Perfect Harmony: the Myth of Tupelo's Industrial Tranquility

Wendy D. Smith

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“Perfect Harmony”: The Myth of Tupelo’s Industrial Tranquility, 1937-1941

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the Doctor of Philosophy degree
in the Department of History
The University of Mississippi

by

Wendy D. Smith

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ABSTRACT

Despite a vast amount of research on Southern labor in the 1930s, historians paid little attention to Northeast Mississippi. This predominantly rural area, though, boasted some of the largest garment factories of the period. Local businessmen established a cotton mill and three clothing manufacturing companies in Tupelo, the seat of Lee County. Town boosters boasted of harmonious relations between workers and management at each of the industrial facilities. In the spring of 1937, however, the cotton mill hands undertook a sit-down strike. Five days later, the women in the Tupelo Garment Company tried to initiate a strike. Both efforts failed. The cotton mill owners refused to negotiate. When it became clear that the operatives would not end the strike, management closed the plant indefinitely. The leaders of the strike at the garment company received little support from the majority of workers who earlier pledged allegiance. The plant manager fired the six women identified as the organizers of a local independent union. For the next four years, National Labor Relations Board hearings and organizing efforts by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union rocked the small town. The experience of the cotton mill workers and the garment company women expose Southern paternalism as a façade created and accepted by area businessmen but rejected by local workers. This study also challenges the prevailing opinion that Southern workers were bereft of class-consciousness. Without fitting into the Marxist definition of a proletariat, the farm women, who commuted to and from the factories via school buses, created a class-consciousness which related more to their rural identity than to their factory experience.
DEDICATION

Aleyna and Kenny
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INTRODUCTION
AN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

For years, Southern labor historians focused their attention on the cotton textile industry in the Piedmont. The question often posed by historians and sociologists concerned the failure of the poor Southern whites to unionize. Most scholars blame paternalism – a term used to describe the relationship between the mill owners and the mill workers. Yet, as David Carlton pointed out, widespread disagreement exists within the “paternalist consensus.”

What is paternalism? Was it benevolent or a calculated effort to engender gratitude and cooperation from exploited workers? Did it arise from Southern traditions of deference or from welfare capitalism? Given that paternalism often included social, political and economic control, does it account for the failure of Southern workers to sustain union organization?

Broadus Mitchell asserted that cotton mill builders were benevolent men dedicated to community and racial uplift. Concerned with economic conditions in the South, these men built mills to provide jobs for poor whites who could no longer subsist on small farms.


challenged the benevolent interpretation of mill builders likening the mill village to a plantation on which the owner exercised complete authority. He did not dispute, however, the gratitude of the workers.\textsuperscript{4} Some scholars accepted New South booster images of Southern mill workers as a passive, biddable workforce.\textsuperscript{5} Rather than question the docility, scholars attempted to discover the means by which mill owners and managers maintained this malleable workforce. Liston Pope argued that the church played a crucial role in mill village society. He suggested that the financial support provided to the church caused ministers to feel indebted to the owners. This obligation resulted in an indirect method of social control.\textsuperscript{6} Sermons in the mill village often followed the theme of hard work, deprivation and suffering as the path of salvation.\textsuperscript{7} Although less specific in his description of social control, F. Ray Marshall noted that textile unions, the United Textile Workers Association and the Textile Workers Organizing Committee, were “too weak to overcome traditional economic, political and social impediments.”\textsuperscript{8} Marshall did not offer a name to these “impediments,” but most scholars recognize the barriers as paternalism.

In \textit{Paternalism and Protest}, Melton McLaurin rejected the idea of mill workers as docile and cited worker uprisings in the nineteenth century. He agreed, however, that Southern social traditions shaped worker self-perception. Mill operatives viewed themselves as dependents and mill owners as providers and protectors. This awareness stemmed from a “great man” complex, which caused mill hands to accept the roles created by owners. A lack of education formed part of the problem, but the author claimed that the crucial element in poor whites’ understanding

stemmed from “the almost feudal social system of the Old South” in which “owners stood apart from, yet somehow remained a part of, general village society.” The “powerful social phenomena” of paternalism caused a “negative class consciousness.”\(^9\) The inability of operatives to identify themselves as a group opposed to the mill owners impeded the development of class-consciousness as defined by E. P. Thompson or “class conflict consciousness” as sociologists Rhonda Zingraff and Michael Schulman chose to call it.\(^10\)

Scholars of American labor history have suggested that paternalism was not unique to the South. Paternalist relationships between masters and workers formed an important dimension in the emergence of capitalist manufacturing. During his investigation of the textile trades in nineteenth-century America, Philip Scranton identified three types of paternalism: formal, familiar and fraternal.\(^11\) Lowell characterized the formal type because of its highly structured environment, particularly the boardinghouses built to house young single women and protect their “virtue.”\(^12\) The textile mills in Philadelphia represented the fraternal type. Fraternal paternalism existed in an urban environment where each firm specialized in a particular aspect of production, such as spinning, dyeing or weaving. The specialization of the craft lent itself to a comparison of fraternal paternalism with a guild system. Scranton identified the cotton mills and villages of the South as the familiar style because the factory owners came from the local elite who benefitted from “pre-factory patterns of authority and dependence.”\(^13\) In all, Scranton’s description of familiar paternalism differs little from that described by Southern labor historians.

