

From Rivermill Event Centre

Start at Rivermill parking lot overlooking mill

My name is Ellie Johnson. The year is 1960, and I live in Bibb City with my husband, Henry, and our two kids, George and Brenda. He and I both work in the mill, and we live right here in the town the Bibb company built. George goes to school here, and Brenda will too, when she gets big enough. I'm so glad I get to show you around my hometown! Let's get started!

Supervisors' Row & Old Village (seen from parking lot)

See all these houses? Well, the Bibb company built all the houses in the town for its workers to live in; not everybody that wanted to live in the town could – there weren't enough rooms, you know. If you wanted to live in the town (and most everybody worked in the mill did), you had to put your name on a list, and it helped a lot if you knew somebody, if you know what I mean. Anyway, the supervisors lived along here, "Supervisors' Row" it was called, and the houses are real nice here, and close to the mill. Anybody who worked in the mill could get to be a supervisor; that's how most of them did it; they start maybe at doffing and get to spinning or weaving, and then maybe loom fixing – they work right on up, and they promote you if you do good work, and train you how to do the new job and pay you a little bit more, too. Now, there have been a few supervisors that were not good to get along with, but as for me, I never had any problem to speak of.

Down that way behind the supervisors' houses is the Old Village. Those houses were built in 1903, and that's where my family lived when we first come up from Dothan, even though they finished the New Village in 1920. You had to work up some seniority, if you wanted to live in a better part of the town. I'll show you the New Village; it's a lot prettier.

And we'll get back to the mill before we're done today. There are lots of other things I want to show you!

School (via Park Avenue & 40th Street)

My son George is eight, and he's in the second grade at the Bibb City school. It's a good school, you know – the teachers, they really care about the kids, treat 'em as their own. Miss Eva Gardner was the principle when I was there (we moved up here from Dothan in the thirties, when I was just a tiny thing, because times was so tough and Daddy had to come find work – never did like mill work much; he was a farmer through and through). Anyway, Miss Ethel Bentley's in charge at the school now, and my George, oh! he's scared of her something awful! She's a good lady, very respectable, but at the school they don't let the kids get away with nothing they ought not do, or they get a switching! But George, he's a good boy; they never had to switch him down here – I'da known if he ever was making trouble. Everybody around here looks out for everybody else's kids. Everybody knows everybody else here. I know when I was growing up, I always knew I better not do anything I knew better than to do, 'cause my Mama and Daddy would get to hear of it that same day! But really, Bibb City is a wonderful place to raise a family, because it's safe here. You hear outsiders make comments sometimes, call us "lint heads" – because of the cotton dust in the mill, you know; it gets in your hair and all over you

when you come home from work – but around here, there's none of that. We're like a family here at Bibb. I guess we don't have all that much, compared to some, but it wasn't 'till I went to high school in Columbus ('cause the Bibb school didn't go all the way) that I knew we were poor. See, you just don't think about it when all your friends come from the same background as you do. And anyway, we may be poor, but we don't lack for the important things.

New Village (via 40th Street, Park Avenue, around Linden Point, and back down Park Avenue)

The company takes care of its workers; they send some folks to paint your house – inside and out, whether it needs it or not – every 3 or 4 years. We've got crews that come to take away the garbage, and the company even gives our trash cans to us. We've got these service alleys behind the houses so the trash men and the milk and ice deliveries and such like can come around the back. It's so much neater that way, and not many places in this part of the country have them, I can tell you! The company even has folks to cut the grass around all the houses. We are proud of our community here, and every year we have a big cleanup. It's like a holiday where everyone tidies up their yard and just makes sure everything is nice. Anyway, here in the New Village (where I live now) you can see that the streets are curved, not just square blocks like in the Old Village. The company hired Mr. Earl Draper, the famous architect from Charlotte North Carolina to come and figure out a plan for how to build houses on all these hills. They flattened off some of the tops of them with mules, for putting the houses on, but they built the New Village to work *with* the land, not against it. Now, it's some mighty hard work cutting the grass in front of some of these houses, but that's one of the things that's taken care of for us. Like I said, Bibb is a great place to raise your kids. I never worry about letting George walk to school by himself. His daddy and I know the people in every house he passes on the way there and back, and they look out for him, just like we do for every one of their kids.

