

Header: This is Mike Regnier. I am interviewing Mr. Lester Butler. We are at Mr. Butler's home in Fortson, Ga. Today is March 8, 1988.

Q. When did you first go to work in the mill and what mill was that?

A. Well, I went in 1949 at Swift Textile on 5th Ave. I was a weaver at that time. I went from weaving to tying warps. This was in the paper department. And I got fixing looms there.

Q. How did you get the job? Did you just go down there or did somebody you know work there?

A. My brother worked in there and he got me a job. I was working at Hughes Paper Mill on 10th Avenue.

Q. Now this was after the war. You served in the war didn't you?

A. Oh yes. Three and one-half years.

Q. Before the war, did you work in a mill?

A. I worked a little while in Bibb Manufacturing Company. I learned to weave there. Then I got drafted in the army.

Q. Is there a reason you didn't go back to the Bibb?

A. I went back to the Bibb. I worked three or four weeks and they laid me off. Then I went with the Hughes Paper, weaving paper seat covers. Then I went back to Swift. I got to fixing looms after a while and I fixed looms for a long time. In fact I taught loom fixing school in the mill a long time.

Q. When you were first learning or learning a new job, did they pay you regular wages and let you work or did they pay you half wages?

A. Well, you had to start at not full pay you know. As you worked and got better, if you could run a job, they would give you full pay. That's the way I was. I worked on about 3/4 of my full pay for a while until I learned to run a fixing job. Then they give you full pay.

Q. Was it like a promotion to move from weaving to loom fixing?

A. Yes, it steps as you go through. If you try when you go in the mill, they give you promotions right on up. See, loom fixing is one of the highest pay jobs in the mill, always was.

Q. Is that what you aimed for when you first went to work?

A. Yes. I was interested in it. In fact, when I quit tying warps, they didn't send me to school. I went right to fixing looms.

Q. Did you just pick it up as you went?

A. I watched and worked with the loom fixers whenever I didn't have a warp to tie. I picked it up.

Q. Where would they send people to school?

A. Well, later on they started to open a school in the mill that anybody that was interested in fixing looms, they had a room there with three looms set in it, just for teaching people how to fix them. And that's what I done. I taught that loom fixing school for three years.

Q. And then went back to regular loom fixing?

A. Yes. I went to over there at the Goo-Goo. They had moved the jacket department over there. So we was running these plastic seat covers. I worked there for a while. I don't know how long. And then when they started this mill over there (Southern Textiles), they wanted me to go over there to help start it up.

Q. How long did it take you to learn how to fix looms?

A. Well, after the first year, I was doing pretty good, but it generally takes five years to make a loom fixer.

Q. Is that how long it would take to get through the school they ran?

A. No. That was just a starting point to learn the settings and how the machine worked and everything. You pick it up on the job training.

Q. Would they pair up a master fixer with a younger fellow?

A. Yes, put somebody with them. You have to work that way a long time.

Q. Like an apprenticeship?

A. Yes. It still would take five years to fix a loom right. Some of them don't never make it.

Q. Would they just go back to doing something else?

A. They would put them doing something else if they can't hold onto the job.

Q. When you got to be proficient at the job, how many looms would you be in charge of?

A. Well, I think I had 35 to start with. These here was big looms, 120 inch looms, W3's. Weaving that plastic seat covers. But you know, the pay increased every year. And the amount of looms you had increased too. They would just keep adding on as the years went on.

Q. I've talked to people that were weavers and they said that loom fixers were just very important to them. Did you ever have some weavers that just didn't run the thing right and always cause problems?

A. Oh, yeah. You get learners in there that keep the looms tore up and that keeps you aggravated. You get good weavers and you're alright.

Q. Can you ever remember a day when you didn't have to fix a loom?

A. No, there's never a day when you didn't have to do something. In fact, you have a loom a day that you have to upgrade. You have to go over that loom to check it. You have to check your shuttles, if your shuttle's bad, you have to replace it. Line your loom up, that race plate has to be kept aligned. Your pickers has to be checked parallel. And, if your lugs is low, you have to put new pick points on those and raise those up. That's one loom a day you have to check. And then there's a head loom fixer comes by and checks that loom and gives you a grade on it.