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\(^9\) McLaurin, 55-56.
\(^13\) Scranton: 246.
but his effort to link paternalism to capitalism is difficult to ignore. Just as convincing is Gerald Zahavi’s description of the “negotiated loyalty” between owners and operatives at Endicott Johnson, a shoemaking firm in New York. While unionists claimed that paternalism and welfare capitalism or “welfarism” undermined the development of class-consciousness, the author argues that the workers co-opted the language of paternalism and turned it to their benefit.

Influenced by Zahavi, Southern labor historians have discovered Southern mill operatives using paternalist language and ideas of mutual reciprocity to improve their conditions. Bess Beatty pointed out that some mill operatives understood paternalism differently than did mill owners, using the same language to express expectations of mill owner responsibility. In addition, workers had ways of protesting aside from joining a union – absenteeism, quitting, and refusing to obey factory rules among them. Both Beatty and Paul Escott revealed that some Southern industrialists viewed employees as little more than productive resources. In the private papers of Thomas and Edwin Holt of North Carolina Beatty discovered mill owner attitudes differed from paternalist propaganda. Carlton affirmed that much of what appeared as paternalism amounted to a public relations illusion. Based on a large collection of oral interviews with former textile workers, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Robert Korstad and James Leloudis have explained that one should not consider the phrase “like a family” to be associated with mill owner paternalism. Mill operatives used the phrase to refer to the mill village of which

14 Ibid.
18 Ibid; Escott.
19 Carlton, *Mill and Town*; Carlton, "Paternalism."
the owner was not truly apart. The “family” symbolized the community constructed by the workers. It did not refer to any sense of relatedness between owners and operatives.\textsuperscript{20}

As historians have struggled to understand this complex phenomenon, most agree that paternalism at its core is a social system of hierarchy and deference. Mill owners attained not only economic but also social authority over their workers. Scholars have suggested that this authority could result from personal loyalty, fear, an eagerness to please one’s boss or a continuance of deferential patterns and customs of the region’s early settlers.\textsuperscript{21} Gary Freeze and Allen Tullos asserted that paternalism represented an extension of a father’s control over his household.\textsuperscript{22} Douglas Flamming argued, however, that tradition did not produce paternalism in Dalton, Georgia. Paternalism did not exist during the first twenty years of the Crown Cotton Mill’s existence. It developed in the early twentieth century in response to a labor shortage. Managers had to raise wages and offer forms of non-wage compensation to lure families to the mill and keep them there. The quest for a stable workforce prompted Southern textile managers to engage in welfare capitalism.\textsuperscript{23} Similarly, Gary Fink explained that paternalism did not exist in any form at the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills in Atlanta, Georgia. The experience of the Piedmont stemmed from local identity, he said, while the Jewish owner of the Atlanta based company lived a privileged life far from Factory Town.\textsuperscript{24} Both Flamming and Fink have

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
demonstrated the value of case studies in discussing social and cultural as well as economic relationships in Southern industry.

An equally important aspect of Southern labor appears in the gendered experiences of women. As Freeze pointed out, “Women have always worked in Southern cotton mills, and men have always run them.” Exploring North Carolina’s cotton mills, Freeze demonstrated that the nature of male/female relationships in Southern society influenced the development of cotton mill paternalism from its very beginning. Linda Frankel discovered women’s work in the mills to be invaluable to family survival in the villages just as it had been on the farm. This tradition of women’s labor on farms promoted the acceptance of female breadwinners within the mill village culture. Historians Mary Frederickson and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall stepped away from the paternalist discussion to explore the female experience as union members and strikers. They not only revealed individual experiences but also exposed stereotypes applied to female strikers. Hall discovered that the perceptions of womanhood, which existed in the urban middle-class of Elizabethton, Tennessee, differed from those of neighboring rural women.

Industrial jobs aside, Southern poor women worked on farms long before heading into the factories. As Frankel pointed out, farmwomen’s labor proved invaluable. Shirley Abbot described the Southern farmwoman as “an absolute economic necessity, a full partner in earning the living.” Melissa Walker explained that Southern farmwomen provided a significant portion

25 Freeze, 21.
28 Hall, "Disorderly Women."
of the family’s subsistence by selling surplus produce, like eggs and butter, keeping boarders and even working as day laborers in neighboring fields.  

Many Southern women, white and black, worked in the fields, regardless of middle-class notions of domesticity.  Lu Ann Jones documented the history of poor Southern women paying particular attention to the importance of chickens and egg money as they sought to “make do” with whatever was available. Once urban markets expanded the demand for both chickens and eggs, this traditional female occupation became the male dominated poultry industry.  

Walker and Rebecca Sharpless discovered that although some women felt embarrassment at having to “plow like a man” others expressed pride in their abilities.  

This heritage of labor as an essential contribution to family subsistence shaped rural women’s self-perception, which made the move from farm to factory less disruptive than one might imagine. The clock produced the most significant change for farmwomen as the factory demanded labor at a much faster pace. Elizabeth Payne, director of the North Mississippi Women’s Oral History Project, observed:

“By the time of World War II, husbands of white women, when asked what they did, commonly referred to themselves as “gophers.” They took their wives to the factory in the morning, returned to the fields to work during the day and then would “go-for-her” at the factory at quitting time. The practice of rural white farm woman going into the factory to raise cash for the family while the husband continued to farm emerged as one of the most important but overlooked patterns setting the stage for North Mississippi’s prosperity.”


