This is Harvey Phelps interviewing Mrs. Martha Stephens on February 26, 1988. Interview with black textile worker.

P: Mrs. Stephens will you give me your name and address?
S: Martha Stephens, 3014 Colorado Street (Columbus, Georgia)

P: I'm going to start off and want you to tell me when you first went into the mill and what was your first job.
S: My first job was a sweeper, and I worked there 33 long years. I was a sweeper from the first day I went in, 'til I come out. Never made a change.

P: Oh, you didn't make a change?
S: No, never make a change.

P: Did you ever want to change and do a different job?
S: Well, you know in them days they had white people jobs and black folks jobs. And that sweeping was a black folk job. Later on down through the years, I can't remember, but then they went to you know the segregation, it come in to the white you know. Then the black folks had white folk jobs. That spinning, that's a white folk job, puttin' up them spinner ends. I worked in the spinner room, but I never changed from the first day I went there from the time I come out. I just like a water hose you water your garden with, a hundred and thirty feet, and I had to pull that, blow that cotton off of them frames.

P: Use a water hose?
S: A hose like we water our yards with.

P: But it had a hose, air pressure?
S: Yes. Where we have water to water with, we had air.

P: So that blows the lint off the...
S: Yea, blow that cotton off of them frames. So I did that, and it was hard, hard, hard. You know a woman pullin', a little ole short woman like me, pullin' a 130 foot hose pipe in them frames goin' straight up and down.

P: Did you blow this lint any certain place or just got it away from the machines.
S: Yes, got it off of the machines, then I had to turn around and sweep it up.

P: To sweep it up.
S: And then later on the work, and they got something like blowers, come down over the frame. It would suck that cotton up, but when I first went there, I had to use my hand and a broom to sweep it up. Then after that they was some big ole things made it'd come down like this. It was rubber and it would suck that cotton up in there. Then they would have a man to clean them, you know get that cotton out of 'em. But yet and still, I would have
to sweep the back alley and the big alley. Now you might not know what a back alley is. That up against a wall.

P: Back alley's against the wall.
S: Yes, that's up against the wall. I had to sweep that up, and I had to sweep out there in the big alley.

P: Now what's the big alley?
S: That's where you run up and down with that ropin' and that fillin' and stuff carrying it to the elevator, where the elevator carry it down to the weave shed. When the weave shed get through with it, then they make it up in cloth, sheeting, bed ticking, all stuff like that. I worked 56 hours a week, and never brought home $100.00, never, 'cause I was the lowest paid person there was up there.

P: 56 hours a week.
S: 56, working 5 days a week.

P: You say you worked 56 hours a week?
S: Yes, oh yea. The mill was a runnin' good then, you know. It had a whole lot of sweepers. We was on full time up there then, working 48 hours a week. Then I would come home on Saturday and get me a little rest, and then I'd have to go back on Saturday morning and work 'til 7:00.

P: How much did you bring home pay-wise?
S: About $58.00 after they got through, and then they had us paying what you call retirement insurance. They took out insurance on us, and you know it might have been $70.00 or something like that. I threw all them ole stubs away, and I never brought home a hundred dollars. We'd mostly get off at 2:00. We did that for a long time. That's cuttin' the help you know, and cuttin' our hours. (Phone call interrupted interview) See that make me forget my thoughts, you know. Now where was we at?

P: We were talking....
S: Oh, and I retired in '73. My boss man told me when I got 63 years old, my boss man said, "Martha, said I don't know what I'm gonna do with you and Rowella." I said, "Mr. Johnson, there that door right there. Let me go out a it." He said, "All right then." He said, "You go down there Monday morning, I mean Monday evening after you get off from work, and see how much retirement." He said, "I don't want to send you out a here bare hand." So I did. I went down to Security Board that Monday evening, after I left the mill, and they told me I would draw $139.00 Social Security, for 33 years. He told me said you come back up here and said you go down to the big office in the morning on Bibb time, I sho' wasn't goin' on my time when I work 7 hours and then go out
there then. So he know that was what I was gonna do, and anyway.

