

Piedmont Mill Workers and the Politics of History

Stephanie McCurry

Volume 29, 1992

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt29re02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

McCurry, S. (1992). Piedmont Mill Workers and the Politics of History. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 29, 229–238.

Piedmont Mill Workers and the Politics of History

Stephanie McCurry

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, LuAnn Jones, and Christopher Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1987).

Allen Tullos, *Habits of Industry: White Culture and the Transformation of the Carolina Piedmont* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1989).

RARELY IS A HISTORIAN presented with such an opportunity to reflect on the deepest matters of historical method and analysis. These two books have a remarkable amount in common — subject, sources, origin in a collaborative project, and even a leftist politics rooted in a shared generational experience — and yet they offer profoundly different interpretations of the history of southern cotton mill workers and their world. The pedagogical allure is irresistible.

Like a Family and *Habits of Industry* both originated in collective research for the project on Piedmont working people and regional industrialization organized in 1978 by the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and Allen Tullos were among the four project founders and shared from the outset a dual commitment to oral history as a method and to working-class history as a legitimate perspective on southern industrialization: those commitments remain evident in the finished books, both of which are exemplary models of politically-engaged scholarship.

Although the geographical parameters of each study are drawn slightly differently (Tullos deals only with the Carolinas while Hall *et al.*, include parts of Tennessee), both retain the project's original focus on the region called the southern Piedmont. A wide strip extending from central Virginia through the central Carolinas and into northern Georgia and Alabama, the Piedmont emerged, by the early 20th century, as the industrial heartland of the South. The process by which that was accomplished — the transformation of an impoverished staple agricultural economy into the center of the South's and, eventually, the nation's textile industry

Stephanie McCurry, "Piedmont Mill Workers and the Politics of History," *Labour/Le Travail* 29 (Spring 1992), 229-37.

— provides the crucial backdrop to the story of class formation and, particularly, of mill workers' culture and politics, which these authors alike aspire to tell. And while they ultimately recount very different stories indeed, they do not differ meaningfully over the fundamental chronology and process of the Piedmont's transformation.

Pursuit of "the lineaments of the region's industrial emergence," to use Tullos's formulation (xiv), and of "the making and unmaking of this cotton mill world," to use Hall, *et al.*'s (xi), leads to a primary focus, in both studies, on the period from the 1870s to the late 1930s, although both also include compelling glances backward to the antebellum period and forward to the 1970s. They locate the crucible of Piedmont industrialization in the capitalist transformation of the countryside, a process that began in the 1850s but which really took off in the postbellum period, and especially in the 1870s and 1880s. Commercial agriculture, and the relations of debt and dependency that accompanied it, had started to erode the yeoman economy in the late antebellum years. But it was not until after the Civil War that widescale tenancy for whites as well as blacks, and the accumulation of capital in the hands of strategically-positioned merchant-landlords, signalled a wholly new regime. By the last quarter of the 19th century, exacerbated by the falling fortunes of cotton, "agrarian collapse" had generated interest in, and capital for, modest ventures in textile production, and it had, more importantly, initiated an inexorable process of class formation out of which emerged a new industrial elite and the South's first industrial working class, white and black.

The mill workers' world initially took shape around the constraints of energy (mills required water power) and of labour (owners embraced a family-labour and mill village system to lure still-scarce white workers). But by the turn of the century the ever-more-powerful Piedmont elite had conquered those circumstances and confidently advertised a plentiful supply of electricity and a cheap and compliant white labour force as the region's most valuable natural endowments. And indeed, as cotton prices continued to spiral downward, sped on their way by the boll weevil, and as mining and lumbering companies pushed into the mountains disrupting ever more remote "yeoman" economies, more and more desperate farmers found themselves at the mill gate looking for "public work." Preserving the remnants of older customs and values, while struggling to confront the new conditions of life and labour, then, working-class culture and politics took shape in the mill villages of the Carolinas and Tennessee, under the watchful eye of mill-owners like James G. Love.

That culture, and the labour relations on which it was founded, were severely tested in the 1920s and 1930s, however. As mill-owners responded to the changed conditions and cut-throat competition of the postwar textile market, they unleashed a campaign of economic rationalization and mechanization which meant, from the workers' standpoint, wholesale firings, wage-cuts, and speed-up. Mills metamorphosed into multi-national corporations. James G. Love's original North Carolina Mills had become, by the 1930s, Spencer Love's Burlington Industries. The

workers' response to the challenges of the 1920s and 1930s? Well, that is where authorial agreement ends and profound disagreement begins.