A number of Southern labor historians stepped outside the textile world entirely to focus on the connections between race and industrial unionism. Looking at the coalfields of Alabama, Brian Kelly argued that Southern elites created and maintained racism. He attacked the paternalist view that white elites stood between warring poor whites and blacks, who inherently hated one another. Because of job competition, years of racist propaganda and “white supremacy” had left its mark on the minds of poor whites. Kelly argued, however, that mutual experience and economic need could undermine racism. White workers faced with deliberate attempts to undermine their working conditions using African Americans chose to link arms with them in the union rather than exclude them. He does not deny the existence of racism and efforts to exclude black workers but notes, “Where exclusion was not a viable option and where other factors favored its development they embraced interracial unionism.”

Robert Korstad blended oral history with traditional research to create a comprehensive narrative of the struggle of African American tobacco workers in twentieth-century North Carolina. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, he chronicled the political and social development of Winston Salem. From the creation of white supremacy to the downfall of Local 22 in 1950, the author presents a clear explanation of the ways in which unionism and civil rights could become intricately interwoven, while exposing the problems white supremacy and Communism produced for unions in the South. Using Memphis as a case study, Michael Honey connected industrial unionism to the civil rights movement. The CIO policy of biracial organization offered a means for Southern workers, particularly African Americans, to escape a system of oppression, which divided them based on skin color. Though the union did not fulfill

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black expectations regarding segregation, many jobs remained racially exclusive. Nevertheless, the role of black workers in union organization paved the way for later civil rights activism.\(^{36}\)

Shelley Sallee expanded the discussions of both race and labor to include poor white children in the cotton mills. During the Progressive Era, child labor became a target of reformers. While Southern Progressives sought to end child labor in the mills, they couched their efforts in racial terms. The “cracker” children who worked in the mills had to become “white” to have worth and the only way to be “white” in the South was not to be black. Thus, Sallee states, “a new interpretation of Progressivism emerges that helps answer why socially forward-looking white reformers appear so backward on the issue of race.”\(^{37}\) The Progressives adopted “the color line” in order to get poor white children out of the mills and into schools. They had to frame their argument in a way that contrasted mill children to black children (whom they depicted as getting educated \textit{en masse}). The racism of the Progressives, therefore, did not represent racist attitudes but the forced acceptance of white supremacy.\(^{38}\)

Tera Hunter, Jacqueline Jones and Stephanie Shaw brought African-American women into the discussion. Hunter focused on black women in urban areas of the South who worked for wages as cooks, maids, child-nurses, and laundresses.\(^{39}\) Jacqueline Jones examined the patterns of black women’s work from the days of slavery into the 1990s, dividing their work into two spheres: work for their families and paid labor (fieldwork under slavery). In so doing, Jones constructed a comprehensive picture of black women’s labor and emphasized the enormity of the double day – a day’s work for an employer or master and a day’s work for her family, both in

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 157.
one day. Shaw chronicled the lives of professional black women during the Jim Crow era, describing their role in building the African-American community. Dolores Janiewski recounted the union experience of black and white women working in the tobacco industry and found racism to be a strong barrier to class-consciousness and union success. While the role of racism and cultural hegemony has been a part of the discussion of paternalism from the beginning, Janiewski revealed its effect on working women specifically.

Michelle Haberland brought attention to women’s work in the largely ignored Southern apparel industry by investigating the impact of factory work on both races of Southern women in Alabama’s apparel industry. The opening of a Vanity Fair factory in 1937 gave a significant number of poor white women in Jackson, Alabama the opportunity to earn wages for the first time. Their labor proved vital to surviving the Depression and improved their families’ standard of living. Work in factories fostered female relationships, which isolated farm life had not allowed. Of course, women gave up control of their daily labor, as management dictated the type and pace of the work performed. Haberland also explored the International Ladies Garment Workers Union attempts to organize the workers. The all white work force of the 1930s and 40s did not welcome the union. After integration, however, the union worked with civil rights organizations and achieved success in 1976. Later generations of workers did not enjoy the increased standard of living that accompanied the arrival of the plant. Workers found management demands harsh and increasing production rates discouraging. Once established, the

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union used a label campaign and boycott to draw public attention to the women who produced the clothing.\textsuperscript{44}

The scope of Southern labor has grown far beyond the textile mills. Yet, the question of paternalism and its fatal grasp upon poor whites remains an unresolved issue. As Carlton noted, “The persistence of employer dominance is not the explanation; it is what needs to be explained.” He also suggested that historians should seek to understand conflict among the workers during the 1930s.\textsuperscript{45} Indeed worker conflict primarily accounts for the failure of unionization. Southern workers did not form a class-consciousness whereby they identified with one another based on their position as laborers. Many workers continued to identify with the larger community in which the bosses acted as local leaders. Whether because of personal loyalty, fear or insecurity of upsetting the established order, or the idea of factory work as temporary, Southern workers refused to identify themselves as a class of industrial laborers. Instead, they developed what Gramsci called “contradictory consciousness” which mixed “approbation and apathy” with “resistance and resignation.”\textsuperscript{46}