P: So you went on their time?
S: I went, yea, and I went down there, and they told me that I'd be ready to come out on the 7th, the 30th anyway, I come out that next Tuesday, and I think that was, no my birthday was on the 17th. Then I worked until that Thursday, and when I left there, I mean, I retired on a Thursday, I don't know what day my birthday was on, but it was on the 17th. But anyway, I worked 'til that Thursday after the 17th of '73. That's when I retired. So I wasn't getting but $139.00. I was getting $100.00 of Social Security, and I was getting $39.00 from the insurance, that's New York Life Insurance Company. We was paying insurance, and I went back up there one time after I retired. Then I paid my insurance one time. Well, I didn't have to go back no more. Then the company paid the insurance for everybody. So it was hard, but it's fair. It was fair I guess. Boss men was real nasty and everything, but all of them dead and gone. I'm still livin', and I thank the Lord for it. But all them low down, dirty boss men, they gone.

P: They were really rough then?
S: Yea, they were rough, and I'm still here. I thank the Lord for being here. After we stopped paying insurance monthly, you know, then my retirement went up $49.39. They still goin' keep that 39 cent in there.

P: Now is there any retirement from the mill, from the company, or is this all Social Security?
S: That's what I'm talking about. The little $49 for 33 years.

P: From the mill.
S: From the mill. Forty-nine little ole dollars. Then every once and a while you get something wantin' you to pay tax on that, and what is you got to pay tax on? You ain't got nothing to pay tax on.

P: Nothing to pay tax on.
S: When I get one of them letters, I put it on in the trash, 'cause it's no good to me. It was hard, but it's fair. But the week I left there the woman that I learned how to work that Friday, she went to making, her first check was $207.00.

P: And that's just starting off?
S: Yea.

P: Just startin' off?
S: Yea.
P: Just startin' off.
S: Yea, her first check after I left there, I learned her how to sweep and blow off one day, and so that was it for me. That day I retired, I sho nuff didn't do nothin' that day. I didn't do anything, 'cause all my hard labor was up there and made no money.

P: Did you have any black supervisors or overseers in your department?
S: Well, they come in at a later date, but they didn't come in, in my part.

P: In your part?
S: Yea. But they got one up there named Johnny Bird, he's been boss over all of the mill. But he's still hangin' in there.

P: He's a white fellow?
S: Black.

P: Oh, black fellow?
S: Yea, I pray God's blessing up under him just hang on there! 'Cause he have been shipped from pillar to post. But I reckon' he said I'm goin' stay here.

P: He's been there a long time?
S: Well, he been a boss man about 9 or 10 years, but he was in the weave shed, that's where they make the cloth at. Then they switched him from there to the card room and from there to another part, picker room. They shipped him all the way around. But now he's a boss man on the third floor up there, I heard. My floor foreman was telling me he's scared of him. A day done come that the black man is over the white man at Bibb Mill, and I'm glad about that. His name is Johnny Bird.

P: Johnny Bird.
S: Johnny Bird. He's been from pillar to post, but he was in all of them departments, but the spinnin' room, when I went to work up there, I was on the 4th floor. That's the last floor. We couldn't even ride the white folks elevator.

P: You had to walk up there?
S: Had to walk up them steps and walk down. But as the years come around and the segregation and then we could ride the elevator with the white people. But we had to go from the 4th floor to number 2 to use the bathroom. We couldn't even use the white folks bathroom. Before I left there we was sittin' down on the stools just like the white people were.

P: So you saw a lot of change in your time.
S: Oh, Lord. Oh, I saw a lot. Glad I lived to see it.
P: Worth while?
S: Worth while.

P: Now you never had any strikes when you were employed there? Have any strikes.
S: No! And them old boss men, they know them, (Bibb don’t have a union), them old boss men find out them union men would be out there, they’d go around and tell all them employees, "Them old union men out there. Don’t y’all stop and talk to them."

P: Did they threaten you about firing you if you talked to the union men?
S: No, they didn’t threaten us about that. They just told us don’t stop.

P: Don’t stop.
S: And talk with them. But it would a been better in my days if they had of had a union up there.

P: Oh, you think so.
S: Yea, I know it.

P: Okay.
S: It would of been better, because I would of been making $2.00 an hour with that sweeping and blowin’ off. But they didn’t allow it, and they still ain’t got it.

P: No, Bibb doesn’t have a union, now?
S: No, Bibb don’t have a union.