But to put it that way is misleading. For the authors' different responses to that fundamental question were informed by — indeed presaged by — radically different interpretations of the culture, ideology, and politics that mill workers forged out of a yeoman past and a working-class present. Despite their essential convergence on a narrative of Piedmont industrialization and class formation, and despite their reliance on similar, and in some cases literally the same, sources, they do not describe the same culture and politics nor do they write the same history. Put bluntly, *Like a Family*, is a history of mill worker resistance and radicalism; *Habits of Industry*, is a history of complicity and conservatism.

The analytical and political difference is nowhere more evident than in the conflicting uses of the metaphor of family. Both Hall, *et al.*, who chose the title *Like a Family* to capture mill worker's representation of their *Cotton Mill World* and Tullos, who, more literally, insists that the family was the cradle of workers' *Habits of Industry*, establish the most intimate of material, as well as ideological, connections between familial social relations and mill workers' community, culture, and politics. "Like I said, it was kind of one big family, and we all hung together and survived. It was a two-hundred-headed family. Everybody on this hill, we looked after one another." (Hall, *et al.*, xi) That was how Hoyle McCorkle, an elderly millhand, described the community of his youth to oral history field workers.

For Hall, *et al.*, that metaphor is a comforting and empowering one. It spoke to an enduring mill-worker ethic of "mutuality" (xiv), communal values (152), and solidarity deeply at odds with the dominant one of "individualism and self-interest" (140). It was not, moreover, simply a defensive strategy that protected workers against economic disaster. Rather, in their telling, the familial "consciousness of southern mill folk" (102), had radical political consequences. For that customary culture enabled workers to embrace unions like the National Union of Textile Workers and the United Textile Workers of America as extensions of traditional "mutual benefit" (102) organizations, and thus drove labour insurgencies in the late 19th century, in the terrible 1920s, and, above all, in the General Strike of 1934. Traditional values sustained radical action and the familial culture and ideology of mill workers made theirs a history of resistance.

For Tullos, by contrast, the metaphor of family is a discomfiting but no less revealing one. It spoke to a cultural "temperament" configured around social hierarchy, relations of power, and a series of "fatherly voices" that originated in the family itself but that extended well beyond its bounds. Indeed, the "authoritarian paternalism" that began as a lesson in family love, respect, and discipline, connected the household, often quite literally, to the factory and the church: "Besides being under the company's jurisdiction," mill worker Grover Hardin pointed out, "you was under your parents." Salvation itself was hostage to paternalism in this land of protestant fundamentalism where even God wore a "jealous and

authoritarian face." The meaning in Hoyle McCorkle's familial metaphor, as Tullos hears it, thus lies in the reference to "two-hundred *headed* households," and is represented in the rigid hierarchy of age, sex, and rank that workers' observed in the arrangement of themselves for the photograph displayed on the cover of *Habits of Industry*. Workers, as a result, "shared in, as well as resisted, the climate of opinion, values, and structures of power dominated by the region's manufacturers ... preachers ... and race-baiting politicians." And that customary culture predisposed Piedmont mill workers to view the union movement, when it belatedly arrived, "with [a] deep wariness" that explains the depth of anti-union sentiment in the textile South. Traditional values thereby engendered political conservatism, not radicalism and resistance, and the familial culture and ideology of Piedmont mill workers made theirs largely a history of complicity in the region's industrial order (xii-xiv, 8-11).

Habits of Industry and *Like a Family* together represent a particularly dramatic example of the contradictory meanings that commonly attach to the metaphor of family in historical literature. *Like a Family* indeed — on that they concur. But is the southern working-class family more convincingly a model of egalitarian bonds or hierarchical power relations? The multivalence of the metaphor of family explains its ubiquity in political discourse and cuts to the heart of the interpretative differences in these two books.

In *Like a Family*, Hall, *et al.*, cleave very closely to elderly workers' representations of mill-village life, a world whose "unmaking," the authors acknowledge, had begun as long ago as 1934 with the defeat of the General Strike. In a methodological discussion, they concede "the limitations of oral sources," of people who recall "past solidarities" from "the perspective of a fragmented and sometimes lonely present." Nonetheless, they privilege workers' "stories" of mill life as one of "mutuality," and family writ large, and acknowledge that they adopted both their thesis and narrative style from the oral histories themselves, turning to written records mainly to verify memory. From this commitment to tell the story as the workers would have it told, and to "reach an audience that makes history but seldom reads it," comes the enormous accomplishment of this book: a profoundly moving and powerful evocation of the "extraordinary significance of ordinary lives." But from it also comes the tendency to romanticization, which assumes particularly disturbing proportions with respect to the racial dimensions and inevitable conflicts of working-class life in Piedmont villages (xi-xvii).

