Mill Workers’ Oral Histories

Henry G. Wright

Swift Spinning Mill
It’s Tuesday the 23rd of February, 1988. It’s approximately 11:10 in the morning, and I’m in the home of Mr. Henry Grady Wright. Henry G. Wright, 5320 Abbot Avenue, Columbus, Georgia, 31904. My name is Fred Stearns and we’re good to go.

Interviewer – You grew up, Mr. Wright, in Slocomb, Alabama.

Mr. Wright – Yes.

Interviewer – Tell me about your childhood.

Mr. Wright - Well, as you know, in those days the Great Depression was on, in the ‘30’s.

Interviewer – What year were you born?

Mr. Wright – I was born the 12th of September, 1915.

Interviewer – 15? Okay. Well tell me about your early years. What did your parents do?

Mr. Wright – They were farmers, and of course he was a carpenter, too.

Interviewer – What did he grow? What crops?

Mr. Wright – Well, he grew cotton – that was the main thing in those days. Cotton and corn, and eventually peanuts.

Interviewer – Did he own his own farm?

Mr. Wright – No, he was a sharecropper.

Interviewer – Okay. And your mother, did she work or did she stay at home?
Mr. Wright – No, she stayed at home. She did work in later years when we moved to Columbus at Swift Spinning Mill for two or three years. That’s all the outside work she ever did.

Interviewer – Okay. So what did you do as a youngster?

Mr. Wright – Well mainly there wasn’t too much to do until I got about twelve years old. When I got that age I went to work at anything outside I could find for twenty-five cents a day. For twelve hours – from sunup to sundown or fifty cents a day. Like one time I remember hoeing peanuts for a feller for a gallon of lard for the day’s work. He was a sharecropper and didn’t have no money, but we didn’t have no lard.

Interviewer – It was barter, then?

Mr. Wright – That’s what it was.

Interviewer – Okay. What about school?

Mr. Wright – I only got through the fourth grade.

Interviewer – My lord.

Mr. Wright – In those days, in Alabama, you had to buy your books, and you didn’t have money to buy books, let alone clothes. Most of the time I went barefooted, the only time I had shoes on was in the late fall. Couldn’t buy books, couldn’t take lunch because we didn’t have nothing to eat much, maybe some little old sandwich. Mainly I depended on the farm boys there whose parents owned their farms. They was kind of up, and they’d bring a lot of potatoes, sweet
potatoes baked, and country sausage links, and they wouldn’t eat them because they had plenty of them and they’d give them to me, see? I’d eat ‘em up, boy!

Interviewer – So you went out to work when you were twelve years old?

Mr. Wright – About twelve, yes.

Interviewer – That’s amazing. And how long did you stay in Slocomb?

Mr. Wright – We stayed in Slocomb about eight years. I lived in Dothan, lived in Slocomb, and I lived near Hartford, Alabama.

Interviewer – Hartford?

Mr. Wright – Um-hum.

Interviewer – Is that down near Dothan?

Mr. Wright – That’s six miles west of Slocomb.

Interviewer – When did you leave Alabama? How old were you?

Mr. Wright – I was 21 when I left Alabama to come to Columbus, Georgia.

Interviewer – So from the time you started working when you were twelve until you were twenty-one, can you give me a recap of the different jobs you had?

Mr. Wright – You mean from twelve to twenty-one?

Interviewer – Yep.
Mr. Wright – Alright – mainly plowing a mule, picking cotton and getting up peanuts. Then
when I moved to Slocomb, I started to be a delivery boy for Harris Brothers, a big store in town,
see?

Interviewer – A department store?

Mr. Wright – Well it sold hardware, it sold groceries, it sold everything. They paid me $2.50 a
week for six days a week, twelve or fourteen hours a day. I didn’t even have a bicycle to deliver
it out. You’d see me with a twenty-five pound sack of Top-Knot self-rising flour on my shoulder.
In those days, they used a lot of kerosene – had a lot of lamps, and an armful of groceries.
Going that way a mile, that way a mile and a half, that way two miles. That was all day long. Of
course, I was stacking groceries, sweeping the floor and a hundred other jobs around the store,
see?

Interviewer – For $2.50 a week?

Mr. Wright – For $2.50 a week. Finally he raised me to $3.00. That was in ’33 or ’34, in the
Great Depression when people were starving.

Interviewer – Yeah, okay.

Mr. Wright – Of course, you may not remember that.

Interviewer – No. That’s before my time.

Mr. Wright – That’s the toughest times under Republicans that I’ve ever seen.

Interviewer – Okay.
Mr. Wright – I’ll never forgive them people. I’m staying Democrat.

Interviewer – I hear you.

Mr. Wright – Today, see, by being under the Democrats, under Roosevelt, you remember something about him?

Interviewer – Oh lord yes. Oh yes.

Mr. Wright – He got Social Security started, and today I draw a thousand dollars a month, net, from Social Security. Almost $1300 dollars before they take out for Medicare, see? Due to the fact that I didn’t retire at 65. I retired right after 70, see? And they give me about a two percent or something like that, each year you work past sixty-five, see? That made my social security jump higher and higher and higher, see? A lot of people retire at sixty-two. Some at sixty-five, sixty-six, something like that. But I went right up to about as far as you can go.

Interviewer – That’ super. So you’re comfortable.

Mr. Wright – Oh, everything’s paid for and I don’t owe nobody a dime.

Interviewer – That’s super.

Mr. Wright – Money in the bank and all of it, see?

Interviewer – Alright, where did you work besides that store?

Mr. Wright – Well, I run an ice route. You delivered ice in the country on a truck in those days, in the mid thirties. It paid me $5.50 a week. Alright, I had another job. I helped a man milk eight cows. There was a little dairy in Slocomb, for that little town. He’d milk three or four and I’d get
three or four. Russ Smith, he’s long been dead. Now I’d go up to his house about daylight, strain out the milk. You remember them old pasteboard stoppers on top of a quart of milk? We’d put it in pints, put that on, deliver it out, put it on the front porch in those days. They don’t do that anymore, see.

Interviewer – No, and the ice was in the truck to keep the milk cold?

Mr. Wright – No, that ice was another concern. But see, he’d pick me up at three o’clock in the morning, three o’clock in the afternoon we’d milk them cows again. This went on three hundred and sixty five days a year – for a dollar and a half a week! You barely could get that up in those days, see? When I got the milk delivered, the sun was just coming up, and I’d grab the ice truck for another man, Buck Miller, paid me $5.50 a week, and head down towards Graceville delivering out five cents worth and ten cents worth. They had no way of keeping it in those days. A few rich farmers did. Then the next day I was north of Slocomb. Every other day. He paid me five fifty and he paid me a dollar and a half, gave me seven dollars. I brought home milk from him and butter from him that was free, and ice. I picked up a few chickens and few vegetables throughout the country – home to Mama.

Interviewer – Well you were doing pretty good then.

Mr. Wright – Dang right! I had seven dollars a week – a dollar a day! That was good money in those days.

Interviewer – Seven dollars a week plus the groceries.
Mr. Wright – Plus the groceries, little odds and ends I’d pick up throughout the country that farmers would give me, see?

Interviewer – But you were working all day and half the night.

Mr. Wright – yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah... Now do you suppose I’d tell that to some kid today? They’d think I’m lying!

Interviewer – I know what you mean.

Mr. Wright – And so God help me that’s one hundred percent true. Not ninety nine, but one hundred percent.

Interviewer – And were you doing that when you left Slocomb?

Mr. Wright – When I left Slocomb. The final morning that I milked his cows, me and him, at about five o’clock on a Sunday morning. I told him, his name was Russ Smith, I said, “Russ, this is the last time I’m going to help you milk your cows. I’m going to Columbus, Georgia and they tell me I’m going to make cards.” I thought they were playing cards! That’s cards that makes yarn in a mill, see?

Interviewer – I hear you. How did you hear about this?

Mr. Wright – My mother had already brought my brother up, see? He was younger, two years younger, and was going to get him a job and he eventually got on at the Bibb. I got on at Swift Spinning Mill with inside help, see? So she came back and said, “Son, I got you a ticket, a bus ticket from Dothan to Columbus.”
Interviewer – You had never been here before?

Mr. Wright – No, No, No.

Interviewer – And you were 21...

Mr. Wright – 21.

Interviewer – And single?

Mr. Wright – And single. I married when I was almost 24. So she give me the bus ticket and I caught a ride the sixteen or seventeen miles from Slocomb to Dothan. I got on the bus and came to Columbus, and that’s been about 51 years ago. I’ve been here ever since.

Interviewer – Where did you live when you came to Columbus?

Mr. Wright – I lived over on Sixth Avenue, that’s over near Swift Spinning if you know where it is.

Interviewer – I know where Swift is.

Mr. Wright – It’s kind of over at the back of it on Sixth Avenue. On Sixth Avenue, on the other end, the last house on the left. You remember these wagons that had these tanks and they’d come and pick up the stuff out the toilet?

Interviewer – No.
Mr. Wright – Well they didn’t have no sewage. They’d come by once or twice a week and get up all the stuff, see, out of the outdoor toilet. Of course, the whole neighborhood was pretty well fumed up good! Well, that’s where we moved, right there.

Interviewer – Okay, and when you say we, you and your brother in the same place?

Mr. Wright – Yeah, my brother went with me, and my brother sent and got the whole family, seven kids, all of us. Mother and Daddy didn’t have no job. He was working at the Bibb and I finally got on at Swift Spinning Mill, and we paid the rent and the light bill and bought the groceries for years until they could get a job.

Interviewer – How long after you came to Columbus did you start working at Swift?

Mr. Wright – Two weeks.

Interviewer – Two weeks. What did you do for two weeks?

Mr. Wright – I stayed with a Preacher Moody down on Second Avenue and 16th Street, other side of the railroad tracks. The second house on the left. I don’t even know if it’s there – it may be tore down now. But he taken me in and kept me there for two weeks. One of my first cousins at Swift Spinning Mill, on the morning shift, was a head fixer. He came and got me one morning about ten o’clock and said, “I finally got you on.” You couldn’t get a job at Swift Spinning Mill – that’s the best mill in the world to work at in those days, see, without inside help. You couldn’t just walk in there and get a job. You had to pay somebody or wait for somebody to die and have inside help.