The experience of labor unrest in Tupelo from 1937-1941 provides clues to understanding this complex phenomenon. The men and women of the Tupelo Cotton Mills struck in April 1937 to demand fewer hours, higher wages and an end to preferential treatment of particular hands. Their effort, like so many Southern cotton mill strikes, ended in disappointment as the mill owners decided to close the mill indefinitely rather than meet worker


\textsuperscript{45} Carlton, "Paternalism,"23.

demands. In their struggle, one can see the shift in management perspective. The owners moved away from the paternalist view that supplied the mill village with a community house and baseball diamond and toward a capitalist perspective that caused them to employ the stretch-out. Like welfare capitalism, benevolence waned when it became too costly. When the strike occurred, the new capitalist perspective prompted the board of directors to close the financially struggling mill permanently. The language of community and questions of mutual obligation abound during the short dialogue preceding the final decision to liquidate mill assets. The public statements and actions provided historians with insight into the self-perception of both owners and workers, which they expressed in paternalist language.

The account of the cotton mill only partly tells Tupelo’s story. Three large garment factories operated in the small town as well. The garment women’s experience differed from that of the cotton mill operatives because, unlike the cotton mill, the garment companies earned profits. The failure of labor leaders to implement a strike presented another contrast. Initially, the women tried to organize an independent union, unaffiliated with a national organization, just as the cotton mill employees had done. Many of the women “lost their nerve and failed to stick when the showdown came,” however. Management discovered the identities of the six women who had spearheaded the effort and fired them. The regional director of the National Labor Relations Board came to Tupelo to ensure the fair election of a bargaining committee for the cotton mill employees. The involvement of the Board in the cotton mill dispute prompted the six women to file charges against the Tupelo Garment Company for violating the Wagner Act. After a lengthy battle and much hardship, the women successfully obtained compensation for lost wages and secured employment. Just after the strike attempt and in the midst of the women’s struggle, Ida Sledge came to Tupelo as a representative of the International Ladies

Garment Workers Union. The battle to secure a union for Tupelo’s garment workers lasted for four years. Tupelo’s elite citizens formed a Citizen’s Committee to combat unionization efforts in a way that would not legally endanger the garment companies. They launched a propaganda war in the local newspaper. The Citizen’s Committee ran advertisements in the local newspaper appealing to the women of the garment plant to avoid affiliation with ‘outsiders’ and “communists.” When these efforts failed to produce the desired effect, the Committee addressed its next appeal to the husbands and fathers of the female operatives. The experience of Tupelo’s garment workers hit upon several important themes in Southern labor – the persistence of employer social dominance known as paternalism, the female work experience in rural Mississippi as their labor shifted from farm to factory, and the struggle of organized labor in the South.

Because professional historians have ignored Northeast Mississippi, the first chapter will serve as an introduction to the region. It provides an overview of Mississippi history with an emphasis on the development of the “hills,” which are part of the upland South, differing in geography, population, and culture from the better-known Mississippi delta. By outlining the settlement patterns and economic and political development of the region, one can understand the history and culture of the inhabitants. Discussions of land ownership and the sharecropping and tenancy systems will reveal the evolution of rural identities, particularly that of landowners, whether large landholders or yeoman farmers. It will show also that Northeast Mississippi, like the rest of the South, saw the rise of a land-holding merchant elite after the Civil War. Tupelo merchants became Northeast Mississippi’s New South boosters as they sought wealth for themselves and economic uplift for their communities.
The second chapter chronicles the introduction of industry to the region. The city of Corinth in Alcorn County first brought cotton textiles and garment manufacturing to Northeast Mississippi. Their eagerness proved premature and the depression of the 1890s ended their textile aspirations. A small garment company was more successful, but the city lost its standing as an early manufacturing center in the overwhelmingly rural region. A small insignificant village about sixty miles south of Corinth would take its place as the industrial leader in the area. Local businessmen, directed by area merchants, established a cotton mill in Tupelo in 1901, which prospered and grew until the 1930s. Although pleased with the success of the mill, merchants and bankers sought economic stability and a larger market for all of Lee County. As a result, they introduced area farmers to dairying as a supplement to growing cotton. During the 1920s, the cotton mill manager installed a number of sewing machines to move a surplus quantity of cloth. The business proved so successful that the mill owners moved the operation to a different facility and incorporated it as a separate company. Shortly thereafter, two additional garment plants operated in the small town. One represented another outgrowth of the business begun in the mill. The other, a family owned and operated company, sprang from the home industry of Elizabeth Milam. Milam manufactured children’s clothes and traveled to department stores in Memphis to market her products. When the order became bigger than she could handle, she and her husband moved the business to a larger facility and incorporated as Milam Manufacturing. This chapter provides significant information about specific individuals within Tupelo’s oligarchy, which allows one to understand the industrialists’ perceptions of themselves and their role within the community.

