

Interview with Ophelia S. Perry on February 23, 1988, by Harvey Phelps. Interview with black textile worker.

Ph: Mrs. Perry, would you state your name and address?

P: Ophelia S. Perry, 948 Booker Avenue, Columbus, Georgia 31906.

Ph: Tell me a little bit about your childhood Mrs. Perry. Where were you born?

P: I was born in Harris County on May 28, 1913. My mother was named Mary Stephen and my father was named Henry Stephen.

Ph: Did you go to school in Harris County?

P: A little bit. I never did go to school too much. I went to school a little bit.

Ph: When did you come to Columbus?

P: We moved to Columbus in '29 or '30.

Ph: That was during the depression time, wasn't it?

P: Yes.

Ph: Do you remember much about the depression?

P: I remember well lots of it. You had to get tickets to get different stuff, like sugar, shoes and stuff like that.

Ph: I want you to tell me something about when you started in the mill, and what did you start out doing when you went to the mill?

P: It was some time in 1940 when I went. I was runnin' machines they called cards. Typed of machinery we called them cards. We had small cans where they laps on the back and run by on the drawing. The drawing would fill the cans up. When the cans get filled we'd sit 'em to the side and sit more under it. Then be somebody come along and pick 'em up on a truck. A truck they'd have in the mill. Then they'd place more cans down, so that's what we had to use. We runnin' down long strips. We'd be drawing. Then they would transfer it back to the drawing frame. When they transferred it back to the drawing frame then they'd put it on the ropin' and send it to another depart. When they sent it to another department then they'd send it to another department and send it to a cloth place, and out there they'd make cloth out of it.

Ph: Y'all started from the raw cotton all the way to the cloth?

P: Right. From the raw cotton all the way to the cloth department.

Ph: Was there very many women working with you at that time?

P: Yes, there was quite a few at that present time.

Ph: A lot of black women?

P: Yes, they was black. The biggest majority that worked in that department was black. All the women in the cards room just about it was black. On the drawing frame they was mixed in white and black.

Ph: Did you work first, second or third shift? Who you all work?

P: I worked on the second. Somebody else would work from 7:00-3:00, then another shift would

take over. I would always work from 3:00-11:00. That was my shift.

Ph: Did you ever get on the first shift?

P: No, I never did work on it. Sometimes we would go in to clean up like on the first shift, but that was about all. I just worked the second shift all the whole time.

Ph: All the time in the mill you worked on the second shift?

P: Second shift.

Ph: I guess you get used to it.

P: Yes, in that days and times you know where you was goin', and you know what you had to do. That job was to come in at 3:00 and work to 11:00.

Ph: Y'all worked five days a week, or how did you work?

P: Sometimes it was six days a week. Sometimes it was seven days a week, hardly ever though. Most of the morning shift would come back on Sunday. The first shift would do that.

Ph: You were there during World War II?

P: It was in the 1940's. It had to be.

Ph: I guess you kept pretty busy then?

P: Yes, we worked real good back then.

Ph: How was the pay?

P: The pay wasn't all that you know up, but in those days and times, I reckon' it equalized about the times, what they was payin' in them times. I didn't go there when they was making \$4.00 and \$5.00 a week. The times had changed by the time I went in there in the 40's. It was kind of rough, but for the years past to come up with somethin' like, that I reckon the pay was equalizin' for the depression was on. It was kind of rough all along.

Ph: During the times you were in the mill were there any children?

P: No, they didn't have any children in the mills.

Ph: I guess children were in the early time.

P: There wasn't any children in there the time I went. Most of them be grown up.

Ph: How did y'all get along with the whites in the mill?

P: Well, to my knowledge you know how the people was back there in them days and times, but if I had a job to do, I went and tried to do my job. I didn't have too much contact with them.

Ph: The working conditions...

P: The working conditions was pretty bad, because when I went there it was steaming hot and no air conditioning or nothing like that. As the years passed over and over then they began to get air conditioners for the other people that come along, after people complained so much about it was so hot. People was really steamin' in the mills at that time when I went in.

Ph: It was real hot?

P: Yes, Lord. It was real hot.

Ph: Did you work on the first, second or third floor? Where in the mill did you work?

P: I was on the second floor...Done so much changing been quite a while.

Ph: Those mills were pretty big?

