

BEFORE THE BEGINNING OF THE END

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We finished our last article with *uncharacteristically bold* [*wink*] *hyperbole*: 1956 was “*The Beginning of the End.*” Yeah? Of... WHAT, exactly??? Well, as much as we’d like to delve into the meaning behind our claim, we need to pump the brakes and slow our roll – it’s waaaaaay too early to get into 1956. There’s still so much dirt...

oh, sorry... we mean, hissstory [*air quotes*] to discuss before we take that gigantor leap. Instead, we’re gonna rewind, once more, to the beginning. Slippy slide! It’s 1881 all over again!!! But this time, we wanna focus on our beloved Mill Village.

So far, we’ve spent quite a bit of time yakking on and on about the founding of The Mill, Jacob’s (mis)adventures, exploding Civil War factories, and trains. Lots and lots of trains. Once or twice, we’ve touched upon the Mill Village (eastward expansion, derisive nicknames, Reunion origins, etc.), but touching just simply isn’t good enough. *It’s time for a Mill Village History Hoedown!*

As a reminder, when Fulton Cotton Spinning Company’s homemade bricks were first plopped on this here earth in 1881, a small settlement already existed. Well, as hard as it is for us to admit, we at *The Patch Works* aren’t entirely sure who these people were (other than being folks fleeing the high prices of downtown-ATL living), sooooo... we can either ignore our ignorance and move on. Or we can make up a bunch of Fake News that will become historical fact in a year or two. Hmmmm... why don’t we just move on...? Sensible plan.

Regardless of our cluelessness about these pre-Millers, it’s worth reiterating that private businesses already had a strong foothold in the community, a foothold that has remained, as we all know, to this day. Self-reliance – local ownership of shops and stores and homes – was pretty anomalous for a 19th century mill town. Yet our little community functioned and even prospered (for decades) independently from The Mill. Inconceivable!!! [Add Princess Bride lisp.]

The freedom to enjoy a life beyond The Mill’s influence helped shape the neighborhood’s demographic and, in turn, its social life. Not to say The Mill had zero control; it obviously owned (and rented) its share of properties. But the Mill Village took care of its own, an attitude that began the moment the first mill workers arrived. This Mill vs. Mill Village dynamic consistently played out BIG time over the years, especially during one particular event: the 1914-1915 Strike. (Not yet, y’all! Waaaaait for it...)

So, from whence did the very first mill workers arrive? The popular narrative is that everyone who EVER lived in The Mill Village came from Appalachia, which is hyperbole that makes even us hyperbole artists at The Patch Works squirm. The community was actually far more complex.

First... let’s set the stage with a little context: the post-Civil War South was an economic sh*t show. Remote areas offered few job options; people took whatever they could get. Tenant farming became de rigueur, but many farmers saw themselves getting victimized by landowners’ quasi-legal practices. In addition, there was a sizable population of “War Widows,” who struggled to find work that paid adequate wages (and/or that allowed them ways to work while also taking care of children).

How word got out to these rural communities about our spankin’-new ATL cotton mill is the stuff of legend (like all our stories). Most history sources agree that The Mill ownership – recognizing an abundant supply of cheap labor in Appalachia – sent representatives to the region, where they busily buzzed about and promoted job openings. These same sources, however, disagree on the extent of the solicitors’ aggressiveness. Some make it sound like mill representatives pretty much dragged people down from the mountains, kicking and screaming; others conjure up images of mill reps lackadaisically tacking up a couple of flyers in the local hipster coffee shop.

Regardless, The Mill certainly sought to fill its initial job openings with an inexpensive workforce. Thus, yeppers, the first mill workers were most likely uniformly Appalachian, and they all lived in the delightfully quaint, mill-owned housing (Factory Lot). Because this first wave of workers came down from the mountains, it makes *some* sense that outsiders might incorrectly assume that any and all Mill Village residents were Appalachian.

In fact, this regional homogeneity didn’t last very long. Although there’d continue to be plenty of future workers hailing from Appalachian climes, The Mill was expanding rapidly (as discussed in a previous article). This meant many, many, many more job openings, which meant The Mill needed workers from anywhere it could grab ‘em.

A few years ago, a lovely gentleman visited The Patch Works, bringing with him his family tree. One of his ancestors worked at The Mill in the late 1800s (by which time, The Mill was absolutely on the Worldwide Cotton Industry Radar). His ancestor, as it turns out, immigrated from France, seeking a steady paycheck from the prosperous Fulton Bag & Cotton Mills. So cool! By the turn of the century, Mill Village residents came from all over the place (this we knew), but this was the first instance when someone showed us evidence of an international employee.

But true to the somewhat rough-and-tumble Mill Village lifestyle, the Frenchman’s story didn’t end without a little drama. Apparently, he was something of a hothead. And when a co-worker did something that he deemed... inappropriate... the French mill worker went all Bastille on the miscreant’s ill-intentioned derriere, punching the man so hard that he done up and died to death. Vive la France!

Next month... Great Depressions are damn depressing.