Interviewer – Because this was the Depression?
Mr. Wright – Yeah, during the Depression. And it was the best mill to work at.

Interviewer – Why was it the best mill?

Mr. Wright – It was easy, you could do what you wanted to – if you got your job up you could go outside. They wouldn’t let you smoke in the mill in those days, but now they do. Outside on Second Avenue, they built you a thing you could set on it your job was up, you could sit there fifteen, thirty minutes, forty-five minutes, an hour. It didn’t matter. Wasn’t getting but ten dollars for forty hours there, see?

Interviewer – Okay, so there was no overtime during the depression, it was strictly forty?

Mr. Wright – That come in a little bit later, with Social Security.

Interviewer – So forty hours – that was a five day week?

Mr. Wright – A five day week, yes sir.

Interviewer – What was your first job at Swift?

Mr. Wright – Two brooms, going down the alley, sweeping between frames. You know what frames is?

Interviewer – Yes I do.

Mr. Wright - I went down them so many times that the operator, he says, “Son will you knock off a while and quit coming?” I was bothering him, see? Every time he’d get in there to doff one of them out you know, yarn, here I come. It was just about this wide and I had to squeeze in
behind him with two brooms, see? He looked around at me – I wouldn’t let a piece of cotton
land on that floor I was so proud of that job. I’d get it!

Interviewer – So you started as a sweeper?

Mr. Wright – As a sweeper.

Interviewer – How much were you getting paid?

Mr. Wright - I was making ten dollars for forty hours.

Interviewer – Then this was a real raise from Slocomb?

Mr. Wright – Yeah, it was a raise from Slocomb. It sure was. Which ain’t saying much, but...

Interviewer – And you were happy to have a job because of the depression?

Mr. Wright – Oh yeah.

Interviewer – This would have been about ’36 then?

Mr. Wright – 1936. It was November the first when I went to work there.

Interviewer – November the first, 1936. Okay. How long were you a sweeper?

Mr. Wright – Oh I’d say six months, eight months, something like that.

Interviewer – And then what?

Mr. Wright – Well, when you was sweeping, if you wanted to operate the pickers here, or the
cards here, or the roping frames, you’d lay your brooms down and get in there and help them.
You’d learn how to run these jobs. They didn’t have nobody to train you. You learned it on your own, see? That’s the way I got started running different jobs.

Interviewer – Okay. What was your first impression of the mill? Of mill work, with all of the things you had done leading up to that from the time you were twelve.

Mr. Wright – Well, I thought it was a step or two steps above what I had been doing and a great opportunity to advance up. It depended on me – whether I wanted to learn anything or not.

Interviewer – What about the people you were working with? What did you think of them?

Mr. Wright – When I told that man that morning that I was going to Columbus, Georgia to make cards, I thought they was playing cards. He give it a bad name, textiles, said, “There’s a lot of bad people work in them places. Prostitutes and things like that.” Well, with me being twenty one, I didn’t know what a prostitute was, let alone dope and alcohol. You’d never heard of that in that part of the world, but now you hear it everywhere. He give it a bad name but I found a lot of good people there, as well as some bad people. Like you’re going to find in any job, I guess.

Interviewer – Okay, so about eight months as a sweeper and then you progressed to what?

Mr. Wright – I progressed to cards – the cards I thought I was going to be making playing cards. We’d make a yarn about this big, going into a can over here, and doff it out every hour, see?

Interviewer – So this was still 1936? No – this would have been ’37.

Mr. Wright – This would have been ’37, yeah.
Interviewer – And was that a raise in pay?

Mr. Wright – Yeah, that was about three or four dollars a week more, running cards. It was a dangerous job and it was kind of a complicated job. Anybody can sweep the floor.

Interviewer – And what was your brother doing at the time at Bibb?

MR. Wright – I don’t know what kind of jobs he was running at the Bibb, but he didn’t stay there too long. He went to RC and stayed there about 33 or 34 years before he died with a heart attack.

Interviewer – Oh, okay, okay. So by this time the whole family was in Columbus?

Mr. Wright – All of them. We went and got them. Me and my brother paid eighteen dollars for a feller Smith to take a pretty good sized truck and go to Slocomb, Alabama and load up the other five kids and my mother. My Daddy didn’t come up until seven months later, see? And they got soaking wet between Eufaula and Columbus. Furniture and all.

Interviewer – Open truck?

MR. Wright – Open truck. We’re lucky to get them up here, we weren’t worried about a tarp to cover them up! Just get ‘em up here!

Interviewer – Alright, how long did you work in the card room?

Mr. Wright – In the card room, well that was on the third shift running cards.

Interviewer – So that was on the third shift running cards?
Mr. Wright – So they said to me, about that time the Wage and Hour Bill come in, you remember time and a half that we were speaking about a while ago? Time and a half’s after forty hours. These watchmen were making sixty hours a week a piece, see, so they had to cut them down to forty or else pay time and a half for that twenty hours. So, that’s one thing I liked about that, about Roosevelt, he created another job, see? They take twenty hours of that man’s job, they didn’t want to pay him no time and a half, and twenty hours off of that man’s job, and created another job. So they come to me and wanted me to take that over, see?

Interviewer – As a watchman?

Mr. Wright – As a watchman on the door there on Second Avenue, where I stayed for nineteen years.

Interviewer – What shift?

Mr. Wright – Oh, I come on at five o’clock and went on until six in the morning for two nights. Then on Saturday I came at noon at twelve with the clock where you punch in the keys, and went for seven hours on Saturday, then I’d come in Sunday morning at seven and went until seven Sunday afternoon, punching the keys. But they come and told me they want me as head man to take over this job and take over running what they called a dope wagon. You know what a dope wagon is?

Interviewer – I do now.

Mr. Wright – We sold all kind of little things like headache powders, and drinks, sandwiches and all that, milk and stuff. Said this man across the street, Mr. Smith, that owns the café, he’s
gonna pay you a little salary to run the wagon. It’s going to stay stationed there at the door and
they can come down from the three floors and get what they want, see? Plus our salary that
we’re going to pay you. Neither one of them was too much. I was running cards then and that
paid more money than the sweeping job. I said no, I’ll just stay on the third shift and run the
cards.

Interviewer – So you didn’t take the watchman job?

Mr. Wright – I taken it, I turned them down, but three days later they come back and said, “this
is what we’re going to do.” So I reckon they wanted me. I never asked for a job in my life,
people always asked me. “We’re going to give you nine hours more, forty-nine hours; nine
hours will be time and a half.” That would put me past the cards, plus the little I’d be earning
running the dope wagon.

Interviewer – How much salary for running the dope wagon?

Mr. Wright – I don’t know. Six or seven dollars a week. But then I got my chocolate milk to
drink, chewing gum, my cigarettes or anything free of charge. That was little, see? Five days a
week.

Interviewer – Plus the money as a watchman.

Mr. Wright – And nine hours at time and a half added to the forty. I went that way for sixteen
years.

Interviewer – Well now when you started you were making a lot more than in the card room
Mr. Wright – Oh yeah, I wouldn’t accept it because the cards was paying more. They had originally offered me forty hours, see?

Interviewer – But with the additional nine?

Mr. Wright – With the nine, it put it past that, see? Then everybody asked me, “What is a young man like you doing down at this door, sitting there reading a magazine” What did they know for many years I was running two jobs outside. Plus that job. See, I would work Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday night and I had Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and half of Saturday off. I went out and got a job at Columbus Motor Company going to Detroit and Pontiac and all over this country picking up new trucks for ten years, see?

Interviewer – You’re kidding?

Mr. Wright – No, every time I went up there and got new trucks they’d give me fifty dollars. It was two days by plane, which I flew out of here a lot of times, versus Atlanta, three days by train, three days by bus, which I made 265 trips to Detroit, Michigan alone, thousands of trips to Atlanta, Birmingham, Jacksonville, you name it. All over this country just picking up one truck at the time, see? And then I taken the job with the company I was working for, Swift Spinning Mill. The lake is still out on the Gray Rock Road, just over in Harris County. They owned twelve acres, and a private lake out there. People was slipping in, fishing, and it was posted, see? So they hired me, taken me up to Hamilton, swore me in as a Deputy Sherriff and give me a .45 and all that. I run that job, I run the job to Michigan and back, and I run my watchman job at Swift Spinning Mill. A lot of time I should have been on this job out here and I couldn’t quite make it back, see? But that money was staring me in the face, and I had twin girls, and other,
older kids and I needed the money! Like, you know, if you get a million you need two million.
That’s the way it goes. Greedy, I guess you’d call it. I can’t think of no other word.

Interviewer – So at the same time you were a watchman, you were running cars and trucks and you were taking care of the lake.

Mr. Wright – Yeah, I was taking care of the lake. That was early in the morning – trying to catch them, and late in the afternoon, 4, 5, 6 o’ clock, slip in from the back way. See what all you could find around this beautiful twelve acre lake.

Interviewer – And you were still running the dope wagon for the guy across the street?

Mr. Wright – Yeah.

Interviewer – So you had four incomes.

Mr. Wright – Yeah, if you count that other little old job you would say four.

Interviewer – Unbelievable. And how many years did you do this?

Mr. Wright – Well I did the going and getting the new trucks, GMC trucks for Columbus Motor Company for ten years. And I did this lake job for two years.

Interviewer – And how many years as a watchman?

Mr. Wright – Nineteen

Interviewer – Nineteen. And did you have the dope wagon the whole nineteen?

MR. Wright – Yeah.
Interviewer – Why did they call it a dope wagon?

Mr. Wright – I really don’t know. That’s what they called it, so I went along with them. I didn’t try to change the name of it.

Interviewer – At the time that you started as a watchman, this would have been ’37, ’38.

Mr. Wright – It would have been ’39. ’39, yeah, I went to work in ’36 there.

Interviewer – What did it pay for these 49 hours? Do you remember?

Mr. Wright – Yeah, I can tell you what that paid. One time in Detroit, in the security guard’s little place where he checks his trucks in and out, you know. I’d been standing there fifteen or twenty minutes talking to him, and I asked him what he made. That’s all Union world, see? There’s no Union down here at all. “Well,” he said, “I’ll show you my last week’s check stub.” One hundred fourteen dollars net, see? For forty hours.