Q. Is this even after you're ten years into the job?

A. Oh, that's right on, that's going on now.

Q. Did you ever get to be the head loom fixer?

A. I was the head loom fixer at one time but not too long. When I was teaching that school, I was the head loom fixer.

Q. That one loom a day you upgraded, is that in addition to whatever else you had to do?

A. Yes, that's in addition to running your job. See, I don't remember how many weavers I to start with, but I had five weavers at the last. Five weavers running. And when they flagged the loom you had to fix it. If you didn't, you'd hear from them because they were on production. Weavers were on production. If the loom don't run, they don't make anything.

Q. Were loom fixers hourly?

A. Well, I was hourly. I got nine dollars and something at the last.

Q. If you didn't get your loom upgraded and you spent the whole eight hours fixing looms, would you just stay longer to finish up?

A. No, there was no excuse. If you checked your loom and you turned it in that you didn't have time, they would give you another chance to fix it. But it was still checked. It was the best thing the mills ever started.

Q. Because that meant they broke down less frequently?

A. Yeah, it kept the looms up. And they had people in there that made you do it. If you didn't do your job, they'd get rid of you. You had to keep your job up. Of course, the first shift was always the main shift. The third shift could get by with a lot more than the first shift, because all the big bosses in there checking your looms and nosing around.

Q. Many people said that when they started, they had to start off on third shift and work toward the first. Did you do that?

A. No. I worked for years on the second shift. And then I went to first.

Q. So you never pulled third shift then?

A. No, not regular. I wouldn't have it. Well, I was married and I didn't want no third shift.

Q. Did different fabrics cause different problems for the looms ?

A. Oh, yeah, yeah.

Q. Did you prefer to run some fabrics or did you get a choice?

A. Well we had a designing department out there and whatever they would sell is what we had to try to run. And those old W3 looms we had down there we could run 26 harnesses on. And when you load a loom down with 26 harnesses you got problems. So a weaver who don't know how to run a loom, he keeps it tore up all the time. See, on these looms heavy loaded, you pull the lay up on front center and jerk the loom on, why it doubles all your vibrators in the head, tears it up cause the loom won't pull it, it just doubles up. You try to teach all your weavers to keep the lay back before you pull it on. Push the lay all the way back, in the back, all the tension is off. Then it starts it easy.

Q. Did you have to spend quite a bit of time breaking in weavers?

A. Well, I didn't teach weavers, I tried to show them if they were doing something wrong, I would show them what they was doing wrong. That helped me out too.

Q. Did you get to be pretty good friends with the weavers you worked with over the years?

A. Oh. yeah. I never had no trouble with nobody much. Once in a while you get a weaver that would aggravate you to death. At Southern Phenix Textile, I know everybody in the mill. President of the company, I can call him by name. Friends. Everybody in that mill was friends.

Q. Was it kind of a family atmosphere?

A. It was. They were strict, they run that mill, everybody was working for that mill and they would treat you nice. Mr. Harris is over that mill over there. Him and Bill Henry and Larry ___ are the three top men.

Q. Did they bring you over there special to set up that mill, work on their looms?

A. They carried me over there with a fellow named Shorty Hicks to start these looms up. They bring the looms in there and you gotta set them down, go through it and reset the whole loom. They're not lined up or anything when they're new. Then you put the warps in there and start them up. I run the first yard of cloth that was ever run in that mill.

Q. How many years ago was that, do you remember?

A. Probably fifteen years ago or longer.

Q. Do they still ask you to come back and fill in occasionally?

A. They did year before last.

Q. Did you enjoy that?

A. Well, I enjoy meeting the people but I don't like the work anymore. It's hard for me to go eight hours a day.

Q. It was very hard work all along then wasn't it?

A. Yes, it was real hard work.

Q. Did you try to discourage Maria from going to work in the mill?

A. No, I never tried to discourage her. I wanted her to get an education. Always figured she'd make up her own mind when she got grown. She did. I didn't tell her not to work in the mill. I carried her down there and let her look. It was rough to start with in the mill. Didn't have no air conditioning then. You had these humidifiers in there that sprayed this old smoky fog cause we run cotton and if the cotton wasn't damp it wouldn't work. You couldn't weave it. But we went to polyester and we didn't need that. The air comes in through the top and goes out through the floor. And we also had blowers that goes through there, blows this loose lint and it goes through the floor and it goes into this big thing outside the mill.

