

GIVING "THE MAN" THE FINGER

By Nina & Jake Elsas, The Patch Works Art And History Center



Since the dawn of industrialization, the thought of a mill town prospering independently from The Mill-Man seemed laugh-a-ha-ha-hable, due to an unwaveringly tyrannical business model: The Mill-Man built a factory; The Mill-Man built a mill town; The Mill-Man confined mill workers to said mill town; The Mill-Man owned anything

and everything in the mill town; The Mill-Man paid mill workers in Funny Money; The Mill-Man made it so mill workers depended 100% on the factory, ensuring complete and utter domination. Ipso facto, The Mill-Man also owned the mill workers. Well, screw you, Putin.

[SIDE NOTE: Okay. Fine. That last comment made no sense. But it felt good saying it.]

In contrast to that nasty norm – according to *The Patch Works'* never-wrong sources – only one Company Store existed in the entire Mill Village community: *L.W. Rogers Store*, which was located at 242 Boulevard SE. In other words... today's *Agave*. Rogers Store would accept FBCM "tokens," which came in pretty much the same denominations as regular moolah: 1¢, 5¢, 25¢, and 5¢ (and proly 10¢, 50¢, and 1¢). The remaining businesses were owned and operated by independent merchants. Thus, FBCM paid indentured mill workers (i.e.: those who rented Company Housing) in both tokens AND cash.

Nonetheless, plenty of mill workers hated receiving any damn tokens, so they'd turn around and sell 'em for good ol' cash-a-roonie, often for 10-20% less than the original value. Yessir, they'd rather take the economic hit, than let FBCM hold sway. In fact, mill workers had a nickname for these tokens: "*Feel Bad and Can't Make it*" (Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills). [SIDE NOTE: According to King Ronnie Edwards, when he was a mere Princeling and working that mid-century cotton, he was paid completely in cash. Tokens no más!]

Notwithstanding its lack of Company Stores, from the git-go FBCM offered all sorts of social services, the cost of which was included in Company Housing rent, which in turn was deducted directly from wages. FBCM provided lawn care, garbage collection, security forces, a cafeteria, childcare, a library, and health benefits (opening the very first podiatry clinic in the country).

FBCM even built a full-on, get-outta-town, mill-workers hotel, which was considered quite posh (well... yeah... relative to local boardinghouses). It had 60 rooms – each accommodating four people – a spacious dining room, a ladies parlor, and a reading room. It also served delish meals that rocked a mill worker's gastronomical world. Hotel Happiness represented the idealistic notion that a content worker was a loyal worker. It was also solely for unmarried employees (although, a future Hotel We-Are-Families was also in the construction queue). The downside to these seemingly wondrous offerings, of course, was that they were company-run.

Now, there are two sides to every clichéd Funny Money penny: some could easily praise FBCM's efforts to be a Good Papa, providing everything a Mill Child could ever want (sarcasm aside, today's corporations could learn a thing or two from this old-school Welfare Capitalism); yet, others could just as easily sneer at the idea of FBCM sticking its schnoz in everybody's business. As it turned out, mill workers were pretty AC/DC about this stuff.

While Hotel Happiness eventually bombed (because tenants super disliked FBCM Honkers breathing down their neck), other amenities were quite popular, especially the nursery and health bennies. To borrow from the great Professor Clifford Kuhn's also-great book, *Contesting the New South Order: "Factory Lot was a female stronghold."* This fact might have had something to do with the success of the nursery in particular. According to Doc Kuhn, "*In 1900, 461 of the 841 residents in the Factory Lot were women.*" (Y'all check out page 23 for more groovy deets. Aww, hell, just read the whole damn book.)

Despite FBCM's varied success in company-controlled offerings, Fulton Mill Village presented its own alternatives. Essentially, FBCM provided the convenience of having everything available as a package deal (kinda like... *Comcast*). Mill workers, however, could opt out of FBCM's bundled services and choose – à la carte – the local options (kinda like... *Google*). Regardless of our godawful similes, we're just sayin' that FBCM had limited control of its workers. Well, to be exact: after the workers finished their shift at the factory. Inside the factory, FBCM owned a person's freaking soul. Outside the factory, people regained some freedom and a bisserl dignity.

According to the 2006 Addendum to the National Register for Historic Places: "By the 1920's, there were six food markets, two butchers, a druggist, a furniture store, a barbershop, and other places of business." And THAT was just on Carroll Street! During this period, each street bustled with shops. The Mill Village truly was a small town in and of itself. And just as a bevy of mill workers didn't rely on FBCM services, neither did the Mill Village rely on the City of Atlanta. For its inhabitants, the neighborhood provided everything the neighborhood needed, so looking elsewhere – living elsewhere – made zero sense.

Unfortunately, those halcyon days came to a crashing halt. The Great Depression Smackdown forever altered the community's landscape, mucking up not only the vibrancy of its independent stores, but also the balance between mill-worker and merchant residents. By 1932, many businesses went belly up, and the owners skedaddled. Once the minority, mill workers increasingly moved into the area, and soon FBCM became the community's primary employer. Although some shops survived (e.g.: *Little's!!!*), the early grandeur would never fully return. In essence, after The Depression, the neighborhood resembled your garden-variety, Southern-style mill town.

But with one notable exception: tweren't nothing was gonna kill Fulton Mill Village's free spirit...