

March 6, 1988
Smith's Station, Alabama
Mr. Robert Passmore
Interviewer: Vernon Presley

VP: You said you worked in the Swift Mill for 45 years Mr. Passmore. What year did you start?

RP: 1926, and worked till 1971.

VP: Why did you first start in the textile mills? Was that the only work available? Did you work anywhere else prior to working there?

RP: The first mill I worked in was the Columbus mill. I worked there about six months. I left there and went back to farming. I broke up farming and I came back to Swifts manufacturing and that's where I stayed.

VP: What type of work did you do when you were in the mill?

RP: When I first when there they had machines in called extractors. Running that water out of that cotton, in the dye house. That's what I was doing?

VP: Was your day about an eight hour day?

RP: No, at the time I was making a ten hour day.

VP: Was it very hard work?

RP: You wasn't playing. (Laugh) That's right it was hard work. Everything you did you had to pick it up. It was beared by a man.

VP: When did your day start? At what time?

RP: We started I believe at 6:30.

VP: Six-thirty in the morning?

RP: Yes, and got off at 6:30 that evening.

VP: We're talking about a 12 hour day.

RP: Well, you had a half-hour to eat...sometimes.

VP: Sometimes? You mean you didn't eat all the time?

RP: Well, sometimes you had a rush order and you didn't have time to eat. You had to work. For what they was paying you, you got that. But if you worked through 12 o'clock you got paid for that. But if you didn't work you didn't go no pay for it. You could go out the gate. Go to the store if you wanted to. Run to town if you want to, and get back quick enough.

VP: Were you living out here in Smiths?

RP: No, I wasn't living out here I was living on 25th street.

VP: In Phenix City?

RP: No, in Columbus.

VP: Did you do any other kind of work in those 45 years?

RP: Well, after War Two they commenced to letting me learn different things. I learned how to dye. I learned how to operate a lot of them machines. Before then they didn't let you learn nothing but one job. I'm just telling you exactly how it was.

VP: Yes, sure, that's what I want you to do, Sir. Only one job before the Second World War you say?

RP: That's right. You had but one job. No need to talking about "I can do this". You had to do that, or either get the hell out. (laugh)

VP: Did you ever work in an opening room?

RP: No, I never did work in an opening room.

VP: They tell me that opening room jobs were specifically for black people.

RP: Well, it was. The dye house, opening room, warehouse, boiler room, and picking room. That's exactly how it was.

VP: Those were all inside?

RP: Inside. You know the warehouse? It's inside. You go to loading them trucks and stacking that cloth and all that. You didn't work...I'm just telling you exactly how it was. You didn't work in the weave shop unless you were putting up machines. A white man was right they're looking at you. And when you got them machines out, you got the hell out of there. I'm just telling you how it was.

VP: Unless you were putting machines in, was the only time you were in there.

RP: That's right. You see, I know, I was down there. I know what I'm talking about. Didn't no body work up there in the weave shop but our colored women.

VP: Colored women were allowed to work there?

RP: Oh, they let them work.

VP: This is before World War II?

RP: Yes, before Two, and way after Two. President Roosevelt is the one who changed it and put all of us working together.

VP: Can you remember what year that was Mr. Passmore?

RP: Well, I didn't set it down. I can't think of it.

VP: That's all right. Then that's the point where blacks were allowed to work inside with whites?

RP: President Roosevelt put that law out. All of us worked together like sisters and brothers. That's what he said. And we all started working together and we're still working now.

VP: Before that time you never mingled in with the whites?

RP: Not until President Roosevelt changed it.

VP: Did you have any black supervisors?

RP: No, we didn't have any.

VP: I guess I should have known that. Did they treat the blacks differently than they treated the whites?

RP: Sure, they treated them like they were dogs.

VP: Could you tell me about that?

RP: Yeah, sure, I'm telling you now. They would cuss you out like you were a dog. You couldn't say nothing. I'm telling the truth. You couldn't say nothing.

VP: If you did what would happen?

RP: They would kill you when night came. You don't know. (laugh)

VP: Is that right?

RP: I'm just telling you. You try to fight them you might get killed when you go home. I'm just telling you the truth, that's the way it was. The boss man, he know where you stay cause he had your house number, street number and everything.

VP: Do you know of anytime workers were beaten up or worse?

RP: I don't know, but if you didn't do right somebody would come in there and beat you to death. You see, I know that.

VP: Was it hard to hold on to a job in those days?