Q. Has it always been like that or is that the way it is now?

A. That's the way it is now. It's always been that way in that mill over there.

Q. What about at Swift? Did they have that?

A. No. You would have died. It was about 85 to 90 degrees in there all the time. There wasn't a dry thread on you after you worked there a while. It was rough. They have changed cotton mills a lot.

Q. But how did you put up with the noise?

A. Well, you get used to it, not all the way, but you get used to it. The last 12 to 15 years that we worked, we had to wear ear plugs. I got mine hanging up on the wall in the other room. But that was a good thing, because when you walk out of there after you worked eight hours, and you couldn't hear nothing. That roar in your head was still going on. Them ear plugs helped a lot.

Q. Did people that had been there for a long time prior to you have hearing losses?

A. I've heard the news media and all talk about it but I don't know.

Q. Do you have any yourself?

A. Oh, I can hear good.

Q. It sounds like when you went into the mill, it was eight hours of real hard work.

A. Yeah. Well, you could take a break once in a while. Oh, you take a break; eat a sandwich, go to the bathroom. But, you got a job to run in a mill. If you're a weaver, you got your looms to run. You can't just walk off and leave your looms. The weavers generally eat on the job while he was working. They'd go get a drink and they'd start their looms up and they'd lay their sandwich down on

the cloth while they got an end up or something. Now a loom fixer, he could go and sit down for about fifteen minutes, about the middle of the shift, and eat him a sandwich. Other times you was on the job. You didn't fool around.

Q. Did you always work an eight hour shift?

A. I just worked eight hours. They was always wanting you to work over in these other shifts but I never would do it.

Q. Did they pay over-time or was it just regular pay?

A. Yeah, they pay you over-time. But eight hours was enough for me. I never did make it a practice to work over that because it's not good for me. I wouldn't do it. I think it's stupid for anybody to work over eight hours.

Q. Did you feel like you might start making mistakes or just get so tired you wouldn't feel good?

A. Well, you burn yourself out. I just got used to eight hours. That's it. I could go fishing, go home and rest, it's not so bad. But you work twelve hours in the mill, and some of them worked sixteen hours.

Q. Did you work six or five days a week?

A. I averaged five days. I have worked all the way through. And I have worked three days. But I imagine the average was five days for thirty three years.

Q. And you still feel welcomed when you go back and visit?

A. Oh, yeah. They call me up all the time. They have a party every year in the mill. You know the last day you work in there, everybody pays five dollars and they cater a meal in there. You go in there and you eat and they always invite me. Don't cost me a thing. And then we have a twenty-five year century club at the Iron Works down there every year and I'm invited. I'm given a good meal and I'm given a nice Christmas present. It's all free.

Q. Now, you never lived in Bibb City but you lived close.

A. I lived on 2nd Avenue. Marie went to Bibb City School.

Q. Did you live close so she could go to Bibb City School?

A. Well, we lived on Morningside Drive over here and we wanted to live closer to town. So we found that house on 2nd Avenue and I bought it. And we were right there at the school so Marie could go to school.

Q. Many people I have talked that still live in Bibb City are really proud of Bibb City. Did you ever have an association with those people in Bibb City?

A. No. I knew a few people around there. You know Margaret, Marie's mother, she worked at the Bibb all the time. She worked there about 27 years.

Q. Was she a weaver?

A. She weaved.

Q. So you could have lived in Bibb City in the housing provided by the mill?

A. If I could have gotten an opening, but I never did want that. I bought my own home. See, when Margaret started working at the Bibb Mill, she couldn't even speak English. She had trouble understanding the instructions how to weave. And she'd come back home at night and tell me and I'd explain what to do.

Q. Did she pick it up real quick?

A. Yeah.

Q. Were they using the same type of looms as you were repairing?

A. No, I could work on any loom. The weaving principle is the same on anything. One of her biggest problems was putting two pics together. You know that's the end going through here (demonstrates). She would get the pic that wasn't open. And then when she threw the shuttle through there, the loom changed and it put two pics together every time. She couldn't understand to save her life. And then when I explained to her what to do, she had no problem.