P: So the union probably would have gotten y’all a higher pay, wages.
S: Yea, they would of. That’s the reason they wouldn’t let us stop and talk to them. Didn’t want us to take the papers, you know. Well, we’d take the papers, but we wouldn’t stop and talk to ‘em. Yea, and we used to have to go down, they had a gate there like they lettin’ the chain gang folks in. And the went in there and picked up what they had to ship off you know. We had to walk on, you know they put these rock stones down, I got callouses on my feet now, I go to the foot doctor and he’s done did ‘em good, but they’d have to unlock that door at 6:30, (a man had a little ole house there, a white man they called that the gate man) and he’d unlock that door at 6:30. But, we couldn’t go in ’til 15 minutes of 7, so we had to walk on the railroad track. But my brother-in-law, bless his heart, he was in Saginaw, Michigan and he broke the ice for the black folks. Just like Martin Luther King broke the ice for the colored people today. And one morning, he and my sister-in-law went in that front door. They wanted to run him away, but they didn’t run him away. And he
he got tired of walking on them rocks, and he went in that front door. Now the black and white go in the front door, front of the mill.

P: Was this sometime in the '50's or later or what?
S: Let me see, Ed had been in Saginaw about 30 years or 31 years, and after he just quit The Bibb, and he went on to Saginaw in Michigan, and he been up there about 31 years. He come from there, so my head ain't that good.

P: About sometime in the '50's.
S: Well, that's what happened. They walked in that front door one morning, we'd had to stand out there in the cold and the rain.

P: Stand in the weather?
S: Yea.

P: Until quarter of 7:00.
S: Yea, then later on down the years, we could walk in at 6:30 later on down. But we still would have to go in on them stones. You know gravel. Oh, yea. Wasn't no easy go, but anyway before I left there, I could go in the front door and come out of the front door. We could drink water from they fountain, but we'd a have to get a cup or a bottle or something.

P: So you just take a coca-cola bottle or something to get your water in, but you couldn't drink out of the fountain?
S: No. Sho' couldn't. It was rough up there. I think that's the roughest mill that's been to work in it.

P: You think that Bibb Mill, Big Bibb and Little Mill are the tough mills to work in?
S: Big Bibb was, I know.

P: That's Big Bibb?
S: Yea, biggest mill they is in the South. I see Sunday before last, they had the whole picture of it. It used to be thousands and thousands of people. They done cut down so many jobs up there. They got two floors cut down up there. The first one and number four floor, and it run from the 1st Avenue to the river back.

P: Big place.
S: Big place. ______ ain't else there, and the place where I retired from down there in #1, they say they got every frame and everything out of it. So it's just sittin' there, big old dark....

P: Empty building.
S: Yea. And I read in the paper where, when they had the other Sunday, said they had 900 workers. So I talked to
S: I reckon' he wanted me to change over into another alley, but it could of been another doffer down on the other end comin' this way.

P: I guess he didn't want to see you slack up or not doing anything.

S: And she was blowin' and gettin' most of the cotton that come up there at that end by her in the spinner frame. Oh, I toughed it out. And the lady what was doin' the runnin' with me would say every morning, it was my day off. So Moody______ our floor foreman, and he told Hattie to run my job, that was blowin' off and sweeping. She didn't want that. She swung herself around, and first thing I would do is clean up the office upstairs. He said, "Martha, go up there and tell Hattie I said come here." I went up there, I said, "______said come there." "What he want?" I said, "I don't know. He just told me to tell you to come there." So we would have to go in and see what everybody goin' be in. If everybody goin' be in then you could come back home. So Hattie______, he said, "Hattie", he said, "what you flirt off on me like that, when I told you to run Martha's job?" Hattie said, "Mr. Moody, I didn't run off, flirt off." He said, "Yes, you did." So then Monday morning, when Hattie went down to the weave shed, she had a brother worked out there, she went out to the weave shed to see if she could get a job out there. So then Monday morning, Moody told all of us to come up in the office, before we do anything. He said, "Hattie." So we all went up there. He said, "Hattie," he said, "when I told you to run Martha's job, Saturday, said you flirted off with me, and I didn't like that." "Mr. Moody, I didn't call myself flirtin' off from you." He said, "Yes, you did. I could tell that attitude." (That's what we was talking about in our Sunday School, Sunday, talking about a person's attitude). So he said, "Hattie," it was______he said, "Hattie, I been better to you than I have Rose and Martha." See there, the Lord let him brought it out. He said, "I let you had yo' way, but I didn't let them have they way." He said, "When you went out yonder in that weave shed to see if you could get a job out there you was so mad," he said, "don't you know you can't leave this department until I turn you a loose?" He said, "You even called_______, (that was his brother-in-law Moody married my overseer's sister) and Hattie got home she called him and told him about it. He said, "What you call ______Johnson for?" She said, "Mr. Moody, I didn't think you treated me right, sending me back home this morning, on Saturday morning." He said, "Oh, yes _______." He said, "And you called in ______Johnson, said he just my brother-in-law." Said, "I will fire you so quick it'll make yo' head swim." Said, "You'll forget about you ever worked up here in this mill." He said, "You can't go out yonder in them
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weave sheds or no other department, until I tell you."  He was right about that.  He has to turn her loose, you know for that part, before she can go get another job. Worked on, worked on, worked on, eventually she got a chance to get out of there, in the weave shed.  That where she retired from.