The third chapter discusses the cotton mill strike in depth. The details of the strike and its participants come primarily from the local newspaper and a short article written by the strike
leader, Jimmy Cox, for the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Through the public medium of newspapers, the language of community and mutual obligation resounds as each side sought to curry popular support. The importance of the cotton mill and its payroll to local merchants is unmistakable; a fact that caused strikers and management to blame each other for the mill closure. In the context of Southern mills and failed strikes, Tupelo’s story is not exceptional. Some significant differences existed, however. Mill village residents did not live in isolation. Mill Town, also known as South Tupelo, lay within the corporate limits of the city. Additionally and perhaps more significantly, the village did not have a commissary. Merchants made up the majority of cotton mill investors. They would not allow one to monopolize mill employees as consumers. For this reason, mill workers enjoyed the freedom of spending money with the local businesses of their choosing. They freely walked the streets of Tupelo and interacted with townspeople and farmers alike. The consumer and familiar relationship of mill operatives and Tupelo citizens provided the strikers with a measure of community support. Male leadership of the mill strike helped to garner local support because traditional society recognized men as household heads with the responsibility of providing for their families. This chapter will demonstrate the shift in owner attitudes toward their workers even as they retained the language of paternalism. Likewise, it will show the genuine disappointment and dismay of the workers who never believed the owners would close the mill permanently.

In chapter four, the women of the garment companies come to the fore. Five of the six women discharged for union activity testified at an NLRB hearing. Their testimony offers a rare look into Southern working women’s experience. The women provided detailed descriptions of their jobs and the working environment, noting the changes wrought by the National Industrial Recovery Administration codes and the result of their invalidation. They expounded upon the
working conditions, with which they were unhappy, and gave invaluable information about their unique effort to organize their fellow workers without arousing management’s suspicion. The women demonstrated their comprehension of regional attitudes towards national unions as well as the rights given them by the Wagner Act. To avoid alienating local citizens both cotton mill and garment workers delayed affiliation with the CIO. After realizing their precarious position, both sought help from national unions and the federal government. Kathleen Patey emerged as the central figure of the would-be strikers. Her story exemplifies a poor woman’s struggle against the wealth and social respectability of small-town elites in the South. Ida Sledge, an organizer from Memphis, and many union supporters in Tupelo believed the success of government intervention on behalf of these women would embolden the rest of the garment workers to join the union. It did not have the desired effect.

Chapter five describes the efforts of Sledge and later organizers to establish a local of the ILGWU in Tupelo. As the five women above suffered from blacklisting and a degree of ostracism while they awaited an NLRB ruling, Sledge and others attempted daily to recruit more union members. The Citizens’ Committee worked to counter her efforts at every turn. The local press, which had favored the cotton mill strikers and initially condemned the low wages of garment manufacturing, changed its tone during the unionization efforts. The women of the garment plants did not enjoy the same level of community support offered to cotton mill employees. Two possibilities can account for this lack of support. The gender of the workers and their resultant status of dependence within the household prevented middle-class citizens from perceiving women’s work as necessary to sustain the family. Fear that local industrialists would close the plants entirely, as they had the cotton mill, cowed the community into
submission. Economic sanctions proved a more powerful tool in Tupelo than paternalistic language.

The three garment companies combined fired an additional twenty-two women for union activity. As members of the ILGWU, the union filed charges against the companies on the fired women’s behalf. Another NLRB hearing brought about a settlement in which the companies agreed once again to pay back wages and reemploy the discharged operatives. This time, however, Tupelo’s industrialists conceived a plan to thwart the government’s intervention. The owners of the largest factory, the Tupelo Garment Company, which operated six plants in various Northeast Mississippi towns, sold one of the plants and restructured the company in a way that legally divided the business into three separate corporations. The NLRB failed to prove that these companies were successors of the Tupelo Garment Company and, therefore, could not compel them to uphold the settlement. Although the discharged workers received back pay, company officials blacklisted the fourteen women fired from Tupelo Garment. The small-town industrialists won the final round and most significant round. The limited commitment of the ILGWU and the failure of federal intervention on behalf of the workers further eroded interest in unionization.

The final chapter places Tupelo’s industrial turmoil within the context of Southern labor history. By examining the language of public discourse and the actual experience of the Tupelo workforce, it becomes clear that paternalism as it existed in the Piedmont did not exist in Northeast Mississippi. Although the language employed by mill officials sounded paternalistic and the men believed themselves to be so, the interactions between management and workers denied a relationship equivalent to that of Piedmont cotton mills. Mill owners in Tupelo enjoyed cultural hegemony in the city and part of the surrounding region based on their economic status.
but hegemony and paternalism are not interchangeable terms. Small-town industrialists exercised control of a more tenuous nature. The cotton mill strike, which enjoyed a measure of popular support, revealed the fragile state of cultural authority. At the same time, management’s decision to close the cotton mill and its continued threats to shut down the garment factories underscored the extent of their economic power.

Several specific factors negatively affected union organization in Tupelo. The economic threat of plant closure frightened not only employees but also many local businessmen who depended on the employees as consumers. Worker division also hampered organization. The choice of some employees to join the union while others adamantly opposed organization stemmed primarily from economic concerns. The inadequate commitment of the ILGWU, specifically the removal of Ida Sledge, undermined the confidence of union members and left them feeling abandoned. Their detractors felt validated in their decision to avoid union affiliation. The final blow came with the failure of the NLRB to force Tupelo industrialists to stop blacklisting union members. None of these factors directly resulted from cultural hegemony or paternalism. Workers living near the edge of economic survival chose the course they felt offered the best possible outcome. Fear of job loss motivated decisions more than anything.