Whenever a kid gets sick or hurt or whatever, if their parents are busy working, then you can count on someone taking care of them until they can find you. If there's a real bad emergency, somebody can call the office at the mill, and they'll come find you and tell you, but otherwise, once you're in that mill and they close the doors when your shift starts, that's it! You don't know nothing that's happening outside. It could come a big storm, and you'd never know it, those machines make so much noise, and the windows are all blacked in. I remember a few years back – George was real little and Brenda hadn't been born yet – there was a bad tornado that struck here. Ruined some houses and tore the roofs off of them, and some people died in Columbus, but nobody did in Bibb City, thank God. Anyway, that kinda makes you worry sometimes, when you're in the mill and can't see the weather outside. Come on, let's head back over to the mill now.

Mill (return to Rivermill Event Center)

I'm a weaver. I work the second shift – that's 3 in the afternoon to 11 at night – and Henry's a loom fixer. He works the first shift from 7 in the morning to 3 in the afternoon. That's the best shift to have, because you get to have a normal schedule if you're on the first shift. Usually, when you start working, you have to take the graveyard shift from 11 at night to 7 in the morning. Both of us started there when we first got jobs in the mill. It was kind of stratified like

that; the folks that had been working longer and doing the best work could usually get a better shift if there gets to be a vacancy on one of the other shifts. It works out real well for us, working on different shifts, because this way one of us is always able to be home with the kids, 'specially since Brenda's just 4.

It's good for the kids to have a parent at home when they need them, you know? I'm there in the morning, before George goes to school, and I look after Brenda all day and keep the house. Henry gets off at 3, so he's home for the rest of the day to take care of the little one and be there when George gets home. It works real well; I think if they were to offer to move me up to the first shift, I wouldn't take it. You know, the mill -- this place really was the presence of the town, you know what I mean? It was always running, and you could feel the machinery shake the house sometimes, if you lived real close to it. It was nice. Sort of comforting to hear it when you went to bed at night, I remember I thought it was, when I was little. My daddy never did get to like working in the mill; always he kept hoping for years that he'd make enough money to be able to buy up some good land and farm again. That was why he brought us all up here from Dothan -- he'd heard, 'cause there were a lot of folks telling it then, that the thing to do if you wanted to make some money was to come up to Columbus and work the mills. There was the Swift, but they don't have a town like the Bibb does. It really makes a difference. It's a hard life working in the mill, but we don't complain. In the summer, sometimes it can get to be so hot in there, you'll be soaking wet when you come out 'cause you sweat that much. My daddy, he's been working 'bout 25 years as a doffer, and he's getting to be kinda hunch shouldered. It's hard work, but it's also a challenge. You're always having to pay attention and work fast; it keeps you on your toes, let me tell you! So, people on the outside who want to look down on us, because we work in a cotton mill, they don't understand how it is. Maybe a lot of us did quit school to come to work, but it takes a certain kind of skill to keep all the machines in here running right and making good cloth. It's complicated work; any little thing can go wrong if you don't watch out. It's hard work, but you never get anything out of life if you aren't willing to work for it. And we've got the things that matter, good houses, a school (our school was the best in the county in 1949), even our own police force to keep us safe. It's hard working in the mill, but the company takes care of us. Personally, I wouldn't want to go work at the Swift or wherever that doesn't have its own town like this. My family is here. The whole town is my family.

From Comer Auditorium

New Village (via Poplar Street and around Linden Point)

School (via Park Avenue and 40th Street)

Mill (via 40th Street & Park Avenue)

Return to Comer (via Hanson Avenue, behind the School, & down the stairs/sidewalk [29 steps], unless handicapped people are on the tour)