P:  So that was a long experience...
S:  Yea, yea.  I prayed and cried goin' up them long alleys a many a day.  I did it.

P:  I bet if you had to do it over again you wouldn't do it over at the mill.
S:  If anything, anything get in my lap like work, I'm goin' say get up.  I lay in my bed, I don't even hear the thunder when it early morning thunder.  I don't hardly work up 'til 9:00 or 9:30.  And I thanks the Lord for it. It ain't lazy, I just done worked hard and ain't paid, made no money.  But all at the same time, I would work and I would lean and depending on Jesus.  That's the name.

P:  He comes through for you.
S:  That's the man.

P:  That's right.
S:  Tears would be lappin' up under my chin, but them old nobody dirty boss men had done sent me home.  They'd talk to me bad and all of that stuff, but old Moody before he retired, or before I retired, (he retired before I did), 'cause his health got bad, but he had the aid then, but he had done got to the place that he would talk to me like a boss man.  And that was this_________.  And when this woman tryin' to run me out of the mill, runnin' up and down the boss men asking me couldn't I keep up with her.  I said, "No, 'cause she's runnin', and I got this machine, I cannot keep up."  But you see if I had the broom in my hand, I could skip over two alleys, you know, and then she go in this alley.  Then she goin' go up there come back down here, she goin' dump on that over there.  And the cotton flying' like that you see.  And I would get it the best way I could.  Oh, Lord.  Bibb Mill treated me dirty, but I hung in there 'til I got 62 years old.  And when I got 62 and they called me, "Martha" I was working on one of my early Saturday mornings, had a 7:00 whistle blow, I said, "Mr. Johnson, there that door right there."  I said, "Let me go out of there."  And that's what I did.  And I been happy ever since.

P:  I bet you have.
S:  I been happy.  And these young ways of people what comin' on now, they ain't goin' go through the work I went through.  No, no, no.  Won't have to go through it.  Give 'em a job up there in the mill, what they say.  A lady.
before they moved us on the first floor, you know way up there they used to call theirself giving the mothers jobs, you know. This lady was down on her knees trying to ship them spinner frames up in there, I said "Honey", and I had on an apron, blue jean apron, (I ___it down there cause they didn't have no air up there, but eventually they put some in there) I said, "Honey, how you like it?" She said, "Who?" She said, "I got 9 chillen, and way up there give me mo' money than I'm goin' make up here." I wouldn't have this job. So she quit. That lady left there. They had a nice lady learning 'em how to spin. I mean trainers, you know to train 'em how to do it.

P: But now they could have in the spinning department, made a little money. Couldn't they?
S: Oh, yea, they made money. 'Cause you see when I first went there, it was white folks job. Wasn't nothing, wasn't no black folks doin' white folks jobs, no black folks. But as the years come around, ain't no white, and ain't no black.

P: Everybody worked all together?
S: Yes, sir. Everybody go to the same bathroom, everybody drank out of the same fountain.

P: But these welfare mothers didn't want no parts of that?
S: I got nine chillen. And the welfare give me mo'. And then you know it come out in the paper that the welfare wasn't goin' to take care of the mommas, but now you know that was wrong. 'Cause the momma had to cook for the chillen, and she was goin' to eat first.

P: That's right.
S: And now days and time, it's all a different story. But they catchin' up with 'em, and makin' 'em pay back money.

P: They are collecting it.
S: Yea. But Reagan, I reckon', they said he did a good job. He's puttin' these welfare women to work. But these women's did not come working.

P: They ain't working in the mill.
S: In the house either.

P: Conditions now are much better when you two were in there.
S: I can turn the T.V. on.

End of interview, Mrs. Stephens, I want to thank you for letting me come into your home for this interview. It is important to get the black worker's experience recorded for history. Many times history is lost by not being recorded.
This will give an insight to the black experience in the early years in the textile industry in Columbus, Georgia.

Thank you again, Mrs. Stephens.