fire?

B: Every house had a water hydrant sticking up in the back yard. They also put a fire hose hydrant every so often in the middle of the block. The water came from one of the two tanks down by the store. I don't know when they was built, but one of them is real old. I don't know if they would put out the fire or just let it burn down and just try to keep it from spreading. I don't know what kind of pressure they had. Our department is still a volunteer fire department.

S: Okay! Now, Aragon was served by two railroads, I think you told me.

B: Yes. The Southern Railroad came in from the south to the north, and the Seaboard Railroad came in from the east to west. We could go in all directions. We could catch a Seaboard and go east to Cartersville or west to Cedartown. On the Southern, we could go south to Atlanta or north to Rome. I guess that's one of the reasons the cotton mill built here was because of the railroads. The mill used the railroads for shipping. But today, the railroad tracks have been taken up and they use trucks altogether.

S: What did the mills make here at first?

B: When the mill first started, they made clothing material such as denim. Later on, they made corduroy. My experience was in corduroy. We had the cutting department to cut the wales out of the corduroy. A lot of people don't know that is what happens to corduroy. I'm sure you're familiar with it. They made some denim at the LaGrange mills. As a matter of fact, that is what I went down there to apply for a job for. That was about 1951, I guess.

Do you have any other questions?

S: I have some memories noted down to ask about. One is the memory of fire buckets hung on posts throughout the mill.

B: Yes, on the posts. This was even after I went to work in the
mill in the '40's. There was fire buckets hanging on the posts. The posts were all painted red where the buckets were. A little later on, they put up fire extinguishers to replace those buckets. Those buckets held water to put out small fires.

S: Do you remember any serious fires here?

B: Well, the most serious fire I know of in the mill was in the early '40's. The fire started underneath the cloth room and it burnt the floor out and it got into the warehouse. A lot of cloth was burned. We had a big sale afterward. They put it outside and sold a lot. Mostly, it was drapery material and bed spread material. I know some of it is still around. I remember that my dad bought some of it, and we made some curtains from it. And some bed spreads. I wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't some of it still around.

S: Did you ever go swimming in Euharlee Creek?

B: Yeah, I did. It was quite a thing. We had a couple of swimming holes. Euharlee creek runs almost through the village. It's the southern boundary of the mill property, and it's the city limit now.

S: Our swimming hole was just above the steel bridge on the Rockmart Road.

B: Do you remember what they called that hole?

S: No.

B: They called that hole the "Dice Hole" .... the men used to go down to the creek there near the swimming hole to shoot dice. Down below that there was another swimming hole on my daddy's place, where wagons would ford the creek going into town, or to cultivate the fields on that side. Sometimes, we would go swimming instead of to work. Sometimes we got caught and got into trouble. I have a lot of memories of that, too. If you know anything about wooden wheeled wagons, you know that in dry weather, the wooden wheels shrunk and the metal tires came off or loose. Then we drove the wagon to the creek and let them stand to soak up the water to tighten up the rims.

S: I remember the Sunday walk from the village down a dusty dirt road to the railroad station to watch the train come in. It was hot and dirty. We were allowed to play up and down the ramps going up to the freight docks and the big iron wheeled freight wagons.

B: That road stayed dirt until the '40's. The road from here to Rome was not paved until 1948. I remember that because my son was born in '48.
We started up to Rome on that road in a Ford car which they called a "sixty". It was raining and one of the worst nights you ever saw. That Ford wouldn't pull the hat off your head. I would pull those mountains and the road was still tore up so bad, we had to detour around through Silver Creek. I thought I'd never get to Rome. They did finish the road that summer, as far as the crossroad that went down to Silver Creek.

S: Does the Aragon spring still exist? I remember the picnics by the spring.

B: There are picnic tables there now above the spring. They got a building over the spring. The county pumps water out of the spring now. If we had organized the city just two months earlier, before the mill company turned the spring over to the county, we would have got the spring. If we had, we would have been more prosperous.

The only problem we have now is, we charge four dollars and a half for garbage pickup and fifty cents for street lights. Lots of people don't pay up. They just throw the garbage out somewhere, even in their own yards. If we owned the spring, we could cut off their water until they paid up. We don't have no way of forcing them to pay up.

S: Do most people here now own their own houses?