Q. Did that frustrate her loom fixer then you reckon?

A. Worried the whole mill. See, your cloth is inspected. If she was making a lot of double pics. She told me she tried and tried, that she had done what everybody had told her to, but she couldn't understand. But after I explained it to her...but I helped her out with several things like that.

Q. It seems like it was awful nice of the mill to work with her and stick with her when she was having trouble?

A. The mill always does that. See, they got training all the time.

Q. Working on the looms, did it cut you up?

A. Oh, you skin yourself. (Rolls up sleeves to show numerous scars.) See them scars. Machinery cutting on you, harnesses, sharp edges on metal. Yeah, I had my arms cut a lot of times.

Q. Did you ever get hurt really bad?

A. Well, I thought it was bad to start with. A quill come out of the shuttle and it hit me in the glasses. It got glass all in my eyes. They had to carry me to the eye doctor. They took two nurses and held me down and held my eye open and told me I wasn't supposed to move and they picked all that glass out and it cut my eye bad. But it got alright.

Q. If it hadn't, would the mill have taken care of the injury and you?

A. The mill paid every penny of it.

Q. Did they have a clinic there at the mill?

A. They had a clinic.

Q. But that was serious enough that they took right on to the hospital?

A. Well, I went to the clinic to start with. I walked from the Goo-Goo down there to Old Swift across that railroad track. And I knew I had glass in my eye, and I knew I wasn't supposed to turn my eye, so I done everything I could not to move that eye ball at all. And when I got over there, Miss Hamish, she was the head nurse over there, she told me not to move it. They sent me right to the doctor.

Q. That probably saved your eye, knowing what to do?

A. Yeah. I've got pieces of metal my arms now. Where you'd be hitting a piece of metal with a hammer and a little piece would come off and go in your arm. I got a piece right in here still (points to left bicep). I was hitting a race with a big ball pean hammer and a piece come off about the size of a pea and went in. The doctor said to leave it in there.

Q. I talked to one lady and she said that the first week on the job she got hit in the back of the head with a quill. How many times would that happen in a day?

A. Well, working around a loom was real bad to start with. The quills would come out of your shuttle but that wasn't as bad as the shuttle coming out of the loom. Now that shuttle comes out of that loom, it'll kill you. The shuttle has a metal point on each end of it and the quill fits into that. You got springs in there that hold your quill and if your springs get weak you should change your springs. You should check that on your loom. We started improving on that in the looms. We put shuttle guards up there on the lays. Then we put shuttle guards on each end of the breast beam, put these big cage screens and if it throwed a shuttle out it hit that. But once in a while they'd come out over that. I was hit with a shuttle in the side and knocked out. I was down there next to the back door and it hit me in the side, and it was cold weather, I knew I was fixing to pass out so I opened that back door and went outside there and laid down until I come to.

Q. Did anybody even know you were out there?

A. No.

Q. You could have laid there for a couple of hours?

A. Oh, well, you know, you get knocked out...it hit me right there (points to upper hip) on that bone.

Q. Was that a quill or a shuttle?

A. A shuttle, a whole shuttle. It knocked a hole in my side.

Q. In other words, you had to be careful when you started out?

A. Oh, I've been hit with shuttles a lot of times but that was the worst one. Lot of times they just glance off of you.

Q. Did you have any kind of warning, did it make any kind of noise?

A. No, you had no warning. Most of the time what done it was your end would get tangled up where your shed opens up and when the shuttle hits it, it would glance off and come out.

O. Sounds dangerous.

A. It is dangerous. But they got it now where it's pretty safe.

Q. Did they ever make you wear the mask, for lint?

A. No. Some of them wore it in the old Swift upstairs where they run that blue denim. A weaver could work there eight hours and you couldn't even tell who he was, you just see a moving lint around, there was so much lint in there with the humidity. Now they wear masks. And in the carding room they wore masks. But I never wore none.

Q. Were there ever any women that were loom fixers?

A. That was a man's job. They trained one or two after I left Swift over there but whether they're still fixing I don't know. Over there where I was, a woman couldn't handle that job.

Q. Was it just too physically demanding?

A. Yeah.

Q. Did you ever know a woman supervisor?

A. Not in the weave shed.

Q. What about blacks? When you first started, were there any blacks working in the mill?

A. Oh, yeah. They were always working there. There weren't no weavers to start with, blacks, that I remember, but they started letting them fix looms and weave. In fact, most of them over at Phenix-Southern Textiles, weavers, is black. When I retired over there, a colored man took my job.