Interviewer – That was a fortune in those days.

Mr. Wright – Yep. This was along in the mid-fifties. I said, “I do the same thing that you do, but they don’t call it security work. They call it a watchman job. “He said, “Well what do you make?” and I said, “I got one here in my billfold.” I had one folded up in there with a needle and a little thread on it in case a button come off or something I could sew it back on, see? I said there’s mine – forty seven dollars for forty nine hours. And there’s him, one hundred fourteen dollars for forty hours. He said, “Son, how do you make a living on that? You told me you had two kids!” At that time I did, see? And I said, “Well that’s why you see me up here, trying to make a living. Takes two or three jobs to raise a family.”
Interviewer – Columbus Motor Company – does that still exist?

Mr. Wright – Yes, but it’s under a different name. The owners that did own it are dead and gone. They’re out there in that park just off Victory Drive to the left. I don’t know what the name of it is. Back there off Victory Drive to the left – behind the farmer’s market in there. Right behind the farmer’s market, come to think of it. I never did work for those people. At the time I worked for them they was on Fifteenth Street right behind Swift Textiles. Next to Harvey Lumber Company.

Interviewer – How did you get that job?

Mr. Wright – Well, I had a brother-in-law who was a mechanic at Columbus Motor Company, and they wanted a man to go to and pick up a truck maybe down in Enterprise, Alabama, West Palm Beach, Florida, Morristown, Pennsylvania. Places like that. Plus a trip every now and then to Detroit. He called me one day and said, “I’ve got you a job down here if you’ve got three and a half days off.” I said, “Well I’ll be on down in a few minutes.” At the time I was living in the Peabody Apartments, you know where they’re at. They’re over there in Jordan City.

Interviewer – Okay.

Mr. Wright – All them apartments over there – I was living in there, see? I went and got on with those people.

Interviewer – Now if you flew up to Detroit, did you turn around and drive right back?

Mr. Wright – Yeah, what I’d do, I’d fly to Detroit. It’d take two days and two nights round-trip to Detroit from Columbus by flying. I’d get the trucks ready – they’d have them ready three or four
hours after I got there. I’d bring either one, or two or three back, see? It’s roughly nine hundred miles, and there was no interstate in those days. That’s what made it rough. I’d drive down to the Old Kentucky Tourist Court, was the name of it, about halfway across the state of Kentucky. I’d stay there every time that I come from Michigan. He’d give me an alarm clock, and I’d get in there at say, nine, ten, eleven o’clock, see? I’d say all I need is three or four hours of sleep, cause I had to get on in and get on this other job, see? I couldn’t afford breakdowns or nothing like that. I’d sleep three or four hours about halfway to Columbus, Georgia. My alarm clock would go off, I’d get up and I’d head to Columbus and get on in. I’d have maybe a day or half a day before I had to go on this job.

Interviewer – Okay. In the meantime you met your wife.

Mr. Wright – I met her December 23 (tape messes up) accused me of robbing’ the cradle! I’m twenty three and six foot two, a hundred and eighty or eighty five pounds.

Interviewer – So how did you meet her? She lived around the corner?

Mr. Wright – She lived around the corner, and she’d go up to the grocery store and come over to the house, I had two or three sisters, you know. That’s how we got started. First thing you know, we’s dating.

Interviewer – And you married her in ’39?

Mr. Wright – Yeah, well I’ll be married to her forty-nine years this coming December 23. From ’39, on the 23rd of December, to this one coming up will be forty-nine years.

Interviewer – And how many children have you had?
Mr. Wright – Five

Interviewer – Five kids?

Mr. Wright – Five kids, including twin girls.

Interviewer – Are any of them working in the mills now?

Mr. Wright – One. My oldest daughter is about forty.

Interviewer – Okay, and where is she now?

Mr. Wright – She works in the laboratory and she makes good money.

Interviewer – At Swift?

Mr. Wright – At Swift Spinning. I got her the job there, 25 years ago.

Interviewer – And She’s still there?

Mr. Wright – She’s still there.

Interviewer – What do your other children do?

Mr. Wright – One works for the government downtown, getting jobs. Past sixty or sixty five they can’t get a job nowhere, and she helps them get jobs. The other one works for Industrial Bearing down on Fifth Avenue, right across from Swift Textiles. And the two boys – the oldest boy works for RC, and he’s been there about thirty-three or thirty-four years. The youngest boy, Richard, he works for the Railroad. Now that’s the boy that makes the money.

Interviewer – I didn’t think the Railroad was very profitable these days.
Mr. Wright – He ain’t making but fourteen, fifteen dollars an hour. That’s what he makes.

Interviewer – Here in Columbus?

Mr. Wright – No, the problem with his job is he recently got married in the middle of this past January. His wife’s gone over to her mother’s now. The problem with that job is she run him to Opelika Sunday at 6 o’clock, and they’re working up near Rome, Georgia. Now he won’t be home until Friday. That’s the problem with that job.

Interviewer – I hear you.

Mr. Wright – But at the same time they furnish them a trailer, air-conditioning, all their food – free.

Interviewer – So he’s doing well.

Mr. Wright – He is doing well

Interviewer – You don’t have to worry about him

Mr. Wright – I don’t have to worry about him, although he totaled out a car over here three weeks ago. One of these speed-demon cars. What do you call them, Camaros? I-Roc is the name of it. One of them $21,000 dollar jobs. Wasn’t his fault. He didn’t get hurt.

Interviewer – Fortunately

MR. Wright – He was on the Bealwood Connector going north, and this woman got out between the highways, and she didn’t see him and she pulled out in front of him. He was going north doing forty-five or fifty. He didn’t even see her until he run into her. She’s still in the
hospital and that’s been about three weeks ago. It tore her up and totaled out both cars. Since then I carried him to Huntsville, Alabama two weeks ago and got him a new one. That’s the only thing he wanted – we tried to talk him out of it. You know when you see one of those cars, I call them. “There’s one of them boys that’s going to do 60, 70, 80 right here in town if you don’t watch them.” Let me tell you something. I tried to get him to put seat belts on for years and he wouldn’t do it. He didn’t have them on up there when the wreck occurred and his head went against the windshield and cracked the windshield. Just put a little blood on it. It didn’t hurt him, but he still went on to the hospital and had a checkup. First thing he’ll tell you now is to put a seatbelt on. Might be the best thing that ever happened. I couldn’t get him to put it on.

Interviewer – So your kids are doing well?

Mr. Wright – All doing well. Doing well.

Interviewer – That’s great. Did your wife work?

MR. Wright – Oh yeah. She worked most of our marriage.

Interviewer – Where?

Mr. Wright – She worked for Swift Spinning Mill

Interviewer – As a what?

Mr. Wright – Running twisters. You know what twisters are?

Interviewer – Yes.
Mr. Wright – She run that ten or twelve years. Then from there she went on and run spinning frames at the Columbus Mill, which is West Point on First Avenue, about a block and a half from Swift Spinning Mill. The first job she had was working in a meat packing company out in South Columbus. I’m trying to think of the name of it. She worked a year or two there. Her job was the pounds of bacon coming down the line – she checked that. That was her first job. Her final job was right up here at this carpet mill store on top of the hill, where she worked nineteen years. She retired when she was sixty-three. Outside of about eight or ten years, she’s worked all this marriage. I’d say she worked about forty years.

Interviewer – Okay. Now, let’s get back to you and Swift Spinning. Am I right – nineteen years on the door?

Mr. Wright – Yeah.

Interviewer – Did you enjoy this more than inside the mill?

Mr. Wright – Well, yeah, I enjoyed it in a way because I had all these other jobs, all these other things going. I was actually making more money with them other jobs than the supervisor – man over the whole thing! But see, people didn’t know that, and they’d ask me, “Son, what’s a young man like you doing sitting here reading all these magazines and not learning nothing, wasting time.” Well I couldn’t tell them. In those days they might run you off if you had another job. That’s how it was in those days. I said, “Well, I’m going to make a move one of these days. I’m not going to stay here indefinitely. I’m not going to stay here all my life.”

Interviewer – So what year did you leave the door?
Mr. Wright – In 19, you know, like this, 1958 or 1959, the man that run the supply room Mr. Walker, of course he’s dead now, but this was thirty years ago. He was then sixty-five, see? He was to retire, and they come to me. I didn’t ask them for the job. Otis Austen, he was over all that, you know. He’s not with them anymore. He’s with some other mill up in the Carolinas. He wanted me to take the job. Said I had been recommended for it. I said, “Man, you’ve got 35, 40 thousand things to keep up with around here. I don’t think I’ve got enough education to run it.” I had all these other jobs going – I didn’t want it because I’d have to drop them. It’d be a five or six day thing. I wouldn’t have time to go to Michigan or nowhere! He just insisted. In the meantime, half a dozen others really wanted that job throughout the mill, but he kept pestering me. I said, “I’ll tell you what Mr. Austen, I’ll go around and run that job for you, with that man, he was working two or three months and then he’d have to knock off because of social security. So I went in there and worked for Mr. Walker five days. On Friday, when three o’ clock come, I dialed Mr. Austen’s phone. It was an office on the other side of the mill, and nobody answered. I put his code call in. I knew he’d get that, you could hear it all over the mill, see? In a few minutes he was around. I said, “Well, Mr. Austen, I come out here like I said, for one week. Five days. I do not want your job. You can have it. “I’ll never forget, he sat down on the other end of my desk, and I could see it wasn’t setting well with him. I said, “Get one of them other four, five or six that wants this job so bad.” I said, “Man, look up yonder at all them shelves of things, bolts and nuts and belts and bearings and all other kinds of things.” I said, “I’d be taking this job home with me. Eating it, sleeping it.” “Oh, that ain’t nothing,” he said, “I do my job that way.” I don’t know if he did or not, but that’s what he said. He got up and started out the door and said, “You’re making the biggest mistake.” I was on third shift. He said, “You mean to tell me
that you’re turning this job down, a morning shift job, and you’re going to sit on the third shift on that cheap paying job?” He didn’t know about all these other jobs. He said, “This is the biggest opportunity you’re going to ever have in your life.”

Interviewer – Running the supply room?