The problem is evident from the outset. For while this book is wide-ranging in its interests, embracing intriguing discussions of every arena of working-class life from the gender and generational conflicts in the home, to the conditions of work and daily resistances, to mass culture and the "Nashville sound" in country music, the analytical direction follows the metaphor of family steadily from the farmsteads of backcountry antebellum yeomen to the picket lines of Durham and other Piedmont towns in 1934.

Even with reference to its antebellum origins, "the communal quality of life" (4), which the authors attribute to the economy and culture of yeoman farmers is a misleading representation when disconnected, as it is here, from the proslavery politics which accompanied it. And the effect of that analysis in minimizing class and racial division and social conflict (with the notable exception of gender conflict) within mill village communities, increases in significance throughout the book. Despite the radical transformation in political economy which is delineated so superbly here, the "older rural culture that stressed mutuality and the ideal of self-sufficiency" (13) exhibits a curiously static character, surviving even the destruction of the world of precapitalist independent proprietorship on which it was originally based to emerge intact in the capitalist social relations of 20th-century mill villages. "Traditional beliefs held steadfast" the authors' insist, allowing them to represent the mill village as "one big family" in which even the distinctions between workers and superintendents were relatively meaningless (13,140). This thesis meets its biggest challenge on the question of unionization in general, and the General Strike of 1934 in particular, in the face of substantial evidence of social and political conflict within worker ranks. Hall, *et al.*, argue convincingly against the view that the strike failed, preferring to emphasize its brutal defeat by the combined forces of rabidly anti-union mill owners, the governors virtually on their payroll, and the National Guard and police troops at their disposal. Nonetheless, they concede that bloody and bitter divisions visited worker ranks as well. And in seeking to delineate the fault lines, they reach for an analysis significantly at odds with the one that preceded it. Instead of a familial community bound by kinship and communitarian values, mill villages fractured along the lines of rank, kinship ties, and industrial experience. Certainly the right question, as the authors' insist, is not why so few risked their lives for the union but rather "why so many were willing to risk so much" (349). But the fact remains that in the horror of the strike, the mill community revealed deep and longstanding fractures in its social body that might have led the authors to a more critical interrogation of the metaphor of family that elderly mill workers had offered them as the representation of their world.

That failure of critical distance perhaps explains why Hall, *et al.*, so readily accept the definition and boundaries of family and of its membership that white millhands used. For the authors forgot to ask (or at least to attach significance to the answer) who was embraced within the family circle and who was kept outside. The book, admittedly, focuses on textile workers, of whom, they claim, "all but a handful were white" (xiv). And that is fair enough. But some workers, predictably in the most menial of mill tasks, were black, and each mill village, as they acknowledge, had its street of nine or ten houses to accommodate black workers. It is even the case, as they mention in passing, that some black women residents of the village worked as domestics in white mill workers' homes. But the authors do not embrace that street or those black workers in their vision of the mill village or community. Instead, they exclude those most oppressed members of the Piedmont mill towns' working class, as did the white contemporaries about whom they write

with such evident sympathy. The book's thesis of "mutuality" and of "family" could hardly survive such inclusion, unless of course one is willing to acknowledge that the "family" was a segregated one, the village a Jim Crow one. The consequences of this recognition are nowhere considered in the book, not even with respect to the fate of the union movement or to the political choices of workers in electoral politics. Part of a more general avoidance of the less-admirable side of white southern working-class history, this blindness to racial conflict is the greatest weakness of an otherwise compelling and impressive book.

