

Dixie Belle Mills and The Textile Workers' Union of America:  
Labor Management Relations In Georgia's Carpet Industry,  
1960-1980,

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The \$10 billion-a-year carpet industry forms the economic foundation for much of northwest Georgia. Within a fifty-mile radius of the town of Dalton, Georgia, companies large and small manufacture more than half the world's carpeting. The carpet industry of northwest Georgia is a hybrid, born of a maverick native southern entrepreneurs. During the 1940s, Dalton-area manufacturers adapted machines originally intended for use in producing tufted bedspreads to the production of small rugs and carpeting. In the 1950s, Bigelow-Sanford, Mohawk, and other members of the northeastern woven carpet oligarchy joined the southerners, adopting the new, more efficient tufting technology and moving their main production facilities to the South. The carpet industry benefited from the postwar consumer boom. By the

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mid-1960s, carpet was the nation's third-fastest growing industry, trailing only computers and aerospace equipment.

As the carpet industry moved South, established companies often left behind union plants for cheaper, non-union labor in Dixie. Locally-owned companies also enjoyed the low-wage labor afforded by their native region. The Textile Workers Union of America tried for more than two decades to crack the southern "tufted textile" industry." Doug Flamming (Creating the Modern South) has chronicled the efforts of workers to organize tufted textile mills in Dalton in the mid-1950s. That effort collapsed in the wake of TWUA's crushing defeat at Belcraft, a bitterly-contested election heavily influenced by a red-baiting campaign conducted by the local newspaper and the Tufted Textile Manufacturers' Association.

Organized labor did not disappear from the tufted textile industry after this defeat. In the early 1960s, the TWUA launched a major efforts to organize the carpet industry of north Georgia. The records of the Tufted Textile Manufacturers Association provide a detailed look at the concerted efforts of management in the industry to prevent unionization. The records indicate a pattern of strained cooperation among small and large companies in the Dalton area. The records of the Textile Workers' Union of America give a complete picture of the union campaign. This paper will examine the campaign on both sides.

TWUA established a foothold in the tufted textile industry in 1962. The union won an election at Dixie Belle Mills, a carpet manufacturing establishment located in Calhoun, Georgia, approximately 20 miles from Dalton. Curiously, Dixie Belle was a subsidiary of Bell Industries, the company which owned Belcraft, center of the unsuccessful 1955 union campaign in Dalton. TWUA had won a majority of votes at Dixie Belle in 1955, but that election had covered all of Bell Industries' Georgia operations. Anti-union majorities at Dalton plants such as Belcraft offset the pro-union votes from Calhoun in 1955. In 1962, the NLRB agreed

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to allow a separate election covering only the Calhoun plant. More than two-thirds of Dixie Belle's 640 workers voted for union representation. Difficult negotiations followed, and in June 1963, Dixie Belle and TWUA signed the first union contract in the tufted textile industry. This paper will consider why the union was successful in Calhoun but not in nearby Dalton.

TWUA's victory led to a more cohesive resistance on the part of management. Former union members insist that other companies raised wages and increased benefits during the 1960s to keep the union out of their plants. Attorneys for the TTMA certainly urged management to boost wages and benefits advocated that management establish rational personnel policies and procedures. TTMA records indicate that carpet mills showed a greater interest in "industrial relations" seminars offered by the trade association, and established more modern personnel departments. Many companies offered more explicit rules for promotion and procedures for solving grievances. Combined with a vigorous pre-emptive campaign in the local media against unions, the incentives offered by the industry took the steam out of TWUA organizing efforts.

Dixie Belle remained the only unionized carpet mill in north Georgia. Local 1592 survived into the late 1970s, negotiating several contracts which generally set the standard for non-union plants in the area. Dixie Belle workers used the union structure to push up their own wages, and industry wages generally. Dixie Belle employees also used the unauthorized, wildcat strike to oppose arbitrary management practices on the shop floor, such as unwarranted firings and disciplinary actions. These southern mill workers used the union to defend their own values of self-respect and personal honor. After several ownership changes, the former Dixie Belle plant, now called Venture Carpets, was shut down in 1978. Venture was the largest employer in Calhoun and Gordon county, and the plant closing was used by area owners as further evidence of the evil effects of unions. This paper will also examine the experience of labor-management

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relations at Dixie Belle/Venture, and assess the long-term impact of Local 1592 on the shape of labor relations in the carpet industry, and on the larger community.