P: Yes, they was real large. We got along pretty good, so for it was steamin' when we went in there. You could hardly stay in there, but the Lord give you the strength to keep you goin' if you put your trust in him.

Ph: Did you get rest breaks during the day, water breaks, and bathroom breaks?

P: Well, if you job caught up. If you was caught up you could walk around a little bit, but it kept you busy. They kept you busy all right. That's the truth. Sho' did, keep you busy.

Ph: What mill did you work in?

P: Bibb Manufacturing.

Ph: That's up in Bibb City?

P: Right.

Ph: Was there any blacks up in the Bibb City Mill Village? Up there?

P: It wasn't any blacks livin' up there then when I work there. There's black living 'round in them areas in there. Everything's done changed so.

Ph: But when you were working there no blacks lived there in Bibb City?

P: No. You wasn't hardly allowed to go in Bibb City none but them that was working. We couldn't even go in the door. We'd have to go in the side under the shed.... Like the train would come and you'd have a shed. We'd go in to go in back there.

Ph: You mean the black workers and the white workers couldn't go in the same door?

P: No, they did not. No they really did not.

Ph: But you worked side by side on the machines?

P: No, we didn't. Like I told you the white wasn't workin' in the department. In my department wasn't nothing but the blacks. That's like when the room out here, they called it the picker room. They made the laps out there. They would haul them upstairs, then they put 'em on the back of the machine. You go to the back and press 'em down. They go through the machine and come out like ropin' like. They wasn't no white in there. Nothin' but the old fixers was white. Didn't have no black working back there. Doffin' where we worked, where they sent this ropin' and stuff they had whites runnin' their machines back there. It was pretty rough, and I think they started puttin' air conditioning down there. They was a lot of rackets rackin' there.

Ph: Fuss and stuff.

P: A lot of noise.

Ph: In some of those departments they had to have a little moisture coming?

P: Yes, there was a little moisture, but it wasn't nothing like the heat back. Not in the department I was in. But later on they did put air conditioning in. Then it was really dusty too where I worked at. They done come a long way from that now. I think they made it a whole lot better in the last year.

Ph: Last years. You spent how many years in the mill?

P: Thirty and a half. I worked 30 and a half.

Ph: And all your time was on the second shift?

P: Yes. Yes, I knowed what job I was goin' to learn when I went in...Worked on 2nd shift whole time.

Ph: Did anybody else in your family work in the mill?

P: Yes. I had a sister that worked in there. My brother he worked in there a while, but he left and went down to the Big Swift down on Sixth Avenue. I had a sister-in-law that worked there too. I think she worked about 32 or 33 in Bibb, same one I worked in.

Ph: You lived in Columbus. How did you get up to Bibb City?

P: Somebody would pick us up. Somebody that was working.

Ph: The same shift. Sometimes when you had to work seven days, I imagine it interfered with church?

P: Yes, it did. Most of the time some of the first shift would go. Every occasion if they had a rush in order we would go in for an afternoon. It kind of messed with your church, but you have to work too. The Lord knows what you praise Him with.

Ph: In your retirement, do you really enjoy it?

P: Yes, but I was trying to make it until I got to be 62 and I lacked about six months. Then my feet gave me a whole lot of trouble, and I had to wear a brace. So they said there wasn't no need in it 'cause my children was grown and gone. But the Lord blessed me so far. I keep busy. You don't just retire and sit down. They's a lot of people to visit and church work and try to visit the sick, when I can.

Ph: If you had to do it over again, would you go back in the mill?

P: Yes, I probably would try it. But not knowing what I know now. I'd probably try it if jobs was scarce and everything.

Ph: Did you try anything else before going into the mill?

P: I had a little house taking care of a lady's baby while they worked, but you there wasn't nothing in no house too much. That's about the biggest I did. That job looking after a baby from six months to six years, then I went on to where I could make a little more money.

Ph: How many children do you have?

P: How many do I have now? I got three. I had four. My baby got drowned. It'll be about three years in August in California. He was 36.

Ph: You'd be in the mill in the afternoon?

P: It'd be pretty good, 'cause my husband be workin' in the morning and that would give us a good provide one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

Ph: Did your husband work in the mill?

P: Yes he worked in the mill too. He passed in 1955. It's been a long time. When I wasn't able to work I liked to work. You know what I mean, but like it is, but have to give it up an come on out...Look to the Lord to take care of me.