Part of chapter six also discusses class-consciousness formation. Scholars believe that paternalism inhibited the ability of Southern workers to develop class-consciousness. This failure prevented unionization in the region. These arguments, however, recognize only proletarianization as an expression of class-consciousness. If one accepts Thompson’s definition of classes as groups distinguishing themselves from one another based on oppositional interest, accepted manifestations of class identity need not conform to Marxist theory. The political and economic divide that existed between yeoman farmers and the landholding merchant elite, whose
ranks included the industrialists of Tupelo, exemplifies the self-perception of rural people as a group whose interests opposed those of the city’s businessmen. Given that the majority of women working in the garment factories were farmwomen, this study argues that an extant class-consciousness based on rural identity preceded and inhibited proletarianization.
CHAPTER I

NORTHEAST MISSISSIPPI IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many people associate Mississippi with images of the Delta, but the state consists of several sections differing in social, economic and political development. Geographic features and land fertility divide the state into four primary regions. These features determined settlement patterns as well as the economic success of the pioneers, which in turn influenced political development and often divided Mississippi politics along regional lines. Political squabbles between the river counties and the hill country began almost immediately. Economic concerns accounted for the fundamental problem, which spilled over into issues of representation, education and the development of infrastructure.

This study will examine the per capita income and general political tendencies of the four main areas – the Delta (or river counties), the Northeastern Hills, the Piney Woods and the Coast (see figure 1). The Delta, a rich flood plain and the most productive agricultural region of the state, lies between the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers.1 The Old Natchez District, one of the first regions settled and the seat of political power during the territorial period and early statehood of Mississippi, consisted of the river counties located around the city of Natchez. The Northeastern Hill country undulates between hills and bottomland that consist of red sandy loam and reddish clay with certain sections prone to erosion. The exception in this region is a relatively small strip of land known as the Black Prairie. Roughly, 100 miles long and twenty-five miles wide, this

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prairie benefits from excellent farmland. Less fertile than the Delta, the Northeastern Hills opened to white settlement later than any other region. The Piney Woods covered most of South Mississippi. The sandy loam soil made poor farm land but grew an abundance of pine trees that fostered the development of the Mississippi timber industry.² This region, although opened to settlement earlier than the hills, remained less populated than the other sections throughout the nineteenth century, weakening its political impact on early Mississippi history. The coastal region runs inland for approximately twenty miles. The relatively flat terrain consists of fine sand and sandy loams, which sustain some types of timber but make poor farmland.³ The first Europeans in Mississippi settled along the coast when Sieur d’Iberville led 200 French colonists ashore in 1698. Politically weak, the coastal region tended to ally with the Natchez planters.⁴

Avoiding the Spanish to the east and moving in the direction of the previously navigated Mississippi River, the French spread westward to the cities of Natchez and New Orleans. The French period of Mississippi history ended when France surrendered its colonies to the British at the end of the French and Indian War pursuant to the terms of the Treaty of Paris in 1763. A series of British governors ruled the Natchez District until 1779 when Spain, having entered the American Revolutionary War allied with the Americans and captured the area. At the end of the war, Spain refused to give up the district, claiming it as part of West Florida. The lack of support for Spanish control among the inhabitants of the region coupled with the financial crises of the Spanish crown resulted in the American acquisition of the Natchez District as part of the Pinckney Treaty of 1795.⁵

² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 4.
In April of 1798, the United States Congress formally established the Mississippi Territory, which consisted of the present day states of Mississippi, Alabama and parts of Louisiana and Florida. Native American land cessions and the annexation of the coast

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encouraged further settlement. The Choctaw signed the Treaty of Fort Adams in 1801, formally giving up their claim to lands in the Natchez region. The second Choctaw land cession, the Treaty of Mount Dexter in 1805, granted to the United States a tract of land across the southern boundary of the Mississippi Territory. The annexation of Spanish lands in 1812 brought the coastal region around Mobile into the territory. The conclusion of the War of 1812 added another twenty million acres of Creek lands east of the Tombigbee River, the majority of which lies in present day Alabama.

The availability of so much cheap land brought settlers pouring into the Mississippi Territory. Natchez remained the most attractive destination for men with capital. Rising cotton prices and the proximity to the New Orleans market made the trip down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers worthwhile. By 1800, the planters of the Old Natchez District developed into the wealthiest and most politically dominant men in the territory. Immigrants to the eastern part of the Mississippi territory tended to be yeoman farmers moving overland from the older eastern states. They settled primarily in what would become Alabama. A significant number of settlers, however, moved into the Piney Woods to the south and into the Tombigbee region. The settlers along the Tombigbee benefited from the 1816 treaty with the Chickasaws, who gave up not only their holdings north of the Tennessee River but also a tract of land extending southward just beyond Cotton Gin Port, an old trading center on the Tombigbee River in what

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7 Busbee, 54-67; Loewen and Sallis, 44-47, 70; Rowland, 337-481; Weaver, 26.
8 Loewen and Sallis, 80-81.
10 Busbee, 66.
would become Monroe County, Mississippi. Although some plantations existed in the eastern territory, small farms formed the basic agricultural unit.¹²