Tullos does not do much more with the racial dimensions of working-class life and politics in the Carolina Piedmont than Hall, *et al.* The difference, however, is that his analysis can more easily accommodate the challenge. For although Tullos also defines his as a study of "white society," he begins with very different assumptions about the political and cultural sensibilities ("temperament" as he puts it) of mill workers, seeking not the source of their radicalism and unionism, but of their conservatism and anti-unionism. His interpretation, therefore, traces the lineaments of a white conservatism born of complicity in social hierarchy and relations of power, public and private, and identifies social conflict and disunity within working-class ranks — including that between white and black — as central dimensions of the regional history. Thus, while Tullos fails to explore relations of power between white and black workers or to consider how they gave shape to the temperament and politics of the region's white working class (a notable weakness of the book), he does, albeit briefly, acknowledge the significance of those relations in the construction of the "false consensus," to borrow Lillian Smith's phrase, "between Mr. Rich White Man and Mr. Poor White Man" (6), over the exclusion of black workers from the mills and ballot-boxes of the New South. Shut out from most operatives' jobs, black men and women nonetheless worked with and for white workers, performing "the essential dirty work among the mudsills" (13), in mills, tobacco factories, and mill-workers' homes. "In just this way," Tullos points out, "white social standing rose upon an unacknowledged black history" (13).

The complicity of white workers in the paternalistic culture of the Piedmont and, by extension, in its racist and anti-union traditions is brilliantly evoked in Tullos' analysis. But so compelling — and totalizing — is his evocation of the "sources and shape of cultural authority" (xiv), that the possibility of resistance to "habits of industry" at home, church, and work is virtually obliterated. As with *Like a Family*, the problem seems to lie in a method that simultaneously accounts for the book's many accomplishments, but also for its weaknesses.

Tullos is very self-conscious about historical method and the political meanings implied in particular choices. Indeed, he offers a thinly veiled critique of Hall, *et al.*'s, method, likening the "historian-manufacturer" and their "production of 'works' of oral history" (155-56) in a traditional narrative, to the appropriation and alienation of mill workers' labour by textile manufacturers. Used this way, he insists, in "an authoritative skein of facts and a well seamed argument ... lives as

lived in a historical time and place become the fragmented parts of someone else's narrative" (256).

In contrast, he professes a commitment to letting subjects tell their own stories, fully, in their own voices, claiming that he has little to add to the powerful accounts of working-class life offered in oral interviews. In many ways, he is right. For it is this conviction that leads him repeatedly in the book, to reproduce, without apparent authorial intervention, transcripts of interviews with mill workers conducted throughout the 1980s. The "oral biography" of Ethel Hilliard, for example, is one of the most powerful, painful, and insightful account of domestic violence I have ever read. And it is a significantly different interpretation told in Hilliard's own voice, than the one that accompanied the fragments of her story, anonymously presented, in *Like a Family*. Tullos is not wrong. These are indeed powerful stories, brilliantly told. But the same methodological and political commitment that produced them, lures Tullos so close to workers' voices that he appears, at times, capable only of echoing them. Letting one voice speak at a time, he fails at key moments to capture the cacophonous dialogue of working-class life and thus to explore the contested character of the region's cultural and political history.

Tullos eschews conventional narrative and chronological style, instead choosing to combine biography, oral autobiography, and family history and so to move back and forth in time, excavating the past from the testimonies and remnants of it in the present. Hence, he recounts the region's capitalists' ascendancy and their joyless Presbyterian culture through the history of the Belk family of North Carolina ("ascetic stewards of a God who could not dance" [38], as he calls them); and he does this from the perspective of the visitor's seat in the executive offices of the Belk department stores, where he sat face-to-face with the heir of the original family patriarch. This approach accounts for much of the immediacy and power of the analysis, but it also contributes to the monolithic and static quality that ultimately accumulates around the representation of cultural temperament, and that overpowers any consideration of particular political choices, especially by Piedmont workers in the inevitable struggles over unionization.

Icy Norman's story of a lifetime of work for J. Spencer Love and Burlington Industries exemplifies Tullos' argument about the conservatism of Piedmont mill workers and about its paternalistic dimensions. For Icy Norman's "habits of industry," as she proudly tells it, reflect the personal bonds of obligation, respect, and loyalty that tied her not only to her father, but to his boss, the supervisor J. Copland to whom she owed her first job, and to the mogul himself, J. Spencer Love, who had known her since she came to work for him as a teenager. Icy Norman was 65 years old when she retired from Burlington Industries; she had worked there for 47 years. As Mrs. Spencer Love said to her, "Your sure have been faithful ... to the Burlington Mills" (131). The paternalism that gripped Icy Norman was deep and authentic. "When I retired," she said, "It was like leaving my family Everytime I go back up there I feel like I'm going home." Icy Norman had consistently

opposed union organizing efforts, and her story goes a long way toward explicating the sources of widespread anti-union sentiment among southern mill workers.