Q. All the way back in 1949 you can remember blacks working?

A. Yeah, 1949.

Q. Did you ever have any dealings with unions?

A. No, I never would fool with unions. Didn't like them.

Q. What didn't you like about them?

A. I just never did feel like I wanted to belong to a union. I know unions has done good through the

country when they started but our mill always tried to do good by us without the union.

Q. Did they ever try and come around to organize?

A. Oh, yes. Not in the mill, but they'd stand outside the door giving out pamphlets. A friend of mine fixed looms, he was trying to give out them things. But I just didn't want them.

Q. Did they ever give people a hard time that did try to join them?

A. They didn't want it there and that's something they didn't talk about. I feel like that if they thought you was trying to pull a union in there, they would have figured out some way to get rid of you. But I don't know that for sure.

Q. I talked to one lady and she had the same opinion you do. She said sometimes they would come around and ask her to speak against the union to other employees. Did they ever ask you to do that?

A. No. Nobody ever talked about unions to me at all.

Q. Maria talked one time about the Red Feather campaign. Do you remember anything about that?

A. Yeah. It was United Givers.

Q. Where did the Red Feather come into it?

A. They would give you a little old Red Feather to show that you had participated.

Q. Did they push that to the employees real hard?

A. Yeah. But my mill over there, Southern-Phenix Textiles, never forced you to give. But I did give a little every year. But it wasn't much. I never felt like the money was going where it was supposed to in the first place. And now Margaret in the Bibb Mill, they made her, they forced her to give.

Q. Did they threaten her job if she didn't?

A. A day's work.

Q. That's what they expected her to donate?

A. They didn't expect it, they told her that. I told her to refuse that. They called her in the office and told her they had a policy in the mill that everybody give and she'd have to. So she just signed the paper and went ahead. They took it out of her check.

Q. Is that something that made them look good, is that why they did it?

A. I reckon so. They wanted a 100% of the Bibb and they always got it.

Q. But it was never something that went directly for mill employees, it was for the community?

A. Oh, yeah. There were a lot of organizations that belonged to it. That's to help them.

Q. Did you ever get the impression that people looked down on mill workers?

A. Well, I think some people would. But most of the people that lived through here worked at the mill, so we didn't have no problem.

Q. The reason I ask that is Maria said that when she went from Bibb City to Daniel to Jordan, she sensed that when she was in Bibb, everything was fine but when she got outside of it, there were some people that would call them names and look down on them. Was that just kids playing or was it something they picked up from adults?

A. Well, I always felt like people looked at cotton mill hands as a low income class of people. And they were. They are now. It ain't like it was. Everybody makes more than mill hand does now.

Q. Did you see many jobs lost to machines while you were working in the mill?

A. Oh, man yeah! I first started working around weaving, we run one loom. That was paper seat covers. You ever heard of them? Weaving paper with a loom. You had to fill your shuttles by hand, stop it off every time it changed fillings, change your shuttles, you had three shuttles there, one running and two filled. Then we went to two looms. And you had to run two looms. Then we went to the automatic changing system. Those changed automatically. Then you went to four looms, six looms, and this was on paper. Magazines is what they called them. You had four cells in your magazine and they had four colors. You timed these cells to match the color of your shuttle. I've run seven shuttles in a loom. That ain't easy. When we started running cotton, rayon and plastic, a lot of looms. Then we got a thing called unifill on the looms. That would make your own filling, put it in the magazine, change and strip that little piece off the quills, that was left on there when they changed filling, you had belt that brought it back up and dropped it in here (gesturing) and it was reloaded again.

Q. And so you picked up more looms every time?

A. More looms.

Q. Did they let people go or did they let people retire and not replace them?

A. They just moved them around or let them quit, this that and the other. It didn't come over night. This was a long process. We went over to Southern-Phenix, we started up with unifills over there. So when they started training crews over there they just trained them for that. We started that mill up, we trained people for it.