The growing population in the eastern half of the Mississippi territory became increasingly dissatisfied with Natchez’s political domination. Settlements in the Tombigbee area petitioned Congress in 1803 and again in 1809 to divide the territory, but it refused. According to the Georgia settlement of 1802, Mississippi could gain admittance to the Union when its inhabitants numbered 60,000 or earlier if Congress thought it expedient. In 1816, the United States contained nineteen states, nine slave states and ten free states. Adding Mississippi as the tenth slave state would restore the balance of power. Once again, the question of division arose. Natchez leaders initially opposed division but the rate of population growth in the east led them to realize they could not continue to dominate the entire territory. In addition, territorial delegate William Lattimore understood that dividing the territory into two slave states rather than one would garner support for statehood from Southerners in the United States Senate.¹³ After Congress passed an enabling act, Mississippians began work on the state’s first constitution. The convention gathered in Washington, Mississippi, just a few miles north of Natchez. The river counties dominated, sending thirty-two of the forty-seven delegates to the convention. The Mississippi constitution of 1817, the least democratic of any state admitted after the War of 1812, set high standards of property ownership for suffrage and office holding. It defined citizens as white, male, taxing property owners over twenty-one years of age who had lived in the state for one year and had been a resident of the county or voting district for six months. Senators had to be twenty-six years old and own 300 acres of land or real estate worth $1000.

¹² Weaver, 41.
¹³ Busbee, 69-71; Loewen and Sallis, 80-81.
The new constitution required the governor to be at least thirty years of age and own 600 acres of land or real estate worth $2000. The city of Natchez became the state capital.\textsuperscript{14}

The greatest controversy during the convention involved representation in the legislature. The sparsely populated east wanted senate representation apportioned equally. Delegates from the Natchez area wanted to count slaves in the population for determining representation within the senate. The factions agreed to a compromise in which the free white population determined representation in the house with each county having at least one member. The number of free white taxable inhabitants decided Senate representation. This method of calculating representation in the Senate worked to the advantage of the river counties because more of their people owned large tracts of taxable land. Many inhabitants of the eastern counties (mainly the Piney Woods region at this point) owned small farms or acted as herdsmen who may or may not have owned the land on which they lived. The Natchez aristocrats gained additional political control with the constitutional provision that the legislature would elect all executive and judicial offices, except the governor and lieutenant governor.\textsuperscript{15}

In 1817, a north-south line divided the Mississippi territory with the western portion admitted to the Union as the state of Mississippi and the eastern portion organized as the territory of Alabama. The recently ceded Chickasaw lands along the Tombigbee became Monroe County, Mississippi in 1821.\textsuperscript{16} Most of the state, however, remained the territory of the Chickasaw and Choctaw nations until pressure from the state and federal governments along with a flood of settlers brought about more land cessions. The Choctaw ceded more than five million acres in the western central part of the state in the Treaty of Doak’s Stand in 1820. This region developed quickly. Within ten years, the white population grew almost as large as the Natchez

\textsuperscript{14} Busbee, 71-74; Loewen and Sallis, 81-82; Rowland, 486, 494.
\textsuperscript{15} Busbee, 72.
\textsuperscript{16} Rowland, 471; Stone and Tombigbee River Valley Water Management District (Miss.), 13; Winston, 82.
District, while the plantation/slave system also continued to expand. In 1830, the Choctaw ceded the rest of central Mississippi in the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. Soon thereafter, the Chickasaw, under duress, began negotiations for the land cession that would remove the remaining Native Americans from Mississippi. They signed the Treaty of Pontotoc in 1832, opening up all of North Mississippi to settlement.

FIGURE 2: NATIVE AMERICAN LAND GRANTS

Territorial boundaries based on Herbert Weaver’s map “Indian Land Grants.”

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18 Busbee, 76-77, 80-84; Loewen and Sallis, 47-55; Rowland, 509-510, 554-556, 579-580; Stone and Tombigbee River Valley Water Management District (Miss.), 13.
19 Weaver, 19.
Settlers had to purchase the newly available land from the government. Poor whites with no money could not obtain land, while speculators and wealthy planters quickly bought large tracts believing that it would become an integral part of the burgeoning cotton kingdom. Richer land to the west and the lack of sufficient transportation in the northeast prevented these investors from capitalizing as quickly as they had hoped. The panic of 1837 also prevented speculators from reaping an immediate profit, though they held the land in hopes the value would increase.  

Statistical studies in Tippah and Tate counties reveal that land companies reaped a profit of only four percent and individuals earned even less. As prices began to rebound in the late 1840s and early 1850s, the landholders sold smaller tracts to yeoman farmers, many of whom emigrated from the Piedmont area of the Carolinas and Georgia. With the removal of the Native Americans, some settlers living in Alabama moved farther west into the hill country of Mississippi because it most resembled the land and soil to which they were accustomed. A few moderately wealthy men established plantations in Northeastern Mississippi and, despite their inability to purchase land, a significant number of poor whites emigrated as well. The yeoman farmer, however, dominated the region.