RP: If you worked you didn't have no trouble. You don't say nothing, you got along alright. If he cuss you out, you take it and go ahead on. If he hit you, kill him. (laugh) That's what I had in mind.

VP: You didn't argue with the boss man?

RP: I didn't argue with nobody. If he cussed me out I didn't say nothing. You better not say nothing. Take it and go. You want to hear the truth, don't you?

VP: You never got the opportunity to work on machines?

RP: Well, the boss did want me to become a fixer, but the way he gave it to me, I wouldn't have it. He wanted me to fix, and then when I wasn't fixing I still had to do something. I couldn't sit down. I wouldn't take it. And, he wasn't going to give me no more money. What they were going to do was smart. I'm telling you the truth. You couldn't go around thinking this fellow was your friend. They got him out to see what they could get out of him. You aren't going to say anything. If you say anything, the first time that times got tight you couldn't get a job. They can fire you. You see I know what I'm talking about. But, I had more sense than they did. I didn't do it. I didn't say nothing. You never will know who told it cause when you go to the bathroom they going to slip in there and tell the boss man. When you get back he tells you, "I don't know who told." He be the very one who told it. The best thing you can do is keep your mouth shut. And then they got no choice. They can't say nothing. You ain't told them nothing. You ain't told the rest of them nothing. But what you do you tell God. If you don't tell God you just fucked up. (laugh) See, I didn't say nothing. Cause I was a poor man and I had to work, and I didn't have time to be out in the street looking for a job, and wouldn't get one.

VP: You had a family at this time?

RP: Sure I did.

VP: Did you find it hard? Were you able to manage with the pay they gave you?

RP: Sure, you had to. Everything was cheap. You could get along alright if you could make every day you could save a little money.

VP: When you were working in the thirties do you think the pay was adequate?

RP: Before Roosevelt took the seat... I'm going way back to Hoover's time now. Before Hoover took the seat we was getting two dollars a day. When Hoover took the seat we was getting a dollar and a half a day. And they cut your days. You made four dollars and a half a week for three years and a half. It was a hard way to go. Now everything was cheap. But, if you could make five days, you could have a little money to tote in your pocket. I'm telling you how it was now. Roosevelt got in the seat, he changed it. Well, come on down, one day, it was pretty. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, we could knock off Wednesday, we had done cleaned up you know. The sun outside was just as pretty. All the boys say "We got to pay house rent next week, and I don't know what I'm going to do." I say, "Well, Old Massa say he will make a way out of no way. Boys think about what he said." About two hours after that the bottom dropped out. It was raining so hard you couldn't even go and look out the door. Water was coming down... You work at Swift's? You go out there don't you?

VP: I've been there but I've never worked there.

RP: Water was coming across that railroad this deep. Right down at Swift's. The picking room had water running out the window. You couldn't tell where a machine was. The man called us and told us he wanted us to work until eight o'clock that night. I said, "What did I tell you. Old Massa looking out for us. He say he will make a way out of no way." We went to work regular then. We took our money and bought groceries. We knew we were going to draw about nine-sixty next payday. That was big money.

VP: You got paid every week?

RP: Yeah, paid every week. Before Hoover got in there we were making thirteen dollars and eighty cents a week. That was big money. Everything was cheap. You could save five dollars a week. After you bought something to eat you could save five dollars every week. Sometimes you could save more. Of course, you could take two or three dollars and buy more than you could tote. You had to make two or three trips. You could buy a sack of flour for sixty-five cents. There was plenty to eat. You had to go home and take care of your family. You couldn't take care of nobody else's out there. Just take care of yours.

VP: What about benefits Mr. Passmore? Did you have any health benefits or anything like that?

RP: Out there at work?

VP: Yes, what if you had been hurt on the job?

RP: Well, that didn't have any then. They carried insurance but it was mine. They didn't have it like they got now. If you got hurt they might pay you something or you might not get anything. You didn't have no insurance. They way they had it, if you got killed, they got the money.

VP: What if a black worker was to get hurt, where did you go? Did they have doctors there?

RP: Sure, they had doctors.

VP: Could you go to the white doctor?

RP: Yeah, but I never did get hurt.

VP: Do you know of any workers who got hurt seriously? Or even killed on the job?

RP: I remember one got hurt. Got his leg broke. The nurse come round. He signed them papers. He was out of work for about a month. He come back. They counted it out and gave it to him.

VP: Counted the money out?

RP: Paid him his time. I know that.

VP: What were the facilities like? Did they have separate facilities for blacks and whites?

