

At the River Mill:

If I'm gonna tell you about my life at the mill I reckon I'd better start at the beginning. I first went to work here in the summer of '26. I was 16 and started out in the same place my daddy started out at, making 15 cents an hour in the opening room. That was my trial period, you see. I didn't stay there long before they moved me to the picker room. My boss took a liking to me right off the bat. He said I was a fast learner and he could tell I was hard worker just like my daddy. They moved me all around the mill and I eventually got promoted to supervisor over the spinning department. So if y'all came to hear about Bibb City then you came to right man.

I'll stop bragging and start telling y'all about what you came hear about, my town, Bibb City. This town, like the one across the way there, Phenix City, for you outta towners, was named after the company that started it, and its mill village. They started building that dam behind me and this mill in front of us in 1899. The actual production started in 1902 and the town was made official in 1909. That's what brought my mama and daddy here, the town. They were from down around Dothan, Alabama and I guess farm life just wasn't cuttin' it anymore. So they moved here to Bibb City. Yeah, the mill is everything to this place, Hell, the superintendent of the mill automatically got to be mayor of the town until '39. The mill takes care of everything. We have everything you could want in a city; we even have our own newspaper, the Bibb Recorder.

Before we start moving around the town I have to tell you that we'll be walking and standing for about 30 minutes. There are no stairs on my route, but some of the ground is uneven. Dogs have always been in the neighborhood and they are penned so don't worry about that, just know that they can surprise you and get real loud. Let's take a walk down here and see some things.

Walking down Porter Street:

All these houses were built for the mill workers, but not every worker gets to have house. No sir, only the really hard working, dependable type gets to rent houses inside the town. There is a long waiting list to get a house in here. If you know somebody or have kinfolks with some pull you can get around the list, but people who don't know somebody have to wait until they have some seniority before they can get in. Working in the mill is hard, but especially nowadays I can't imagine a better place to raise a family.

Look over here at the mill. That's where the cotton comes in at. That's the opening room. The blacks who don't sweep or work in the boiler room work there. The big bosses like to keep some blacks around just to remind us not to complain about our paychecks too much. Over there close to the opening room is where the Men's Progress Club meets. I'm a member because I'm over the spinning department. Most of the men in there are supervisors or overseers. We put on barbeques and festivals and such, but mostly we just like gettin' together to shoot pool and watch the fights on the television. It's a good time, but there ain't no gamblin' or drinkin' allowed.

Our wives have a meeting place too. The Woman's Club is right back there over on River Avenue. They do things like help our group out with the PTA and put on pageants and

things. They also organize clean-ups and even operate a cannery. Let's stop up here at the corner for a minute.

At the south corner of Hansen Avenue:

That part of town back that way is the old part of town. That's where my folks and I lived when I was a little boy. At first these houses didn't have any electricity or running water. I was about two when they started puttin' in water pipes so I don't remember too much about that, but I do remember when I was about 6 or 7, the mill put in new outhouses. These were nicer and had water runnin' underneath them. Before, we used buckets and every other day, what we called the honey wagon, would come around and haul off the...well, they'd take care of things for us. Anyway, all these houses used to be painted the same colors, white with black trim. No yard or any frills. It took a depression and a couple world wars for us to get the frills we have now. Part of what came out of WWII was those houses over there; they're bigger and nicer than their neighbors. That's my part of town, called Supervisor's Row. Follow me down here a bit and I'll show y'all the newer part of town.

Walking north on Hansen Avenue:

Yeah, both them world wars really helped the mill. You know a few years back when the war was still on, about 98% of everything we made here went to the military. It takes a lotta cotton to fight Germany and the Empire of Japan. But that also meant the mill had money to expand and invest in the town. Round about 1919 the mill started building up this part of town. The church here is a little newer; it was built in '36. Before the church was built people met here in the school. The school was sort of the community center for a while. It was built in 1920. It had an auditorium and a basement that held the daycare and meeting places for different groups. Eva Gardner's the principal here. She and the other teachers live right here at the teacher's cottage. They used to live in the old hotel over towards where we started. Anyway, all the kids here know to behave. If they get outta line, Ms. Gardner will let me know and I'll go have a talk with the kid's parents. I'll tell 'em right quick, you better get that young-un of yours in line, or you might find yourself looking for a new job and a new place to live. The next visit to those parents would come from the mill superintendent. Everything has to run smooth here in Bibb, and we don't need any trouble makers.