B: Yes. Most of them do own their own homes. A few own houses that they rent out.

S: Do you remember when the mill owners sold the houses?

B: Yes. They started right after World War II. The first offer was to the person who lived in the house. If they didn't want it, then anybody else could apply and the first to apply got it.

S: Did the company finance the new ownership?

B: The company had some finance company in with them. It was such a small price, like twelve or fifteen hundred dollars. The same house today is bringing between thirty five to forty thousand each house.

S: Did the mill worker pay any rent previously to the company?

B: Yes, they paid about two dollars a week, taken out of their pay check. If I remember correctly, that took care of electricity and water. A big house might have cost you two fifty or three dollars.

S: Wesley, what work did you do in the cotton mills?

B: I worked in the mill from 1940 until 1955, fifteen years. I
started off in the cloth room from '40 till '43, when I was drafted into the army. When I got back from the army, I went to work in the plumbing shop and studied plumbing under the G.I. Bill. I wasn't satisfied with it and when the cloth room overseer asked me to come back to work for him, I went back to the cloth room as a supervisor. I worked there for about three years when I was transferred to the corduroy cutting department as foreman until it was shut down. I went back to the cloth room until 1955. Then I went to work for another textile corporation, Celanese. It was then called "Tubize". It was unionized but it was not a closed shop.

S: Was this a union shop?

B: Yes! They did not have a closed shop. They had unions though.

S: When did it go union?

B: Right after World War II, in '46. I remember when they was organizing.

S: I recall a lot of labor trouble about 1934.

B: Speaking about the unions, I can tell you something else about the union in Aragon. Back in 1934, I don't know whether or not you remember, that's when they started to organize the south. They came to Aragon, and, I remember I was about nine or ten years old. Where I lived, I had to walk to school, and they had machine guns up on top of the mill. They had people carrying picker sticks around the mill, and it was terrible. My mother's brother got killed. He was shot down by one of the strikers, thinking he was somebody else. Well, he thought he was one of the workers, but he didn't work at the mill.

I can remember real well when they sent the National Guard down here. And I remember going to school, walking by those National Guards. They would help us get by the mill and get us on the other side. They had the road blocked and they stopped everybody that came by. They pitched tents down there in the little park, near the spring. That was quite a time.

Then, in '51, we had another strike. This happened in '34, the first one I'm talking about, when my uncle was killed. In '51 they had another strike. I was a supervisor in the mill by that time. It got pretty rough. They didn't want to let anybody in. Of course, the supervisors had to go on in, and I went on in right along. Of course they would holler at me and say nasty things.

S: Did they try to stop you?

B: Never did! One time, they picked up some rocks to throw at me. There was three of us in the car and one of 'em had a pistol
and he raised it up and they dropped the rocks. It was that bad! I carried a shotgun in my car. At that time, I was going to school, at night, in Rome. To get to my house you've got to go right through there. I was coming down the street right back here when they got in front of me down there and I just lowered the lights down and backed up a little bit and said: "You'd better get out of my way. I'm going home. I'll run over you if you don't." And I put it in gear and floorboarded it. And when I passed there, somebody hollered something dirty at me and I just stopped and backed up and reached and got that shotgun and said: "Who said that?" They all run. They said nobody. They hollered at me when I started off: "We'll be over to get you." I said: "Come on, I'll be waiting for you." Nobody showed up, but they did do some dirty things.

They did set dynamite under one house and set it off. It was an empty house, but they did shoot into some houses. I live on a dead end street, so if they came into my street, they couldn't get out very well. I wasn't trying to be brave, but I was going to protect myself and my family.

The mill was already organized. The union was already in the mill, so the 1951 strike was just for higher pay. From 1934 until 1946, they did not have a union. I think they got in about 1946.

Aragon, to me, has always been a nice place to work. I never have had a problem with anybody. I always thought the company treated the people very nice. And, besides being a nice place to work, they had a lot of recreation facilities. If you was familiar with the textile ball league that they had back in those days...they would hire a man if he was a good ball player, and give him a job just to play ball. I remember those ball players and I think back in those days the ball teams that they had was as good as the majors. I've heard a lot of people say about those years, "you've had as good a players as the majors had." They just wasn't as well known. We had a few go to the majors from here. We had one man here .... Dizzy Dean.

S: Oh, really?!