Mr. Wright – You know what he said? He walked off and said, “Take it! Run it!” I stayed thirty years there.

Interviewer – In the supply room?

Mr. Wright – In the supply room. The last thirty years – I retired from there.

Interviewer – So you had to give up all your other jobs?

Mr. Wright – I give up everything else. See, that could be an in for you, an excuse to let you go. They got something, some little minor something. I had a young family and we’d just moved into this old house, so I said yeah, I guess I’m just going to have to drop everything else and go with this.

Interviewer – Do you remember what it paid? To start?

Mr. Wright – Well, I can’t hardly remember. It was on an hour basis, I had to punch a card in and out. It was around a hundred and twenty, a hundred and twenty-five a week.

Interviewer – In what year?

Mr. Wright – It was in ’58 or ’59.

Interviewer – Well that was good money then.
Mr. Wright – That was pretty good money, yeah.

Interviewer – You were actually losing money though,

Mr. Wright – Yeah, I was actually losing money. Because you see when I was on the road and I would drink, I was my own boss. If I wanted a coca-cola, the company paid for it. If I wanted a newspaper, a pack of cigarettes, a meal, anything, they paid for it. I got a receipt for it. Plus whatever they was paying for the trip. And I liked that. I’m a private person anyway, see? And I really and truly liked that, even if I’d had to take a cut in wages I liked that better than over that supply room, see?

Interviewer – But you stayed there thirty years?

Mr. Wright – I stayed there thirty years.

Interviewer – That’s amazing.

Mr. Wright – I got so as time went on and on and on I got on to everything and it wasn’t as big a problem as I thought. But looking at something with thirty or thirty-five thousand different things in there, that can be tremendous on an average boy that didn’t even finish high school. I had to make an impression on you, quick!

Interviewer – Alright, this was ’58 or ’59, first shift...

Mr. Wright – All first shift.

**********pause in tape**********
Mr. Wright – It was the best place I ever worked in my life. But it ain’t that place anymore, it’s changed. I wouldn’t want to work for none of these mills anymore.

Interviewer – Why?

Mr. Wright – You’ve got so much more work on you than what you used to. Look, when I ran them cards up there in Swift Spinning Mill, in ’39 and a little bit in ’40, they’d doff every hour. They come in with about a twelve inch can like this, about this high, full of yarn, see? And you’d doff them out. I had thirty-five cards, and the yarn would come about halfway like this. Didn’t weigh ten pounds with the can and all. Too many cans you can’t reach around. I’d only take one or two, see? I could take two in this hand, two in this hand and one in front, and just run between the cards out to the drawing frames, that was the next machine it went through with, see? I could doff my cards out in five minutes, thirty five of them, and I could go outside and sit for fifty-five minutes. I had my job up, I’d get the next operator to run the next set of cards to me to watch out for an end that might come down, see? We done that for each other. Don’t tell me there’s anything better than that! Cannot beat it. You go up there and try to run one of them jobs now, you’ll stay on that job 90 or 95% of the time, except for whatever lunch breaks you’ve got. That’s due to all those foreign imports flooding this country, see? That’s what brought this on. They had to in order to stay in business. Last time I heard there was seven hundred that had went out of business – mills.

Interviewer – You wouldn’t have any recollection of the 1934 strike in the mills here?

Mr. Wright – I didn’t arrive here until 1936. All I know is just second hand from different people, so I better not comment on that. I wouldn’t know what I was talking about.
Interviewer – Okay.

Mr. Wright – I’d be speculating and guessing, now.

Interviewer – When you went to work at Swift, what benefits did they have? What restrictions did they have?

Mr. Wright – Benefits? You want to know what they had. Zero. None.

Interviewer – No benefits?

Mr. Wright – No unemployment compensation, no social security, no insurance, no nothing! What you got in your check, that was it.

Interviewer – When did benefits start coming in?

Mr. Wright – Well, let’s see. I think social security come in about 1937 or somewhere along in there. I remember this on social security, I was making ten dollars, gross, and they taken out a penny on the dollar and left me with nine ninety. Now there was no income tax until World War II come along. Course then they started taking out income tax.

Interviewer – How did World War II affect working at Swift?

Mr. Wright – Oh, it just speeded it up three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

Interviewer – You were working seven days?

Mr. Wright – Seven days a week, and they couldn’t get help to even run it! Except prostitutes, maybe drunks, things like that. Anything they could pick up off the street. They put them up
there to running those machines, or else they’d have to shut them down. A lot of times different machines were shut down for lack of somebody to run them, see?

Interviewer – Because of the pool being drained by the war?

Mr. Wright – Being drained by the war, and other people going to the shipyards and airplane factories and other places, you know. They paid better than textiles pay.

Interviewer – But you stayed right there?

Mr. Wright – I stayed right there, I was satisfied there. There ain’t no better place in the world to work than Swift Spinning Mill.

Interviewer – When did you move to this house?

Mr. Wright – Moved into this house, let’s see, I been here thirty years, so about ’55, ’56, somewhere in that area.

Interviewer – And until then, where had you lived?

Mr. Wright – Well, I lived first at 3803 Meritas Drive, over here near Bibb City. I lived there a couple of years. Then I moved to Peabody Apartments, which I thought was the greatest thing that ever was because they furnished your Frigidaire, they furnished your hot water, they furnished your gas, your lights, and no taxes, they’s all free. Depending on how many kids you had is what the rent they charged you.

Interviewer – Okay.
Mr. Wright – I moved in there in about ’41, and it was sixteen dollars and five cents a month for ALL of that! No overhead! And there was no, I’m not downgrading the colored people, I’m not one of those people that’s against the colored people, I’m not, see? But I’m on the other hand, you stay over yonder or you go to your school or your church like you want to and I’ll do mine. But as far as being against them, I’m as much for them as I am for you or anybody else, see? But that was the greatest place, that Peabody Apartments, that I ever lived in. Until they integrated. Of course, I was out of there before that happened, see? You’ve got crime over there now. You can’t walk through that place at night. You’re liable to get robbed or killed in there.

Interviewer – I guess I’m still having trouble with where the Peabody Apartments are. Is it Talbotton road?

Mr. Wright – Yep. It runs from Talbotton to Hamilton, all the way through that section, on 27th Street.

Interviewer – Okay, near the Three Arts Theater?

Mr. Wright – Yeah, Three Arts Theater is only about a block from it.

Interviewer – Then I know where it is.

Mr. Wright - If you’re coming up from town to the Three Arts Theater, you pass by it on the left. It’s all Peabody Apartments back in there for acres and acres.

Interviewer – Okay, then I know exactly where it is.

Mr. Wright – You know where it is. You got to.
Interviewer – When you moved here, in the mid fifties, you bought this house?

Mr. Wright – Yeah.

Interviewer – That was the first time you’d...

Mr. Wright – Owned a home. I bought it, you remember, how long you been in Columbus?

Interviewer – Four and a half years.

Mr. Wright – Then you wouldn’t know, but when they built this Bealwood connector express through here, I had to move to, oh, I don’t know, probably a hundred, hundred and fifty homes had to be moved out to make room for this four-lane highway. And I bought one of them. Near where the Krystal is. You know where the Krystal is on River Road? About a block from it. Near where State Farm is. Almost to where State Farm is, I bought that house there and moved it here.

Interviewer – How did you move it?

Mr. Wright – I got some guys up here in North Columbus, in the business of moving houses. They moved it over here for me. They had to cut off half the top to get it under these power lines and get it over here.

Interviewer – In the meantime, your father had moved to Columbus,

Mr. Wright – Oh yeah, he came up six or seven months later from me

Interviewer – And what did he end up doing?
Mr. Wright – Well, I got him a job – we’re going back to this dope wagon. They decided then in later years to put it throughout the mill. They put four wheels on it, and a handle. They’d take it and go from the winding room on the first floor to the second floor card room to the third floor spinning room and blow you a whistle. Let everybody know that the dope wagon was there, your sandwiches and drinks and milk and everything else was there. If you want anything, come on and get it. I’m only going to be here ten or fifteen minutes.

Interviewer – There were elevators to go between floors?

Mr. Wright – There were elevators.

Interviewer – So there were no canteens at this time?

Mr. Wright – No. Not like they got now.

Interviewer – And no cafeterias?

Mr. Wright – No cafeterias period.

Interviewer – Do you remember back to the days of the pail toters?

Mr. Wright – Pail toters? What’s that?

Interviewer – Well, one gentleman I talked to last week was talking about the...

Mr. Wright – That’s a new word for me...

Interviewer – His aunts used to put lunch in a pail and he’d go across the street to Swift Spinning and hand it to another relative inside the...
Mr. Wright – Oh, the little boys that would show up, about 8, 10, 12, 14 years old?

Interviewer – Right

Mr. Wright - Say on the second shift they went to work at three and they’d show up around six or seven. I was on the door for nineteen, like I told you, and I knew everyone just about in that mill, and they’d say, here’s mama or daddy’s lunch, a little pail or a little brown paper bag mostly see. Will you notify them? I said I sure will. I know what you’re talking about. That’s just a new word they used.

Interviewer – But you weren’t a part of that yourself?

Mr. Wright – No, I wasn’t a part of that. Had the dope wagon right there!

Interviewer – We talked about benefits, what about restrictions? What restrictions did you find there at the mill when you first went to work?

Mr. Wright - Hardly any. The place was wide open. No security guards, no watchmen in the daytime. They had me coming on at night, and another man coming on at night. Of course it was a little dangerous on Second Avenue. When World War II broke out, there was all kinds of soldiers in town; most of them on payday was drunk and looking for a woman. You could have trouble, and I had trouble with a lot of them. I told them to stop, and all I had to stop them with was a coca-cola bottle. They wouldn’t let me carry a gun in those days, or a blackjack. I made me a homemade blackjack later and put it under my seat just in case. But around the first of the month it could get dangerous in Bibb City and North Columbus. It could get dangerous there! Interviewer – I hadn’t thought of that.
Mr. Wright – Extremely dangerous.

Interviewer – What do you remember about unions in your early years with Swift Spinning?

Mr. Wright – The word Union did not have a chance at Swift Spinning Mill. Like I told you before, it was the best place in the world to work. Why would you want a Union?