RP: That's right. You had to go to your toilet. You didn't go to the white folk's. You better not go in there.

VP: What about water fountains?

RP: You had to have a bottle. You couldn't drink out of it. You had to have a bottle or cup or something. That's the way it was.

VP: Was your toilet in the vicinity of where you worked?

RP: It used to be outdoors over a sewer. Then the boss had his over here. You better not go in there. You go in yours.

VP: Did you tell me you worked in the Bibb Mill and the Swift Mill?

RP: No, I said the first mill I worked at was the Columbus Mill.

VP: How long did you work there?

RP: About six months.

VP: Why did you leave there?

RP: They wasn't paying nothing. They were only paying eight dollars and a quarter a week. I could make more money than that.

VP: How did you get a job? Did somebody on the inside help you?

RP: The way I got on at Columbus Mill, a colored fellow was a foreman and he hired me. You didn't have to put in a application. You just walked on in the mill there and if they need anybody they'd hire you. It wasn't like it is now.

VP: What about at Swift's? Did you get your job the same way?

RP: I just went on in there with the rest of them. I went and asked the man did he need any hands. He told me to wait. They checked up, came back and said yeah and put me to work.

VP: They put you to work and you stayed 45 years?

RP: Yeah, I had to stay somewhere.

VP: When you worked Swift Mill you were still living in Columbus?

RP: Yeah.

VP: How did you get to work everyday?

RP: Walked. It wasn't far. From 24th Street to Sixth Avenue wasn't no where. Then after so long I moved on 18th Street. I'd come on through the cemetery.

VP: Were you born in Columbus?

RP: No. I was born in Harris County.

VP: What year did you move to Columbus?

RP: 1926. I was about eighteen. I was about nineteen year old... I wasn't twenty-one when I went to Swift's.

VP: Was there ever a time that you were laid off?

RP: I was laid off once, and they put me back to work. I only had five more years before I would retire. They laid me off but they put me back to work.

VP: Do you remember the strike?

RP: Yeah, let me tell you about the strike before you even ask me anything. All of us were off. Except one fellow. He worked around there. We were scared to go in there. You better not go in there. Them white folks would come in there and beat you to death. They had a place picked for us to go and get food, you know. But I saved my money. I had enough money to pay house rent. I had plenty of something to eat. But since they were giving me that I went and got it too. When they put us back to work, they got mad. They told us they were hiring us back in a new mill. They were hot you know. I wasn't going in there and get killed. Roosevelt said don't go in there. That's the reason Roosevelt got this raise. Then he got the eight hours. I wasn't going against his word. We had one fellow there. He went on and worked anyhow. I didn't have nothing to say about it. Well, what happened to him...I seen it happen to whites and blacks. He thought they loved him. I think he worked there about fifty years. They tried to get him to retire, he wouldn't do it. They fooled around and waited until he got sick. When he got sick they wouldn't let him in the gate. You couldn't go in the front gate, you had to go in the back gate, and had to come out the back gate.

VP: That's the black workers you are talking about.

RP: One day all the white folks got to coming in the back gate. We couldn't hardly get to our jobs. Upstairs there we didn't have no dressing room to hide. Well, what happened, I was up there naked. They stop and look. All of them rush and get boxes to put over them. I didn't put nothing over me. I put my clothes on and went down to the office, and told the overseer about it. He said, "Robert, how come them other boys didn't come?" I said, "They scared. I ain't scared." I said, "Them women ain't go no business coming through there looking at us like they looking at a bear, and we are naked up there. There should be a stop to it!" I'm the one who stopped it.

VP: Were you completely naked?

RP: Had on my suit what I come here with. (laugh) All of us was naked. We were changing our clothes to come home.

VP: And the women would walk through there?

RP: Yeah. I said, "We can't go out through that mill and go through the front." I said, "We can't get in through the gate we are supposed to come in because all the whites took it." I'm the one who stopped it. I went and told it, and they stopped them from coming through the back gate. All of them was coming through there just about. You better not touch any of them. Better not look at any of them.

VP: You better not look at any of them, huh?

RP: How long you been here? How old are you?

VP: I'm forty-eight.

RP: You were way late.

VP: I've been around for quite awhile.

RP: I know, but you didn't know all this.

VP: Mr. Passmore, when the blacks started working on machines did the pay get better?

RP: Well, I think they paid them. I don't know about that. I know one thing they didn't want to pay me nothing. Then told me to my face they better not catch me sitting down on my ass. If I didn't have nothing to finish I better have my ass up picking up buffers. I'm just telling you how it was.