B: Not the real Dizzy Dean, but his name was Dizzy Dean, and he was quite a baseball pitcher, and he did go to the majors. They farmed him out to the Chattanooga team. He stayed in Chattanooga for a while, then he got dissatisfied and he came home.

S: I have found that these mill leagues did feed the upper leagues. The minor leagues particularly. A lot of them were taken up by the major leagues and sent to the minor leagues for training.

B: Yeah, that's the way they operated back in those days, and they had some mighty good ones back in those days. Jack Lawson, for instance, was one of the best. If Jack Lawson
ever went up to bat, he was sure to get on first base. If he had to make the pitcher hit him, he would. He would get a hit, or get hit, but he would get on first base. No! I'll never forget him.

S: Wesley, all of my mother's family came from Fish Creek. Do you know where Fish Creek is?

B: Yeah. My wife came from Fish Creek, so we got a little bit in common.

S: We have a little more in common. I was born here in Aragon.

B: Yes. Did you ever live in Cartersville?

S: No, but when my mother was a girl, she was a telephone operator in Cartersville.

B: My mother came from Cartersville. Back in those days they didn't have anything in Rockmart. They just had operators in Rome and Cartersville. As a matter of fact, they didn't have any telephones in Rockmart, either. I can remember where they didn't have but a few here. There was one up at the preacher's house, two or three at the mill and mill manager's house, and one at the store, and that was it! If you wanted to get a message in, people would call Aragon store to get them to deliver a message. I remember in World War II, my dad was managing the store, and I was stationed at Oklahoma City and flat broke. I had to call the store to get money to come home on furlough. My daddy spent a lot of time just delivering messages. And some of them was sad messages.

Even telegrams were called in to the store for him to deliver. When I was at Fort Sill, with only two or three dollars to my name, I had to call my dad to wire me some money. I got it in, I guess, about twenty minutes.

S: You went into the Army from the mill?

B: Yes, I was drafted. When I went to work, my mama told me I was to go for my physical. I was real skinny. I weighed only 130 pounds. I didn't think they would take me in, but they did and sent me up to Massachusetts. When I was up there, I noticed that my first sergeant was looking me over very carefully. A few months later, we was talking in the mess hall and he said: "When I first saw you, I didn't think that you would make it. But, you know," he said, "you're the toughest little feller I've ever seen." I was doing farm work besides working in the mill, and you can just about tell a farm boy. They're used to hard work.

S: Did most of the mill workers come from off the farms?
B: Yeah. Most everybody that was hired into the mill was a farmer. A lot of people would move from mill village to mill village. We got some people who went from a farm to a mill somewhere else but then would come to Aragon. Even from Alabama, up in the Carolinas, or up in Tennessee. People were coming in and going even up until recent years. 'Specially weavers, loom fixers, or spinning room hands.

S: At what age did you come to work here?

B: Well, this is before my time, but my father went to work there when he was nine years old. I know some others who went to work at eight and nine. When I started, you had to be at least 16, and I was 17.

S: How did Aragon get its name?

B: Well, I told you how my grandfather met these two men from New York. He quit the railroad and they gave him a job as their land agent. The local people didn't have much faith in them but they did in my grandfather. They were staying in a hotel in Atlanta named the Aragon. They were sitting one day trying to think of a name for their mill. My grandfather said: "Why don't you name it after that hotel you like so much?" So they named it The Aragon Cotton Mill. That's the way my daddy told it to me.

S: NOTE: In the Aragon City Hall, there hangs a large early photograph which shows Robert Milton Brumbelow sitting in a horse-drawn buggy. The caption under the photograph credits Mr. Brumbelow as being the man who suggested the name "Aragon."

B: I thought it was kind of unique to name it after a hotel. After awhile, the company built a hotel here. It was right up the street from the mill, right across from the Baptist church. From where we are, it was just across the street there.

Drummers would come in on the train. We had a livery stable where they'd rent horses and buggies. They'd always have two or three sitting over there at the depot for people to rent when they came in. They would rent a horse and buggy and come on down here to the mill, do their business with the mill and the store, and the surrounding area. And then they would go and get a room at the hotel.

We had all the accommodations of a big city. We had a hotel, a car rental, so to speak, except it was a horse and buggy. Young couples would rent one on Sunday afternoons just to ride around in.