Interviewer – Didn’t the union try to come in though, and make...

Mr. Wright - Yeah, they tried to come in about fifteen or sixteen years ago, and they voted on it there, but me being a supervisor, I wasn’t allowed to get into it, see? I had to be for the company only, no matter how I felt. Which, I sort of leaned at that time towards unions, but I had to keep it in me, see? And they voted it down, four hundred and something to fifty nine, I believe. It didn’t have a chance. I knew it didn’t have a chance of going through there. People was happy with what they was doing and the way they’d been treated. They didn’t need no union.

Interviewer – Did you make a lot of friends in the mill, or were your friends people who didn’t work there?

Mr. Wright – Oh, I made a tremendous amount of friends there. They depended on me for everything. I knew every company in town; I practically lived on the telephone. On my lunch break if you needed a 204pp ball bearing, and they couldn’t get it up from Columbus Bearing in those days which is Columbus Industrial Bearing, my daughter works there now. I’d run down in my car on my own time on my own gas and pick up one. It didn’t matter to me if it was a
sweeper needed something or if it was the man that owned the mill, I give him the same
treatment, the sweeper, as I gave the owner. No difference.

Interviewer – Did you know the owner?

Mr. Wright – Oh yeah, I knowed Mr. Clifford Swift. Of course, he’s been dead 30 or 35 years.

Interviewer – Clifford Swift?

Mr. Wright – Clifford Swift.

Interviewer – Was that any relation to Henry Swift?

Mr. Wright – Henry Swift was his son. Henry Swift taken over the mill when he died.

Interviewer – What kind of relationship did you have with Clifford Swift?

Mr. Wright – Fine, fine, fine. Couldn’t have had a better one. And Henry, I even had better. He’s
the one who wanted me to go out and watch his lake, the private lake. The lawyer Swift’s are
still in Columbus. That was his brother. The lawyer more or less downtown kept up with lake,
see? But they all kind of owned it together, the Swifts. Fine relations with the lawyer, fine
relations with Henry.

Interviewer – When does the name Illges get connected with Swift Spinning?

Mr. Wright – They were there when I got there in ‘36.

Interviewer – Were they co-owners with the Swifts?
Mr. Wright – Yeah, yeah. They were co-owners. Percentage wise I don’t know what percent they owned, but Mr. Illges at that time was one of the richest men in Columbus.

Interviewer – This was Abraham, Sr.?

Mr. Wright – Right, he’s dead now. Now his son has since left Swift Spinning Mill and has moved up on 38th street and opened up that old mill up there that the Bibb owned, on 38th street.

Interviewer – The old Anderson Mill?

Mr. Wright – The old Anderson Mill. He’s got it going there, under his own name. You know, I guess he furnished all the money and everything. He works about 60 or 65 people there now.

Interviewer – His picture was in Sunday’s paper.

Mr. Wright – Yeah, I believe it was. He’s as fine a man as you’ll ever want to make a deal with.

Interviewer – You’ve met him then, you know him?

Mr. Wright – Oh, have I met him?

*********** gap in tape***********

Mr. Wright – In the navy, stationed in Boston Massachusetts in the naval yard there. In 1960. I’m in the supply room when he comes home. That was before he got into the textile business. He got out of the navy and went into textiles and that’s where he has been ever since. He buys him one of them, I think they called them a Corvette, little Chevrolet with the motor in the rear. He bought one brand new, with the motor in the rear, and he put five hundred miles on it while
he was on furlough. And the old man come to me, and said, “Would you run this car?” They knew I made those trips all over the country. Going to Boston, Massachusetts, he don’t feel like fooling with it. He wants to fly, rich people could do that. He said, “We’ll pay you the same thing as if you were working here in the supply room, and all expenses.” Well, I pulled out that Saturday evening right in front of this house in that little old thing, late December, just before Christmas. He’s flying up Sunday, and I’m leaving Saturday at about four o’clock. I get up there Monday morning at about seven o’clock. I run into snow in Virginia. North Carolina, really. The North part of North Carolina. All the way through New York, the first time I’d been to New York, and the last time I ever want to be there, old man Abraham, he called me up in the office and pulls me in front of a map on how to get through New York, cause he’s done it, and I’m at his fancy desk, and he says, “Son, when you cross the George Washington bridge, there’s about seven or eight lanes going one way, and you want to be in this outer left-hand lane. You’ll hit the New England freeway and bypass most of New York on your way to Boston.” When I hit it Sunday night, about Midnight, it was lightly snowing. It had been snowing since I hit North Carolina. That little car never once slipped with that motor back there. I was in the right lane when I hit it. There was no way to get in the left lane – all lanes were full. Only God-almighty could have picked that little car up and set it in the left lane over yonder. So I went on downtown at Midnight Sunday night, through the Bronx. I pulled up there and there ain’t nothing going on at that hour of the night. It was snowing, and there was some men scooping up some snow and putting it in a truck. I pulled up down there and I said “Well, well, well, what do you know. I’d rather be in an African jungle than be in this place. It was awful. I was in the Bronx about half-way, in this white car, with all this expensive luggage up front where usually
the motor is. I got out my homemade blackjack I was telling you about and I carried it along that I’d made over there for them soldiers. I thought a little bit and I said No, these police will catch me with that thing and say it’s a deadly weapon. It’s made out of a battery case taped up with tape, see? Flexible like that, you know. But no, I locked the car, put that thing back, got my two cell flashlight and a little old knife with a blade about two inches long and I thought, “I’ll go with this. Fight them off, see.” That’s how scared I was of that place. You know, you’ve seen on TV, magazines, movies, everything else about New York. So I walk up to the corner and I’m standing there watching these boys loading that snow and I thought, ain’t no need in asking them boys, they probably don’t know more than three or four blocks of this. More that would confuse me in this place, see? So I decided not to get any information from them. Bout that time a yellow cab went through, several went by that had somebody in it, but then here come a yellow cab didn’t have nobody in it. I told him where I was from and where I wanted to go – Boston. Told him I wanted to get on the New England freeway. I said; see that car down yonder, half a block from you? He said I’ll tell you what. You give me a dollar and a half right now. I wasn’t worried about the money; all I wanted was out of that place! I said don’t you run off and leave me! I didn’t trust him and he didn’t trust me. So he waited behind them old tall buildings back there, and there wasn’t hardly no traffic. He motioned to me and said, “Son, see that red light on top of the hill about a quarter of a mile away?” He said, “That’s the New England Freeway. And there ain’t but one way to get on it, turn right.” As far as I could tell he didn’t say hillbilly or nothing because I was from Georgia and that I shouldn’t have been there in the first place. Well, if he was thinking that, I shouldn’t have been. I was there and I had to get out of there. So I got out and got on down there. I like to beat him there, and he flew up.
Interviewer – And you flew back?

Mr. Wright – I caught Webb Company’s truck up there, picking up a load of wool. It was arranged before I started that he was going to pick me up and bring me back.

Interviewer – What did you think of Boston?

Mr. Wright – Boston’s another big city too. About like Atlanta, far as I could tell.

Interviewer – Yeah.

Mr. Wright – By the way, I got on up there towards Boston, bout half way, I pulled in a truck stop to get me what seemed like my tenth or twelfth cup of coffee trying to stay awake – I wasn’t about to go to sleep though. There were four sailors sitting there and it dawned on me that they might be going to this North Boston Naval yard. So I walked in there and introduced myself, told them where I was from, they said, “Yeah, we’re from Wheeling, West Virginia and we’ve been home on furlough. We’d be glad for you to follow.” One of them’s always got a big mouth and he’ll invite you to go, you know? He says, “I’ve been stationed in Boston and I know Boston like I know my hand. But we got a little problem. We’ve got to stop up here at a service station. We bought two tires, snow tires, at Sears & Roebuck back in Wheeling, West Virginia, and we’ve got to have them changed out. I said that’s no problem, so they did. We hit Boston at about 5 o’clock that morning. It was just right – we missed most of the traffic. We drove and drove, the sun come up, you couldn’t see because it was still snowing, light snow. More people, more cars, more people, more cars – seems like we drove at least an hour. I said man; this is a big place, about as big as New York. The man who knew everything was lost, see, and I didn’t
know it. So he went on down there and turned in a one way street like that when he shouldn’t have turned in, and traffic come all this way, see? I was right on his tail – and that’s the last time I saw that feller in 1960. Stuck his head out, looked out to back up, people blowing at him. I’m half on a two-way street, half on a one-way street. I stuck my head out and said “Son, you lost?” and he shook his head just like that. Do you know how close he was to the Naval Yard? Two blocks! I wouldn’t have taken nothing for those trips you learn a lot by meeting different people. One time I went up on the bus, a Greyhound. It was tourists, mostly Yankees. They’d been to Florida, see, and you never saw those people again. The next trip, in two weeks or whatever it was, there were new ones, see? It was very interesting to listen to them talk. Same way on the train, same way on the plane. Of course, I’m scared to death of planes. I almost had a heart attack on that thing, but I had a rush job and I had to go by plane.

Interviewer – You made that trip for Mr. Illges, Sr.?

Mr. Wright – Yeah, and when I got up there, Jr. was going to pay me, see? I had to park a mile and a half away from the naval base. Old, run-down part of Boston must have been built when the city was, 200 years ago. Awful looking place. I began to get all these receipts for everything – it cost two dollars and a half to go across the Chesapeake Bay bridge, and I wound up half a mile in the sky and three or four miles across. . He said, “Grady, just take all the receipts home. Daddy will settle up with you.” And another time, I’ve got to tell you this, they let me knock off an hour early and go to the Atlanta airport. They had a new Chrysler sitting there for me, and he was coming in from the North Boston Naval yard. This thing they have out at the country club once a year – what is it, the King something or other? They have it once a year...
Interviewer – The Southern Open?

Mr. Wright – No, they have a king. There’s a woman and a man in it...

Interviewer – The Mardi Gras ball?