They didn't have a junior high school here until '40 so I had to go to a Columbus school. I didn't like it much. They called my folks "lint heads" and none of the teachers liked me because they thought since I was from Bibb, I had to be bad. I quit going to school when I was 16 and moved back home to work in the mill. And things have only gotten better since. If you look over there you'll see Comer Auditorium. That was built in '41 and is where we go to bowl, and have banquets. It's also where we go to pick up our Christmas packages from the mill. Those are always real nice, with nuts, fruit and candy. Let's move on down this way.

Walking down 40<sup>th</sup> Street:

Yeah, things have really changed around here. I remember back in the '20s you couldn't keep people here. I'd say less than 10% of the people who were here in 1920 were still here in 1925. That sort of thing kept going too, right up till the depression. In the '30s the mill started trying to spruce up the place. The mill bought the fertilizer and the garden club would get people to plant flowers, trees and bushes. My wife joined the garden club and had great time. Ol' Roosevelt helped a lot too when he came up with the idea for the NRA. That's the National Recovery Administration. They came in and raised wages and such. My salary almost doubled! But a lot of hours were cut, it was the Depression after all. We'll stop here for a minute. This is our natatorium, our swimming pool was right here. I think it was 10 cents to swim here. The medical clinic is inside there. So it was right there when the school kids got sick or hurt. Alright, let's move on down the road.

Walking North on Park Avenue:

The man who designed this part of town was Earle Draper. I reckon he thought people would be more likely to stay put if they liked where they lived so he tried to make this part of town nicer, more friendly than the old part. Remember how I said earlier that the world wars helped the Bibb. Well, it was the extra profits from WWI that paid Mr. Draper. He did lots of things like making the streets curvy and puttin' in parks and such to make this part of town more scenic and less industrial. Up here is where the Boy Scouts meet. They have a big time going to fish camps and such, but if you wanna know who got the most attention, let me tell you about the Girl Reserves. They are our most popular group. It includes unmarried women and girls. They take some real nice trips, but it's hard to qualify for those. At one time, the young ladies had to have perfect school and church attendance, complete a reading list, memorize poetry and improve their speech if they wanted to earn enough points to go. It's worth it though; they get to go places like New York, Savannah and New Orleans. Let's walk some more we're about half way through. This lot here used to be Mr. Hawkins place. He was the only home owner in the city. He had store here next to his house up until just recently. My kids know his store, because that's where I buy their candy, the same place I bought my candy as a child.

Walking around Linden Point:

Right up here is one of those parks I was tellin' y'all about. This is Hemlock Drive Park. It's a good place to come sit and listen to the birds or to play game of catch. One thing that makes this place special is the trees and the Spanish moss. Not a whole lotta places around here have Spanish moss. I think it adds a little something extra to the feeling of this part of town. If we keep walking around here I'll get back to something I was tellin' you earlier. Remember the honey wagons? Well this is where they'd come to empty the buckets. Even after the town got running water an open sewer emptied out here in the river too. But, the most recent mess we've had to deal with is that tornado that came through here a few months back, right through this part of town. 9 houses lost their roofs, and about 75 were damaged by trees and limbs. The mill just spent \$250,000 repairing all the damage. If we're all ready I'll move us a little further down the road.

Walking south on Park Avenue:

One thing you may have noticed about this town is that people really like their hanging plants. Well Mr. Alston, who used to manage our company greenhouse, used to come around every fall and collect all the porch plants. He'd take 'em all back to the greenhouse and take care of them for the winter. In the spring he'd manage to get all the plants back to the right houses. These houses here are the boarding houses. Single men usually live in these. They can have up to ten rooms so you can imagine how hard it is to get into the outhouse when you have at least 9 roommates. Up here is where Miss May Porter used to run the old hotel in Bibb City. I guess that was sometime in '20s when she was lookin' after the place. My wife lived there when she first came to town back in '28. In addition to lookin' after all the single women who lived at the hotel Miss Porter ran the Sunday school, which was really the first school we had here. We'll keep moving. If you look over there you'll see our water tower with the big Bibb Mill logo painted on it, just in case you forget where you're at. I doubt you'd ever forget though, seeing as how if you lived here, every thing you did, work or play, it was provided by and run by the mill. I said it at the beginning of the tour and I'll say it again. Mill work was hard, but I can't think of a better place for my family.

Arrive back at the River Mill:

This concludes our tour. Thank you all for walking and talking with me. I enjoyed it and I hope you have a safe and enjoyable afternoon/evening.