VP: Getting back to the strike. You say nobody went in the mill during the strike.

RP: But one. One who we worked with went in there. And all the rest of us didn't go.

VP: Anything happen to him?

RP: I think they went to his house and beat his butt. They tried to get him to retire. They were going to give him a little pension, you know. I don't know how much it was. He wouldn't take it. He couldn't go in the front gate. You see, you could look down the railroad and see him coming. He had a big basket and you could see him coming. Walking like a snake. Bringing his basket of greens. He was running the dryer, and you could cook them on the dryer you know. When he got to the gate the man told him "You can't go in here." I seen that with my own eyes. You see we worked together in the dye house.

VP: You retired in 1971?

RP: Seventy-one, on Easter Friday.

VP: Forty-five years and you were able to draw your pension. You could have drawn your pension before that, couldn't you?

RP: If I'd have come down before then I wouldn't have got nothing.

VP: Why is that? After working forty-five years?

RP: A heap of them came down before I did, they were working on this in the white house and it hadn't come out. If I had come down there three years earlier, I wouldn't have got nothing. See, it's better to be lucky than to be rich. See, I'm lucky enough to be on that money stream.

VP: Did you ever have problems with the other white workers?

RP: No, I never had trouble with none of them. If they cuss me out I didn't say nothing. I got a man to work on him. You know who I'm talking about?

VP: Yes. God?

RP: That's who I've got to work on him. I ain't got to say nothing. I ain't got to tell nobody that he said so and so to me. I ain't got to say a thing. It don't make sense to open your mouth. See, ya'll got more opportunity now than they had them. You didn't have none then.

VP: What did you like the best about being in the mills?

RP: I tell you the best thing I liked was to dye samples. I used to dye them too.

VP: You enjoy doing that kind of work? What did you enjoy about it?

RP: Well, I'd be dying them pretty samples. I'd dye samples for all them countries overseas. You know, they would send you a pattern of how they wanted it dyed. You dye it just like they said, and they make it like they said, and they wear it like they want to. See, I didn't have no learning much. No more than what God gave me. I could dye them samples. The fellows who could read. They couldn't dye them. They would mess them up and I had to straighten them out.

VP: How did you learn how to do that? Did somebody teach you?

RP: I'm going to tell you how I learned how to dye. I know you won't believe it. When I was a little boy coming up I used to pick cotton and I had me a bucket. I put a hole in it. And I put me a reed in it. I grabbed another reed and I had it cut off here. I had me another bucket there. I'd get it hot, you know, and I'd start to running. I'd fix where that water would go up and come down. You eat pork berries? I got that and made it for my dye. I had me a little bale and dyed that cloth red. And that's where I started. Right there as a little boy. It just come to me. I didn't know nothing about dyeing. Something told me just to dye it. But when they put me on the machine, you know, I commenced to studying it sure enough. I was a good dyer.

VP: How far did you go in school? Did you go at all?

RP: Every now and then. I had to work. I made it to the fourth. That's all. But I didn't go to school, I had to work.

VP: What kind of work were you doing?

RP: Farming.

VP: Your parents owned a farm or were they sharecropping?

RP: Well, we sharecropped for several years, then he got on his own place. He sure enough took me out of school then. Listen now. I was nine years old before I went to school. Moving around like I was, and taking me out of school, an old teacher learned me. I didn't know how to say one, two, three. She asked me how old I was. I told her. She say, "You tell your daddy I'll be over there, and talk to him one evening when I have time." I said, "Yes Mam". She come out there, she chewed that old man out. Now, he had a good head. Why he didn't want his children to have one I don't know. See, I was raised by our step mother. She didn't care. He was older than she was and he believed every thing she said. It's alright to believe a woman sometime. I don't give a goddamn how young she is, if she is wrong she is wrong. (laugh) If she ain't right don't go with her. If God gives you five senses you ought to have sense enough to use some of it. Not let her use it all for you. You look at it like this, every year you're getting older and older. You try to get in all the learning you can. That's what I'm looking at.

VP: How older are you now Mr. Passmore?

RP: I came out at sixty-five, I'm eighty-two now. Still working. Working in my garden.

VP: What do you grow there?

RP: I grow greens, peppers, collard greens, cabbage, butter beans, peas, I got a big place out here. It keeps me busy where I can stay limber. I expect I can outrun you.

-End Interview-