Mr. Wright – Yeah, something like that. That year, Sr. was the man, and he was on the front page of the Ledger. He was the man who won it, see, and some other lady – I don’t know who she was. He was coming in there at five o’clock, and the shindig was going to be at eight. I got up there before five. What tickled me, I got in that car there under the shed, and there was a bunch of buttons to push. All I had was an old ’51 Chevrolet, see? Nothing automatic about mine. I said, I better not be pushing these buttons, I’ll be done run through that brick wall in this thing. So I went in there and got him. It kind of peeved him off a little bit, he thought I had more sense or something about how to operate a car, but not them late models, a big expensive Chrysler. I said, “Mr. Eldridge, what button do you push?” It had buttons like radio buttons. He said, “Just crank the thing and hit R, that’s reverse, and go on with it!” that’s what he said. I did, and I got it up in Harris County and I pulled it off the road. It had power windows, power everything; I worked with it until I learned it. Then I went on up to Atlanta. What got me, he was about thirty minutes late – the plane went all the way through Chattanooga, Tennessee, and then back to Atlanta, and he was supposed to be in Columbus. We didn’t even leave out of Atlanta until after six o’clock. We was walking across the parking lot when he said, and I knew he’d been in one wreck as a young man in his teens, broke his body up pretty bad, like to killed him, and he says, “You mind if I drive?” By all means, it’s their car I thought. Do what you want to with it. So I said, “Sure! I want you to drive.” Whatever you want and whatever you say,
you’re paying for it. So when we got down on highway 85 coming towards Manchester and through there, no interstate, he cut off on 27 to Warm Springs to go to Columbus. Somewhere where he cut off 85 at night, it had done got dark, it was late December or maybe first of the year, I don’t know which. We were running behind time, and that Chrysler wouldn’t move. He was doing 60 or 70, but it seemed like we were doing 30 or 40 in a little old car like I had. He sucked a late model Chevrolet under, that Chevrolet was going towards Atlanta, I looked around there to see what kind of speed he was doing. Do you know I could see up to 95 on that speedometer and I did not see the hand? That was telling me it was between 95 and 140. I wouldn’t go no further with my head, and I wouldn’t ask him. I was scared. I wouldn’t say anything. But what occurred to me, a farmer could be coming down one of them little old country dirt roads, a horse or a cow got loose, and lord, it’d be over for us. He’d misjudge the speed, the farmer, you wasn’t supposed to be going over 55 and we was doing a hundred or more. We’d all be killed. I asked him when I retired over there, he run me down as I was going out the gate and apologized. They gave me a party over at Pritchett’s Fish Camp over in Hamilton. I asked him, I said, “Mr. Eldridge, could you please tell me how fast you was going back in 1961 between Georgia 85 and where we turned on 27 towards Warm Springs in there? I said, you sucked a Chevrolet in and I know he was doing 60 or 70 miles an hour. “He just laughed and said, “You know, I don’t even remember.” I enjoyed myself over there the 49 years I was there.

Interviewer – So at one time, the Swifts and the Illgeses co-owned the plant?

Mr. Wright – Yes.
Interviewer – And you knew them all?

Mr. Wright – I knew them all. There were other stockholders too that weren’t there. You know how people invest in stock and never come around.

Interviewer – Well, we’ve talked benefits and we’ve talked restrictions. What kind of activities did the plant have for its employees? Like picnics or parties, that sort of thing?

Mr. Wright – None in those days. None until after World War II.

Interviewer – And then what?

Mr. Wright – Then everything got to rolling, see? All over the country. Then we started having picnics in places/

Interviewer – Where?

Mr. Wright – Well, like Idle Hour Park maybe, but then Fieldcrest bought us out. You know about Fieldcrest mill?

Interviewer – Yes.

Mr. Wright – They bought us out, and they owned their own private lake up here on 85. About fifteen miles from here, and a big building where you could have picnics and barbeques, and a big lake where you could fish. That’s really when that started.

Interviewer – Okay. Why did, why was the plant sold? Do you have any idea? To Fieldcrest?

Mr. Wright – Well,
Interviewer – Was it Swift and Illges that still owned it?

Mr. Wright – Yeah, the same ones still owned it. When they first sold out, it was to a company in Nashville, Tennessee. Genesco. They kept it several years.

Interviewer – Do you know why they sold it to Genesco?

Mr. Wright – It was getting hard for a company with private owners to own it. You had to be in with a group, see? Own many mills. It was getting mighty hard with the ownership in Columbus to survive. That’s why they sold out, from the way I figure it and the way I heard people talk. They told us, the owners did, that we would have more benefits and it would be better for us if they sold it to Fieldcrest. We’d have better insurance, better everything.

Interviewer – So what kind of benefits do the people have now?

Mr. Wright – Well, they have a retirement, which is not too much, but it helps. In my case I had good retirement because I was a supervisor, see? I was pretty well taken care of. They have better, much better than they used to. Minimum wage has gone up. I can’t stress to you how much I enjoyed working there for 49 years.

Interviewer – And you enjoyed it?

Mr. Wright – Even though, in the supply room, I run a four man job, and I brought a lot of work home. Today, they’ve got two on the morning shift down there, one on second and one on third. They’ve got four people running that supply room down there, and I run it for thirty years. That tells you something about a computer, doesn’t it? They put it on a computer. It didn’t need to be on the computer in the first place. I knew that, and a lot of other people knew
it. They have spent a fortune down there, one time they were working six people down there in that supply room. And I think to myself, the company kept promising me they were going to give me a second helper, see? I needed a man to put up things, and shelve. A man to sweep the floor, blow it out and do some painting. I had other jobs, see, and I didn’t have time to get around to it. The old company, the other company, never would do it. They could have used the money they wasted painting that building on the inside and bought parts with it.

Interviewer – You never considered leaving Swift?

Mr. Wright – Never. I never considered. I could have went to work for General Motors. There were several times I went down that assembly line, watching them make them Greyhound busses and trucks. I would have worked there for three times what I was making at the Swift Mill.

Interviewer – But you were happy where you were?

Mr. Wright - I was happy where I was. I looked at it as they were all mixed up with foreigners up there, and you had that winter time coming. Zero degree weather. I didn’t want no part of that.

Interviewer – What do you remember about united givers?

Mr. Wright – From the day it started, whenever that was, I’ve been giving to them.

Interviewer – When did it start?

Mr. Wright – I’d just be guessing this time, but it’s been here a long time. It was the Red Feather at one time.
Interviewer – I didn’t know that.

Mr. Wright – Then the United Givers – it’s had two or three names. I suppose this thing started in the fifties.

Interviewer – After the war?

Mr. Wright – Oh, definitely after the war. There wasn’t no such thing before the war.

Interviewer – Do you remember anything about resentment towards this?

Mr. Wright – Oh yeah, there was some people who like to lost their job over it. On account of they didn’t want to give. They didn’t want to give, and they had some hard words about it.

Interviewer – But nobody did lose their job?

Mr. Wright - Nobody lost their job. They finally come across, or they just ignored that two or three that didn’t want to give. The company was so set in their mind that everyone was going to give, see, until they would get after you if you didn’t give. Why not? He’s giving fifty cents out of his check a week, or whatever it was.

Interviewer – It wasn’t very much money?

Mr. Wright – It wasn’t very much money. I didn’t argue with them. Take it – go on. I didn’t want to fuss. Right or wrong, I didn’t know where the money was going. They want it? Take it!

Interviewer – As you look back, what do you think it was like to raise a family as a textile worker?
Mr. Wright – Really, I didn’t get on my feet until 1978. When you raise five kids, buying a house and trying to rebuild it over thirty years – I’ve got this room to go yet, and the porch cost several thousand dollars. Although I’ve spent twelve thousand in the last two years on it since I retired, see? That’s a new air conditioner sitting in the yard, and this plastic siding you see was five thousand two hundred. I’ll never do no more painting, and it’s guaranteed for seventy five years. I’m about to get it, see, but I guess it’ll be about the time I die. It was tough, it was tough. When you try to raise five kids, mostly on the lowest paying job, it’s tough to do. Even to get them through high school. That’s tough, let alone college.

Interviewer – Did they all get through high school?

Mr. Wright – Every one of them did. Although one of them, I think they just got him out of there to get him out of there!

Interviewer – What about hearing loss. Did your ears, in the mill, give you any kind of trouble?

Mr. Wright – No, no. See, from ’68 until ’85 I was out of the mill altogether. They built a new supply room out in the yard away from the mill, and I was out of all that racket and all that dust.

Interviewer – In the nineteen years you worked at the door you weren’t

Mr. Wright – It didn’t bother me because I had the door wide open. We didn’t have no air conditioning. I was just practically out of the dust. Now there were a lot of people that come down sick from it later. I know several that died from it. All that time I was smoking cigarettes, but I’ve been smoking cigarettes for sixty-five years. I’m seventy-two and a half now. But I
don’t inhale it, it don’t go no further than my mouth, maybe the base of my throat. It doesn’t go into my lungs.

Interviewer – You never had any connection with that I think of as a mill village?

Mr. Wright – No, I never did live there, but the company owned a lot of houses.

Interviewer – Do you have any idea how many?

Mr. Wright – All I could do was just give you an estimate...

Interviewer – Sure.

Mr. Wright – I would say about thirty. Swift Spinning Mill is just a small mill, you know. It’s not anything like the Bibb.

Interviewer – Bibb had a lot of houses?

Mr. Wright – Bibb had hundreds of them. That whole village, back to the river, I guess for a mile across there was houses. They finally sold it to the people who worked for them.

Interviewer – And what did Swift do with theirs?

Mr. Wright – They sold them. The same way.

Interviewer – To the people who worked there?

Mr. Wright – To the people who worked there and wanted to buy them.

Interviewer – When did Swift sell its houses to the workers?
Mr. Wright – The mid-sixties.

Interviewer – Okay. Was it a good deal for the workers?

Mr. Wright – Oh yeah. It was. They didn’t charge them much; they just practically give them to them. Just to get them off their hands. Cost them too much money to keep them up for what little rent they were charging.

Interviewer – What kind of rent was it? Do you have any idea?

Mr. Wright – Well, when I first moved, I guess it was like three or four dollars a week. Of course, after World War II it was probably up to ten or twelve dollars.

Interviewer – Did you ever have the opportunity to live in one of those houses?

Mr. Wright – Oh, I could have bought one, but I didn’t. I was living in some apartments and I liked that better than painting and having to keep up a house. Now they've sold every one of them.