S: My grandmother has told me the same. She and my future grandfather did just that.
B: The old man's name who used to run it was named Robertson.

S: Do you think we can find the street and the house where I was born?

B: Sure can. It's just up Elm Street a couple of blocks there, on the corner.

NOTE: The interview was terminated here as Mr. Brumbelow started drawing a map of the town streets, and we left on a picture taking expedition. Some of the pictures taken in Aragon are shown just after this.

Aragon: The Setting

Coming down from the northwest corner of the state of Georgia is a series of low mountains, sticking down like the fingers of hands from northeast to northwest. They are rocky and wooded. Names like Sand Mountain, Lavender Mountain, Taylor's Ridge, and Lookout Mountain. They enclose valleys through which many streams flow.

The further south, the lower the mountains become, and the wider the valleys.

Newer highways tend to climb up and over the mountains to accommodate the powerful automobiles. The older roads, unpaved and built for horse and wagon traffic, or horseback traffic, followed the creeks and went down or up the valleys.

State Highway 101 from Rome, Georgia, to Aragon, orginally followed the valleys and is still a beautiful drive of 24 miles of prosperous looking farmlands.

New State Highway 101 is a more modern two-lane paved highway which climbs and descends Saddle Mountain in a straight line for about 10 miles before leaving the high ground behind before reaching low ground, and entering Aragon after passing a Highway sign which reads "Aragon, Pop. 1,200" and a diamond shaped sign depicting the silhouette of a fire truck.

After about one mile, the highway crosses a modern concrete bridge with concrete rails on each side which effectively blocks out the view of Euharlee Creek.

Just before crossing the creek, there is a road which comes into the highway from both left and right. In the northeast corner sits a small convenience store with an outside telephone booth and a
newspaper box.

The paving and straightening of Highway 101 cut left the village of Aragon off to the left, where it sits almost as it was when it was built almost 90 years ago.

Turning left at the convenience store and driving about one mile, you will reach the Aragon Cotton Mill, with its mill pond. The Aragon Store, looking all of its 90 year age is on the right.

There are five principal streets going generally north and south. They are Pine Street, Grove Street, Aragon Road, Elm Street, and Oak Street. Aragon Street is the original Highway 101 which traveled the village north to south. At one time it came into Aragon, passing by the home of the town doctor, then passing close by the spring and the Baptist church. It left Aragon passing the Methodist church and in front of the church the village cemetery before crossing Euharlee Creek on a single lane steel truss bridge and joining the new highway to Rockmart.

At right angles to the named streets, were six streets, all numbered First Street through Sixth Street. Houses were and are set close to the street. There are now concrete sidewalks and curbs. These are late additions. Each house originally had an outhouse backed up to an alley. Building lots are small and the houses sit close together.

All mill houses were four room houses with a narrow front porch and a smaller back porch. All houses had two doors entering from the front porch. They are all wood frame or brick piers, open underneath. Roofs shaped from the center ridge pole to the front and back. Porches had a shed roof supported by four small wood columns. Each room had two windows, or one window and a door. Each room had a coal burning corner fireplace with only one chimney going through the roof at the center of the house. The only change seems to have been cosmetic changes. Closed in porches, paint, new roofing, added asphalt. The firehouse, next to my birthplace is still there, only 12 feet away from the house. The new firehouse is a prefabricated metal building.

There is a new subdivision which has similar small houses. People who objected to liing in town lived out here. They had easier excess to the communal cow pasture and hog pastures.

Both the Seaboard and the Southern Railroad depots are gone now, and the Seaboard rails have been taken up. Southern is still active but the freight trains passing do so at high speed.

Euharlee Creek still flows rapidly around the southeastern edge of the village. The water is clear and not muddy. The bottom is rock and gravel, as is the bottom of the big spring. Coming down from the slopes and springs of Dugdown Mountain on its way to join the Etowah River, it flows across the broad flat valley halfway between the
Seaboard and the Southern railroad. The railroads are about a mile apart at this point. These and the water from Euharlee Creek were one of the main reasons for locating the mill here.

The mill is still in operation, making carpeting, but the mill store is closed. There are 300 homes total in the village, including all of the newer ones.

Mr. Wesley T. Brumbelow, at age 65, no longer works at the mill. He is now the City Building Inspector.