But if Icy Norman kept the faith with Burlington Mills, they did not keep faith with her. When she retired — and was feted by the corporation as their longest-serving employee — she was also denied permission to work the additional six months that would have enabled her to participate in a new profit-sharing plan. “That kind of hurt me,” she said, “I could really have used the money” (133). Her sense of betrayal was palpable, but Tullos does not probe its meaning, or the political possibilities that it represented, if not for Icy Norman then for other workers. For the “vestigial paternalism” (6) of mill villages was not only shattered at the moment of retirement. Certainly, some workers, sick with brown lung and stiffed by their companies in disability and pensions, did come to think differently about the paternalistic assumptions that underlay a great deal of anti-union sentiment, wondering belatedly, as did Paul Cline of Greenville, South Carolina, whether company welfare efforts were enacted, as union organizers had long charged, “just to keep the union away” (332). But for some, betrayed paternalism had been a powerful political catalyst in the 1920s and 1930s, powerful enough to embolden some workers to challenge fatherly authorities. “Labor resistance and revolt emerged,” Tullos momentarily acknowledged, “when the levers and loyalties of paternalism faltered and became discredited” (xiv).

Yet Tullos’ resolute focus on culture throughout the book, and his failure to consider its contested nature, contributes to a denial of the possibility of resistance. Evangelical religion, whether in the late 18th century or the mid-20th century, whether Associated Reform Presbyterian or Pentecostal, is here accorded an unlikely common character and constant cultural meaning. Tullos is probably right that most Piedmont workers saw the “union as ‘foreign’ to their experience, as un-American and atheistic, and as a threat to customary work arrangements and familial as well as paternalistic ties of employment” (xiii). “How, given their historical situation,” he asks, “could they have seen otherwise” (xiii)? How indeed? Tullos’ book provides few answers. And yet, incredibly, some workers did. Against tremendous odds and in the face of brutal violence, some stood for the union. In doing so they resisted the logic of Tullos’ conservative cultural temperament. In *Habits of Industry*, their story is not told, their voices are silenced, their resistance is rendered inexplicable.

It is almost as if *Like a Family* and *Habits of Industry*, in the utter incommensurability of their interpretations, offer, when put together, a complete picture of white working-class culture and politics in the Piedmont South. But that is too simple: the interpretations *are* incommensurable and the whole story of resistance and complicity — and the possibility of its coexistence not just within the same villages and families, but within the life experience of one person — remains untold. What these two outstanding books do offer, in addition to a history of Piedmont industrialization and working-class life, is a rare opportunity to reflect on the politics of writing history. What makes this case all the more interesting is

that such radically different interpretations result from common sympathies and a common orientation on the political left, confounding simple typologies of leftist scholarship.

Both *Like a Family* and *Habits of Industry* are more than a match for the powerful and compelling stories they tell. These are brilliant books, books which move the reader to tears, anger, and advocacy. Their significance is, sadly, not yet academic. The struggles of southern textile mill workers go on. The latest round, involving Cannon Mills retirees fighting to regain niggardly pensions lost in the Savings and Loan scam, amounts to a national outrage. It is indeed, as Allen Tullos put it, "long past quitting time" (304).

INTERNATIONAL LABOR AND WORKING- CLASS HISTORY

Edited by Helmut Gruber and Ira Katznelson

Labor and social historians from throughout the world present new scholarship on some of the most vital issues and controversies in their fields in *International Labor and Working-Class History*. Each issue brings readers current research, in-depth review essays, reports on international conferences, and book reviews.

"No other journal sets labor history so consistently in the wider context of historical study and debate. For this reason, and because of its firm commitment to an international and comparative perspective, ILWCH is probably the only labor history journal that historians who are not labor specialists will always look at. For labor historians everywhere it is indispensable." — E. J. Hobsbawm, Cambridge University

"ILWCH does more than any other journal I read to break down parochial divisions among scholars—and, best of all, does so in a gender-conscious fashion. The emphasis on brief, pointed pieces and on continuing dialogue makes ILWCH one of the few journals I read as soon as it arrives." — Susan Porter Benson, University of Missouri, Columbia

Published twice a year. Annual subscription rates are \$16.00 (\$22.00 foreign) for individuals; \$26.00 (\$32.00 foreign) for institutions. Foreign subscriptions are sent by air; checks must be in U.S. dollars drawn on U.S. banks.

Send orders to: Subscription Department



University of Illinois Press
54 E. Gregory Drive
Champaign, IL 61820