Interviewer – Of all the years you worked, what’s your most vivid memory of the mill?

Mr. Wright – What you mean by that?

Interviewer – If you think back, you’re sitting watching television and your mind starts to drift away, is there one thing you remember? One day working that you just...

Mr. Wright – Yeah. You talking about a dangerous thing?

Interviewer – Okay
Mr. Wright – One night I’m on that door there, I’ve got the door and its shift changing time.
Second shift was going out. Third shift was going in.

Interviewer – This was at night?

Mr. Wright – Yeah. They had no passes to identify if you worked there or nothing. We didn’t have no trouble with nobody; it was such a good place to work. We didn’t have no trouble like nowadays. This woman come in – I looked around at her and I didn’t recognize her. I knew everybody by their face. And I asked her, I said “You don’t work here, do you?” She said, “No, I don’t work up there. I’m just going up there tonight to kill old Rosie.” And I said, “Well you’re sure not going up there.” There was a couple of folks standing next to me, one called Hop because he had some defects in his foot and leg and he kinda hopped when he walked. He swept the floors. He was standing next to me, and he was ready to get out when some of that traffic left and he could get out. And I said, “Well you can’t go up there.” Well I’m watching people going and coming in, see, and after a while he hollers, “Look out Grady! She’s got a gun!” I turned around and she’s got a little old pistol, I guess a .22, sticking right in my face. She said, “I don’t need no pass for this, do I?” I said, “Yes ma’am, you need a pass for that thing. Lady, you ought to be ashamed of yourself! “She brought it out from down here, you see, in a big old pocketbook I said, “Put that thing back where you got it, or you’ll be in so much trouble you won’t ever get out of it!” She said, “Well who do I see to get a pass to get up there? Rosie’s been flirting with my husband.” She was a prostitute that was working. I said, “You go outside this door and go down to the office. Mr. Paul Franks is the third shift supervisor. He’s probably in the office and he can tell you whether you can go or you can’t go.” I knew he wouldn’t be
there, it was shift changing time and he’d be on the third floor in the spinning room. And we had two watchmen down there. One would be at the gate, in the yard, and the other had the clock making his rounds. She’d be knocking on the door and a big crowd of people would be there watching. She wouldn’t be able to get nobody. So she come across the street right in front of the door. Mr. Money was supervisor over all three shifts in the card room. She woke him up. I could see them standing on the front porch talking. I don’t know what he told her. But anyway, she drifted across the street and said, “Well I can tell you this, I can come in the back and come over the fence. I’m gonna get ol’ Rosie, and my husband, too.” They lived just around the corner, there in the old Wages Boarding House there on 32nd Street, just about a block from Swift Spinning. Maybe not that far. She didn’t come in. Her husband’s name was Mr. Johnson, and he run a framer. And until this very second, from when he went out that door at six o’clock, I have never seen that man again. I don’t think she killed him, but one thing’s for sure, he didn’t come back to work at Swift Spinning. She must’ve had a firm hand over him. But you know, you could have got killed there with a crazy woman like that, if I hadn’t seen her she might have got up in that card room and started shooting. She could have killed people. You read every day about it. Innocent people, bystanders. But when he went out at six o’clock that was his last time at Swift Spinning, and that was back in ’47 or ’48.

Interviewer – Okay, let me throw this out at you. From what I’ve read, for this class, the first time blacks came into the mills was about ’64.

Mr. Wright – Somewhere in that area, you’re about right.

Interviewer – Why were there no blacks earlier?
Mr. Wright – We had blacks, but they did janitorial work. And they worked in the warehouse where they’d lift these four or five hundred pound bales of cotton. That’s the places they were – the only places. They weren’t in the mill.

Interviewer – What brought them into the mill?

Mr. Wright – Of course, the federal government.

Interviewer – Pressure from the federal government?

Mr. Wright – They passed these laws and you had to work so many. Percentages. Like Muscogee County had 35% colored people, so you had to work 35% of them.

Interviewer – Okay, so there was pressure from the federal government.

Mr. Wright – Pressure from the federal government. That’s how come they were up there. But I can’t blame the niggers. In those days there wasn’t enough jobs for the whites, that’s another reason they didn’t want the blacks up there. I can’t blame the blacks. If I’d been black I’d have wanted the same thing they were after.

Interviewer – When they started coming in, what shift did they work?

Mr. Wright – All of them.

Interviewer – All shifts? Did they displace anybody that was there, or did they come in when somebody left?

Mr. Wright – When somebody left, got laid off, or somebody quit, then they’d bring them in.
Interviewer – Nobody got fired?

Mr. Wright – Nobody got fired for any of them. Nobody was deliberately laid off to make room for a black.

Interviewer – Was the money the same?

Mr. Wright – Money was the same thing. See, you were on a minimum wage, so the lowest pay was minimum wage. They got paid whatever they was paying for that job, might have been $4.50, might have been $5.00.

Interviewer – So it didn’t make any difference what color you were?

Mr. Wright – It didn’t make any difference as far as that went. They got the same treatment as we got.

Interviewer – In your time with Swift Spinning, were there any incidents involving blacks and whites?

Mr. Wright – I don’t recall. I just don’t remember. If one occurred, I never heard about it, and I never saw it.

Interviewer – Okay. One gentleman I was talking to last week told me that Swift Spinning had at one time bought part of Third Avenue because they expanded the mill backwards.

Mr. Wright - They bought that street from the city, and just closed it up at both ends. In order to build on to the mill they had to take over that street. I didn’t really approve of them taking that street, because it means you’ve got to detour a little bit. If you’re coming down Third
Avenue, you can’t go through. You’ve got to detour over to second, or over to fourth, to go to town. But you know, with the traffic there, you could get run over. But they needed it to make parking places.

Interviewer – Your supply room, was that where the street had been?

Mr. Wright – No, it was at one time on that street, on the corner of Third Avenue and 32nd Street. And then they wanted to put new spinning frames where the supply room was. So they built a new supply room down in the yard and moved me down in the yard away from both mills.

Interviewer – Okay.

Mr. Wright – So if anybody wanted a part or anything, they had to come over there and get it, you see? There’s a lot of traffic that goes from the mill to the supply rooms.

Interviewer – Let me get back to the Swift’s. Clifford was the father, and he’s dead. And Henry?

Mr. Wright – He also is dead.

Interviewer – Okay, are there more Swifts? Did Henry have children that are still in the business?

Mr. Wright – No, they had children, two or three boys, but they’re not in the textile business at all. One of them’s in the funeral home business.

Interviewer – Oh?

Mr. Wright – I think he’s at this one out here on the Macon Road, I believe.
Interviewer – That big beautiful place next to the cemetery?

Mr. Wright – If he don’t outright own it, then he owns it with other people.

Interviewer – Okay.

Mr. Wright – You know, there’s a lot of money made in those funeral homes.

Interviewer – Yeah. What about the Illges’? You knew the father, and he died. And the son worked at Swift?

Mr. Wright – Yeah, when he got out of the Navy in Boston he started there from the bottom floor up, see? Finally he taken over when his Daddy died, he taken over and started running it. When Fieldcrest decided to take over themselves, and bring their own men in, he moved out a year or so later and started that over on 35th street. That old Meritas Mill.

Interviewer – Okay. Did he have a good rapport with the people?

Mr. Wright – Oh yeah, you couldn’t work for a finer feller. You’d be with him, and his father many times a millionaire, you would think he was just an old average man. That’s the impression you’d get from him. That’s why everybody so liked him.

Interviewer – What other businesses were the Illges’ in?

Mr. Wright – Well, they told me they was in mattresses, in other textiles, in coca-cola, in the gas-light company, I know they was in the gas-light company because I had experience with them. They owned a little part of everything in Columbus. They had their fingers in everything. If one thing didn’t work, that would. You know how it is when you’ve got half a million over
here, and 200,000 over there. You’re going to make money, aren’t you? You’re going to lose on some, but you’re going to make more on the others than what little you lost.

Interviewer – I don’t ever expect to be in that circumstance.

Mr. Wright – I’d like to experience that one time, wouldn’t you? But you know, I never was a greedy man. All I wanted was my senses, and my health, and to keep my bills paid. That’s how to live your life, because you ain’t here but a little bit before you’re dead and gone. You can’t take it with you, so what you want all these millions for? I never could figure that out.

Interviewer – When you went into the supply room, and you spent thirty years there, that was a forty or forty-eight hour job.

Mr. Wright – Yeah, it was mainly six days a week.

Interviewer – So you didn’t have these other?

Mr. Wright – No, no. You wouldn’t get anything then. You need one day of rest.

Interviewer – You were down to one job?

Mr. Wright – One job. Finally though, they talked about putting me on straight time. But I went in and talked to them about it. Mr. Warren Purks, he was my man.

Interviewer – What was his job?

Mr. Wright – He was supervisor of the whole mill.

Interviewer – okay.
Mr. Wright – Bald headed then, bald headed now. He’s an easy going fellow. I said to him during our conversation, I said, “Mr. Purks, I learned me a little lesson. Ya’ll not been treating me right.” He said, “Well you haven’t never said nothing about it.” Haven’t never said nothing about it – see what I mean. I said, “Well I’m going to say something about it now.” He said, “Well, we’re going on straight time. I’ll take it up with the committee and let you know what your job’s going to pay on straight time.” That means you could make forty hours, fifty hours, sixty hours. One week later he offered me basic pay. I shook my head and said that’s not right. That’s not enough money. I’m a little fractious at times, see. I said, “I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Mr. Purks. I’ll just stay on the card, the punching card, if that’s all ya’ll are going to offer.” I said, “I’ll tell you what to do, Mr. Purks, if you don’t mind it, now if it’s going to be any trouble for you don’t mention it, but if you don’t think it’s going to hurt you to open your mouth, and tell them that I’m dissatisfied with this one week from now, if it’s any trouble, you tell me now. I’ll stay on the card.” “Oh,” he says, “It won’t be no trouble. I’ll tell them what you said.” If you don’t open your mouth, I don’t care if you run ten jobs. They’re not going to say nothing. No company is, I don’t reckon. At least not to my experience. So you got to open. It’s like the Bible says, you’ve got to talk once in a while, but on the other hand it says silence is golden. You’ve got to keep your mouth shut at the right time, too.