Ph: You got your health and can do things you want to do?

P: I ain't in all that good of health, but I thank the Lord for the portion that is 'cause you look around you and there's somebody's worse than you. That's the truth. I just thank the Lord for each and every day.

Ph: Have you ever been back to the mill since you retired?

P: I've been up there once or twice. But there wasn't no use in goin' back.

Ph: A lot of the mills now days have a lot of new machines in there. I guess they started putting them in there before you retired?

P: Well, they had started to bringing things from upstairs to downstairs on the first floor before I left. I was in there when they started running that part downstairs, but now I don't want to go back in no mill.

Ph: When you worked in the mills they had a whole lot of people?

P: Yes they had a lot of people then.

Ph: But now they don't have too many now.

P: I know. They done cut out all them jobs up there where we used to work just about it. Like I said, you know where you had to work at, and you know what you had to do when you went in. There was a lot of 'em coming down wouldn't even think about doing what we had to do. We had to do so much. A lot of 'em would come down and say, no I can't do that.

Ph: If they didn't want to do it, what would they do? Quit?

P: Yes, they'd leave there. You wouldn't see them there. They'd go somewhere else. I really tried to tough it, but I didn't want them to bring me out. I come on out...put my trust in the Lord.

Ph: You said when you went to work in the 40's there were already black people in the mill.

P: There was already black women in there when I went in. I don't know how many they was using on the floor. But they had different floors. The department I was working in they had black women in there. Where there was ropin' and open end they did have white women. I guess the department I guess this part of the mill was too messed and hard for the white to do then. 'Cause they up the easiest way out. After years they started to mix them up. But they still didn't have no white up there where I worked. Since I left there I think they did have a couple of white girls come in there. 'Cause they knew they wasn't gonna learn them. It was just that bad. They always prefer the easy way out.

Ph: Did the mill management give you a chance to get up into the spinning department or move up?

P: No, I just worked on the one floor. They had people on different floors. They had all that going on. They had the spinning department. Up farther where they made cloth, where they made cloth.

Ph: Did black women work in some of those other jobs?

P: Yes, for such a length of time, but much of the time where they make the cloth it was white women. But they'd have a black sweeper to do the worse work.

Ph: Did any of the black fellows work on machine fixing or keep them running?

P: No, there wasn't none there when I was there.

Ph: All those were white jobs?

P: Yes, they was white. But after I left they could have got black. I had heard about it. But they did

have one black. They called him boss man or overseer. I guess he's still up there. They just about got rid of all them people, after they cut out so many jobs for everybody. They did have one black boss up there. I guess he still might be up there. I think they called him Bird or something another.

Ph: How was the black boss?

P: He wasn't over me.

Ph: How did the people say he was?

P: I guess he was all right. People say he was tough. He had a job to run, and he had to run it, 'cause he wanted his job.

Ph: Somebody always has to tell you what to do.

P: He'd come in there. They was some colored men that would push boxes and things like that.

Ph: Going back to what you said about the entrance going into the plant, you said there were two separate doors. That was what they called "Jim Crow" all the way around?

P: Right. Sure did. Yes, Lord. You wasn't allowed to go in that door. You had to go in this one. You had to stoop down go up under there to go in that place. Yet you had to work. It was rough all right.

Ph: I can't imagine them having two separate doors.

P: Oh, yes. They did that. You wasn't even allowed to go in that front door when I worked there. Before I left things changed.

Ph: One other person mentioned to me about the dope cart or the food cart. Did they have that in your mill?

P: Yes, they had it up there. Most of the times they had rooms you could get things out of the machines.

Ph: Could you take your break in there and eat your snack?

P: Yes, if you wanted to.

Ph: Could you smoke?

P: I never smoked, but I think some of them did. They would go in the rest room or somewhere else.

Ph: I'm sure that if they had separate doors to enter then they had separate rest rooms?

P: Oh, yes. They had separate rest rooms too. Right, you could go in there to clean them up, but you weren't allowed to use them. That was for the other race. It was kind of rough, but you just keep on fighting.

Ph: Did you ever do any work on the farm in Harris County?

P: No we didn't have no farm. We just had little patches, hogs and cows. We didn't really farm. mamma work days. I ain't never worked on no farm like a lot of them did. But I know about the farms cotton and corn and all that stuff.