Q. On the retirement program for the mill, did they always have that?

A. No. They started that, I don't know how long ago, but it was 25 or 30 years or more ago. They've improved on that. For a while. They haven't in the last 15 years I don't guess. I think they give you \$98 a year, for every year that you served. But you gotta work five years before you get anything. It only starts after the second year. See, I worked in the mill for a couple of months short of being thirty-three years. And my retirement is \$209 per month. That's for the rest of my life. That really helps out, that there. We couldn't live on my Social Security. This will buy the groceries.

Q. Was that for everybody?

A. Everybody. Now Alice (Mr. Butler's second wife) worked ten years there and she they paid her off in full when she retired in a lump sum.

Q. What was the best thing about being a loom fixer in the mill?

A. Drewed more pay. You were the best trained person in the mill. The loom fixers was the key to a mill.

Q. And the supervisors knew that and kept the loom fixers happy?

A. Well, the supervisors was always riding the loom fixers. Well, you know you problems on jobs and you got problem people. People don't all work the same. Supervisors got bosses over them and they only look at the quality of the material you're making and the amount. If it ain't right they get on the boss, the boss man goes down there and he's got to find out who is laying down on the job and get on them about it. Besides that, they have checkers. They put somebody in there running a loom, say a woman, they put somebody in there to follow them, four hours a day. They set down every move they make, every time they draw an end in, every time they go to the bathroom, every time they eat a sandwich, every thing they do is wrote down.

Q. Was that just weavers or was that everybody?

A. The weavers. And the filling people, they would check them every once in a while. They even put down how long it took you to eat a sandwich, how long it took you to draw an end in, how long it would take you to walk from one loom to another. I mean every time that you moved, that was set down. And they got in the big office and they could look. They knew what you could do and what you couldn't do. And they're checking right now, they've got a woman in there that checks every day their work. I think they work for two hours with each one now. All the time. Always got checkers. I reckon they got computers to run that thing, they can tell exactly what you're doing.

Q. What was the worst thing about being a loom fixer?

A. Putting up with the weavers. People tearing your looms up. Fussing at you about not fixing their looms. See, when you got a weaver there and his loom stops, he ain't making nothing. You know every job you go to you can't fix it in three minutes. I've had jobs that took four hours to fix. But when you get on a big job like that you have to work hard to keep your flags down and work on that one too when you can get to it. But now if that loom stays too long you got the boss down on you wanting to know how come that loom ain't fixed. How come you ain't got that loom started up? Well, that's just part of running a mill. Just have to do that.

Q. Would that weaver just lose out on that production for four hours?

A. Yeah.

Q. They wouldn't make any compensation for that?

A. They did something once in a while. Long time ago they would pay you for standing time. But they cut that out. Of course if you don't make production, you got a base pay you draw. They write

up your production, how much you're supposed to make, and if you fall below that, they'll pay you a base pay about \$5 to \$7 an hour whether you make production or not.

Q. Are they going to keep you around though if you just make base pay?

A. No. Not long. You'll have every boss man in the mill breathing down your neck wanting to know what's wrong. How come you can't do this? How come you didn't make nothing on this loom yesterday? Now that's not because they hate the people in there, that's just a job.

Q. Did you ever feel like quitting?

A. Several times. I got mad several times and started to walk out.

Q. Was it usually a weaver that would get to you or a boss man?

A. Boss mans mostly jumping on me about something I couldn't control.

Q. Were you ever really friends with any of the supervisors?

A. All of them.

Q. But they still kind of gripe at you?

A. Well they didn't jump on me personally. They had a job to do. I understood that. My boss man over there in the mill, he had a stroke here a while back, Leon Root, his left side is paralyzed. We give him a party over there at Captain J's about three weeks ago. All the people in the mill. He was real touched. He just sat there in his wheelchair and cried.

Q. How old a man is he ?

H. I'd say he's around 40.

Q. Will the mill take care of him?

A. For the rest of his life. All of his hospital bills and he'll draw his salary right on the rest of his life.

Q. If you had to do it over again, would you go to work in the mill?

A. I thought about that when I first started working in the mill and in this town, working in the mill was the best thing you could do. You got your insurance, just work eight hours a day and you could make enough to live on, you don't have to work outside in the weather, there's a lot of good advantages to working in the mill. I decided I'd stay in the mill. I first started to get a cook's job, see I'm a cook from the military. I wanted a job in that but you can't find one that paid nothing.

Q. Is there anything you would like to add?

A. No, I think we covered everything.