Interviewer – A lot of people don’t know when to do that.

Mr. Wright – That’s right. They don’t know when to stop.
Interviewer – I’ve run out of questions! Am I going to leave here and you’re going to say, “I wonder why he didn’t ask me about this or this?” Can you think of something that I haven’t asked?

Mr. Wright – Not really, but I can say this much for Swift Spinning Mill. When I was making that 49 hours all them years, I’d get a call from Columbus Motor Company, back when I was on Saturday, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, and maybe they had a rush job and wanted me to go on Monday. What would I do with them other two nights? I’d get one of the other watchmen, and swap time with him. You better believe you couldn’t do that today. I’d be way up in Ohio on a Greyhound Bus asleep after I’d worked all night, sit up straight, and say, “Here I am, 900 miles from Columbus, Georgia and I’m supposed to be down on my job.” I thought of that – that occurred to me a lot of times. But not one word was ever said about it. You see why I like that place?

Interviewer – Sure.

Mr. Wright – You can’t do that no more. You can’t do nothing over there no more. They’ve got all kinds of restrictions and laws and this and that.

Interviewer – You’re awful happy then that you left Slocomb...

Mr. Wright – Couldn’t be happier, because there wasn’t anything there. It was just a farming community. No way in the world for an uneducated man like me to get to work anywhere in that place.

Interviewer – Did you ever try to talk any of your boys into going into the mills?
Mr. Wright – Well, I got a job, when school was out, they’d hire these school kids, they were
hired for a couple of months. They got a taste of it that way and most of them decided they
didn’t want it. They worked at it, but there’s really no future there, except for the few. You
know what I mean by the few?

Interviewer – The few that are...

Mr. Wright – That are running the place. Yeah. The supervisors. Now they do have better
insurance than the average person, better retirement and better pay, and more time off for
vacations. I got to where I had a month vacation, and I wasn’t even taking a month, because
they’d bring in some little feller that didn’t know how to run the place and get it all fowled up,
see?

Interviewer – I hear you.

Mr. Wright – I’d just take off a week, maybe two months from now, take off another week, and
forget the other two weeks. I’d rather be there working than be on Panama City Beach. That
cost you money down there and I worried about this job up here. I’d stay up here and not
worry. I didn’t care about Panama City Beach, I could get that later. Or Daytona Beach,
wherever it might be. It could not have worked out better for me, the way life worked out for
me.

Interviewer – That’s great.

Mr. Wright – Of course now, I don’t know whether this has anything to do with it, but I had a
praying mother, real Christian. And that’s 100% honesty. Anyone who knew me will tell you,
even the main supervisor, not trying to brag, but I’m the hardest working man they’ve ever seen. I just got to where I lived and breathed that place. Like I told the guy when I turned that job down, I was going to have to take it home with me, and sleep with it and eat it and everything else. And that’s what I did. I just got accustomed to it, and that’s all I knew, and that was all I was going to do. Have you ever seen anybody like that?

Interviewer – No.

Mr. Wright – My wife got mad here one time, and was just a fussing’ at me. She said, “All you do is think about Swift Spinning Mill!” And I said, “And all they do is keep this house paid for, keep groceries on our table. They’re paying for it, and that’s all I’m gonna do.” I’m satisfied. You better believe I’m satisfied.

Interviewer – I’ve had the opportunity to talk to several people who have been involved with Swift Spinning, like Mr. Purks yesterday.

Mr. Wright – That’s as fine a man as I ever met.

Interviewer – I’ve never heard anyone say anything bad about the company. Everyone was happy.

Mr. Wright – You could not have said anything about Swift Spinning Mill. As I told you, you had to have inside help to get you a job. And I have heard rumors that they paid up to fifty dollars back in the twenties to get a job there.

Interviewer – Okay.
Mr. Wright – To certain supervisors. That’s how good a place it was to work. I remember in World War II help was hard to get, and we missed a man in the spinning room. He was a doffer over there. And we got to looking for him and found him on the fire escape. The fire escape is gone now, it was on Third Avenue, and it’s been moved on the other side of the mill towards second. It was about two or three o’clock in the morning, and he was asleep laying out there. It was hot summertime, and there wasn’t no air conditioning, just a breeze. It was hot up in that spinning room from the lights and all them machines. And one of the fellers that run the spinning room, Mr. Davis, he’s dead now, said “Don’t wake him. Don’t bother him. Let him sleep his nap out. If you wake him up and make him mad he might go home.” We wouldn’t have anybody then, you see what I mean. Let him sleep his nap out! Get one of the fixers or an extra man over here to run his job until he gets his nap out. Ever heard of anything like that?

Interviewer – No, no.

Mr. Wright – That’s actually a fact.

Interviewer – I’ve just never known anyone that worked anywhere that didn’t have some gripes about the place, and I haven’t talked to anyone from Swift that didn’t enjoy it.

Mr. Wright – Well you can’t. Not if he tells the truth.

Interviewer – That’s terrific.

Mr. Wright – It was the best place in the world. Now let me tell you one other thing. Their wages were a little bit behind other mills, but who cared if they paid ten cents an hour or twenty cents an hour less than the Bibb paid? Cause if you went to Bibb it was kind of like going
in a penitentiary, they had guards all around. I said, it’s like being in a penitentiary, there’s a guy on top of the mill with a machine gun up there! I despise that place! My brother worked there two or three years, and he told me about it.

Interviewer – I’ve not talked to anyone from Bibb.

Mr. Wright – Might be a few people who was happy there. It’d only be a few!

Interviewer – Thinking back to benefits, let’s assume a fellow retired tomorrow from thirty years in the spinning room or the card room what kind of retirement?

Mr. Wright – Well, you have to be at least 55 before you can get any kind of retirement. Really now, I don’t know reduced from 65 down to 55, what that would pay, you know.

Interviewer – Let’s assume you were 65 and had worked forty years. Could he live on what?

Mr. Wright – Oh no! Now you could on a supervisor’s, but you really couldn’t live on it. See – you got a little more time?

Interviewer – Um-hum...

Mr. Wright – When I was under the Swift Spinning Mill, when they owned it, when I came under the straight time, remember when they said it’d be the best opportunity you ever had? It turned out exactly just 100% like he said. When I come under, went under straight time pay, they automatically, the company, put $14,500 dollars to get me caught up with the rest of them. Out of their pocket into the pension plan.

Interviewer – Wow.
Mr. Wright – So when I left there I had $32,000 and something coming from the old Swift Spinning mill. That was set aside and they were paying interest. We came under Fieldcrest’s plans, so I had two pensions coming. I was still getting theirs monthly, and I took the whole lump sum and put it in First Federal up here to get away from paying all that income tax. About every year I have to draw out a thousand, two thousand, whatever they say and you know, put it in another plan and pay taxes on it. Which my income is $932 dollars – they send me a check for it. So I have those two pensions coming, social security of a thousand dollars, and I’ve got a house I sold out yonder, that I financed myself out in Lee County, which they’ve paid about $20,000 on it. When they get through paying me they’ll pay me $65,000, and I financed it at 10%. So I got all kind of money, and I don’t owe nobody a dime.

Interviewer – Now that’s as a supervisor though, as a worker?

Mr. Wright – Nooooooo, you wouldn’t have nothing like that! You’d be out there on probably, 50, 60, 70 dollars a month pension from Fieldcrest and nothing from Swift Spinning Mill. Nothing like I had. So you can see how lucky I was.

Interviewer – So you owe a lot to Mr. Austen?

Mr. Wright – Mr. Austen and Mr. Birch, too. And those Illges now, they’ve got a reputation as being tight with a dollar, which they were, the old man, see? But when I made that trip to Boston, and I run over them $2.50 bridges that I had to pay, Chesapeake Bay, and them roads up through New York where you throw fifty cents into a basket, well I couldn’t get no receipts for those, and when I got back, you see, his son told me to take it up with his daddy, that he’d take care of all of that. When he got through figuring it up, I’ll never forget he was putting it on
that adding machine, this receipt and that receipt. I said, “Mr. Illges, I run over a bridge I paid $2.50 for,” and I knew how tight they was, so I wasn’t going to start arguing over a few dollars. And a lot of roads I paid this and that, a lot of other little things. I said, “Tell you what, I’m a poor man, see, and I’ll forget it if you’ll forget it. That’ll just be out of my pocket.” He looked at me kinda funny-like, and he handed me an extra ten dollar bill. “How about that, will that be alright?” “Sure,” I said. I’d just told him I’d done it for nothing out of my pocket, see? I didn’t want to start nothing with him – I wanted to stay good friends. I didn’t want to be fussing about ten dollars here, twelve, whatever it was. I couldn’t have worked for finer people.

Interviewer – What do you think the future of the textile industry is in this area? Are you optimistic, or are you afraid of imports? How do you feel?

Mr. Wright – Afraid of imports. That’s how I fear the future. I remember going out to Montgomery Ward just before I retired, I bought me two blue shirts, and I didn’t want to buy anything foreign. I got ’em home and they was made in Hong Kong. Fine, fine shirts. I just got them up and carried them back out there. I told the clerk, I said, “I didn’t look at this, but this is foreign stuff, and we don’t buy anything, I’m in the textile business. I’ll just swap it out for some socks and a pair of pants.” I found me a pair of pants that never did fit right, that was made up here in North Carolina; I wouldn’t have them now if they give them to me. Got some socks. We just swapped it out. That was how I was against foreign stuff, see?

Interviewer – So you’re concerned about the future?

Mr. Wright – Really I’m concerned about it. It’s in such a mess up there. What they can do I really don’t know. The whole world, seems to me like, is trying to be one world, coming
together, so to speak. I guess it’s like the Bible says, we’re coming to the end. That’s the way I understand it – it’s not far off. You know in the end, now, they’re going to have a one-world government. You know that, don’t you?

Interviewer – It could be.

Mr. Wright – That’s what the Bible says.

Interviewer – I really appreciate this time, Mr. Wright. I’ve run out of questions.

Mr. Wright – I enjoyed talking to you. If there’s anything you want to talk about, we’ll talk about it.

Interviewer – I’ve run out of things.

Mr. Wright – I’ve never worked in a better place than Swift Spinning Mill.