Ph: Did you ever pick any cotton?

P: No. We didn't have no farm. We used to help out people.

Ph: When that cotton came into the mill, you know where it came from.

P: You can say that. Yes, Lord. It goes through a lot of changes. You know what it goes through, and

then it comes out and be made into cloth.

Ph: I had never seen cotton coming from the bale and then coming into the finished cloth. About three weeks ago I had the opportunity to go through the Eagle Phenix Mill. We saw it coming out of the bales and the process. We were in the mill approximately 5 hours. We saw the big warehouse were they ship the finished product. I'm sure we didn't see 200 people.

P: I know you didn't. Not now days and times. Then they had such a layin' off and goin' on before it got bad like it is now. Folk's still layin' peoples off every which a way you look.

Ph: Up in the spinning rooms they have some of the new machines from Japan and Sweden. Those machines are as far as you can see with 3 or 4 operators walking around.

P: It's something to see now. I know a lady that used to work with me up at the Bibb. She went to the Eagle and Phenix. She was telling me about all them new machines they have. I think she said they have those tall cans now. You can almost get in 'em. She said the just come on and shove 'em off.

That take up a heap of labor. That shuts out a whole lot of hand work too. It's just something you see in the mills now they say.

Ph: Pretty soon they won't have too many.

P: That's true. When I used to work up there, it was one man operate the picker room where they discussed where they got that stuff from. Now they got something that shoots it up there where we used to work. I reckon it shoots it up and lays it down too.

Ph: How many people worked there when you worked there?

P: There was a gang of them worked.

Ph: Now just one man can do it.

P: That's what they tell me. Just one person can operate that place out there. So I reckon that's what they doin', cuttin' out all that labor. Peoples ain't got no jobs, then what they gonna do? They talking about robbin' and stealin', it's going to be worse than that.

Ph: These kids got to realize that they just can't quit school, and say they are going to the mill, because there aren't any jobs in the mill when you get there.

P: It's rough now, but you can't tell them. They don't see it. It's really rough on the younger generation. I reckon now all they want is a hand out. They feel like they ain't got to do nothing for theirself. I don't know what they have in their mind, but it's really sad. I feel for them. What makes it so bad is people that wants jobs can't get them. You take somebody that don't want to work, he can get a job any day. Can't they?

Ph: Yes, that's true. They seem to have a way of coming up with a job.

P: They can get a job if they don't want to work. You take somebody that really wanted to work, it's kind of hard on them to find any work. Ain't got no openings. They say I can't find nothin'. A lot of time it's them that don't work can find something all the time. It's just kind of rough now.

Ph: We also went to the power house at Eagle Phenix Mill, and saw where they made the electricity to run that mill. The water coming off the dam and the spill way and turning those turbines. I'd never seen that before.

P: I know you hadn't. But it's somethin' to see with all the new equipment they got. Everything they can make now to cut out labor. Do it yourself...a job and they don't care whether the black folks work or not. If some of them got one they don't care.

Ph: Talking with some of the men that worked in the mill, most of whom were retired, one of the men I talked to had worked 41 years in the mill, and one had been there 45 years. He was still working. He's going to retire this November. They told me about all the changes they have seen over the years. They don't think there are going to be many more jobs left.

P: It's not. I read an article in the paper where they said they had about 200 jobs up there where I used to work, and the way they done cut, out I don't see how they got that many up there. I told that child they must be talking about both of the mills, Anderson and The Bibb. It was supposed to be Little Bibb and Big Bibb. I don't see where they got no 200 hands working there now. Now the biggest majority of the crows cleaned out. After they finish all that stuff they make that wide cloth, the sheeting material.

Ph: It's really interesting to see that operation.

P: Yes. It's come a long way since I was up there in the 40's. It's different. I think they doubled up. I think they had two sweepers on one floor. I think they got one for the whole floor. Plus the other part closed down.

Ph: What do sweepers do?

P: They sweep up the lint on the floor.

Ph: That was their regular job?

P: Yes, regular job. It was an eight hour job.

Ph: It kept them busy?

P: Yes, you could get a break. It was a job.

Ph: There was that much lint on the floor that they had to sweep?

P: By the time you get through with this end over here, it was about time to go back over here.

Ph: That kept them going all the time?

P: Yes, it was a full job all right. I don't know what they doin' now 'cause all these go back that way.

Ph: When we were in the mill I saw these women sweeping, but I didn't know they did that all the time.

P: Yes, them machines create a passel of dust, and it would be lookin' a mess.

Ph: We saw them in the spinning room, but in the portion of the mill where they had the new machines, those new machines have the things that go around the looms and suck the lint up off the floor. In the older part we saw the people sweeping.

Ph: That's what I said. So much has changed. They cut out all the help they can cut out. If they got that thing to pick up all that dust, they don't need me do they? There's been a great change in the last 10 or 15 years in the textile mills.

Ph: At one time that was the biggest thing going here in Columbus.

P: Yes, everybody was really surprised when that mill opened up there, because you could get a job up there when you couldn't get a job in none of the rest of them. It was just that perfect. They could always get a job up there, but a lot of them go in there said the work was too hard. They wasn't goin' to do it. They'd come out. I just as soon work there as to get out and hunt something. I stuck it out

until I couldn't.

Ph: Did they have good benefits or medical care?

P: They had some of that too. It wasn't all that much. You had some. When you worked they took out all that before you get yours.

Ph: Were any of the jobs dangerous?

P: Yes, some were. Not all of them were dangerous. You pass by some of the machines if you had on a dress, you could get it caught, something like that.

Ph: Did you wear dresses or trousers?

P: We could wear pants. Some of them would wear dresses. In order not to get trapped or caught. I remember one time I had on a dress, and I caught myself mopping the machine. That thing winded my dress up. I caught it, and knocked it off. I finally got it loose some sort of a way. It would catch you. Them wheels would turn and catch you. It was kind of dangerous if you didn't understand it.

Ph: Everybody was probably real cautious?

P: You had to be cautious. Sometimes you'd be in too big a hurry and get your fingers caught. In the picker room a man got his arm cut off just like that. Time he went to work there I guess it had been 5 or 10 minutes. The machine whacked it off. He was a young fellow too. I reckon it was because he was part time. He would work down there then he'd be on the coca-cola truck.

Ph: He probably was tired.

P: He could have been, but no sooner than he got in that mill that evening that arm...

Ph: I knew from talking to other people that blacks didn't live in Bibb City, but one fellow said they had a cafeteria up there that used to let blacks come in to eat.

P: They didn't come in 'til lately because you know how they used to hand stuff out. You go in the back door and get it. But things changed. When I worked, you went in the back.

Ph: You could order your meal, and go in and get it.

P: You could go in the back and get it. There wasn't no place to sit. There's been a great change now. I think lately they can go in.

Ph: A lot of the white mill hands lived in the village up there. They lived in those company houses.

P: That's right, but now I think blacks is all up in there now in a lot of places.

Ph: I guess it was pretty nice living in the mill village?

P: Well, I guess so. There wouldn't be no mill village now. I think the biggest majority of them tried to sell those houses after the mill quit circulation so much. I guess anybody could buy them then.

Ph: Bibb City was a little town inside of Columbus?

P: It's still a little town. Motels was up in there. I think they tore all the motel part down. The villages are still there, but they are not as strict with them as they used to be.

Ph: They were strict?

P: When the village was there? You know they had to be strict if you couldn't even go in the front door up in there.

Ph: When night time come if you weren't working you'd better be out of there?

P: That's it. That's true. You sure said a mouth full then, yea Lord.

Ph: Was there that much difference between Bibb City and Columbus?

P: It always have been a little town looked like it was set off to itself. It still sits off to itself, because some of them said at one time they had their own water. In the villages they had their own little town off to itself. They got their own police and garbage pick up and all that.

Ph: The mill ran those little towns then?

P: Yes, I guess they did.

Ph: The mill was named after the mill?

P: Yes, Bibb City. It was just like a little town.

Ph: Did some of the male workers live in those motels that didn't have families?

P: Yes, I think so. I think some of them lived in the motels. It was right at the mill, but they tore all that down about 20 years ago. No, they wouldn't allow you up in there. They are still prejudiced, but I don't think it's as bad as it was back in the depression days. I guess you can't never tell 'cause yous settin' high lookin' low all the time.

Ph: This has been an interview with Mrs. Ophelia S. Perry, at her home on 948 Booker Avenue, Columbus, Georgia 31906. Mrs. Perry spent all of her 30 or so years working in the Bibb Mill.