The influx of these yeoman farmers, mostly Jacksonian Democrats, contributed to the call for a new state constitution. Between 1820 and 1830, the population of Mississippi had grown more than eighty-one percent and the state’s new residents called for democratic reforms, such as the abolition of property qualifications for voting or holding office. Representatives from the river counties, who knew such reforms would threaten their dominance, resisted initial efforts to amend the constitution. With the opening of new land in the north, however, the river counties

22 Owsley, 60-61; Bolton, 67, 86-88; Weaver, 26-29; Winston, 102.
23 Rowland, 562.
changed their mind and began pushing for a new constitutional convention. Leaders sought to
draft the new constitution before the organization of new northern counties, whose
representatives would strengthen the Democratic Party and provide a more serious challenge to
the power of the Natchez District.\(^{24}\) A constitutional convention assembled in October of 1832,
drafting a new constitution, which retained the basic structure of the 1817 constitution. It,
however, contained some significant changes: the abolition of the property qualification for
voting or holding office, the direct election of state officials except United States Senators, and
term limits.\(^{25}\) The most intense controversy of the convention concerned judicial reform,
specifically the method of choosing judges. One faction known as the “aristocrats” sought to
have the governor or legislature appoint all judges. Another group, the “half hogs,” suggested
the appointment of state Supreme Court justices but the election of county and circuit judges.
The last faction, the “whole hogs,” insisted on popular election of all judges. The “whole hogs”
carried the day with the popular election of all Mississippi judges for specified terms. The
constitution also designed the court system, leaving no part of it to the legislature. Whereas the
Constitution of 1817 had been one of the most restrictive state constitutions, the Constitution of
1832 proved to be one of the most democratic, at least for whites.\(^{26}\)

Another example of the Natchez Whigs’ attempt to maintain political power occurred in
1836 when Governor Lynch refused to issue writs of election to the twelve newly created
counties in the North.\(^ {27}\) A hotly contested U.S. Senate seat dominated the 1836 legislative
session. Mississippi Whigs feared representatives from the yeoman populated northern counties

\(^{24}\) Guy Fulton Ferrell, "A Study of Political, Social, and Economic Conditions in Pontotoc County Mississippi to
1860" (Thesis (M A), University of Mississippi, 1939, 17; Loewen and Sallis, 87; Winston, 111.
\(^{25}\) Busbee, 85-88; Loewen and Sallis, 88; Rowland, 571.
\(^{26}\) Fortune,280-283.
\(^{27}\) Rowland, 589.
would give the Jacksonian Democrats enough votes to win the seat. The counties ignored his refusal, held elections and sent representatives to the legislature anyway. By the 1840s, the growing population of the north and central counties allowed Mississippi Democrats to wrest political control from the Whigs. Their political battles continued until the end of Reconstruction.

Four counties made up the northeastern corner of Mississippi: Tippah, Tishomingo, Pontotoc and Itawamba. The population expanded remarkably from 1840 to 1860 with a 235% increase for the combined counties (see figure 3). Unlike the Natchez/Delta region of the state, whites continuously outnumbered slaves with non-slaveholders predominating. In 1860, eleven percent of white adults owned slaves (see figure 4). Although a minority, their wealth and social standing made them an influential group.

FIGURE 3: POPULATION 1840-1860

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28 Busbee, 92.
29 Rowland, 589.
Along with a limited number of planters, the population consisted of a significant quantity of poor whites – landless tenant farmers and wage laborers. The yeoman farmer, however, continued to be the largest economic group in these counties. In the rugged frontier society, it might be difficult to distinguish between yeoman farmers and poor whites. Both groups engaged in subsistence farming and augmented their living through lumbering, hunting and fishing. Merriman Herndon described life in Pontotoc County before the war to a WPA interviewer,

“The main crop was corn, peas, and pumpkins. Some cotton was grown; one to three bales to a family. The number of bales grown was according to the number of slaves the family had, if any. The nearest cotton market was Memphis; the cotton was carried to market on an ox wagon. It usually took from ten days to two weeks for the trip. The cotton brought from eight to ten cents per pound. With the proceeds, the farmer bought a barrel of molasses, sack of coffee, one hundred pounds of sugar, and two kits of mackerel. This was the grocery bill until the next fall.”

Herndon goes on to describe the process of tanning leather because “most all of the families tanned their own hides and made their own shoes.” His family raised cattle,

31 Bolton, 84.
32 Weaver, 57.
34 Busbee, 106; Weaver, 57.
hogs, horses and sheep. Most families raised their own tobacco, made their own dyes and soap, spun their own cloth and grew gourds for use as household vessels and buttons.  

Significant differences divided poor whites and yeoman. Yeoman farmers owned land. They had often sold property before migrating westward and therefore had the ability to purchase land in the new territory. Poor whites with no capital could not purchase land. In addition, as Charles Bolton has shown, poor whites found it difficult to improve their economic status. As day laborers, they might find work at sawmills or on large farms during harvest (often working alongside slaves). The low-paying or seasonal nature of this work made it difficult to accumulate money. As tenant farmers, landholders engaged them on terms similar to post-war sharecroppers. Even before the Civil War, a cycle of perpetual debt entrapped them. For this reason, many left Northeast Mississippi, creating a steady flow of poor whites both in and out of the region. The similarity of lifestyle and economic concerns for both of these subsistence-based groups often led the yeomen and poor whites into the same political camp. At times, however, some yeoman, as property owners, took the political view of the planters, which made for a vibrant and unstable political arena.

Some early local political struggles centered on the lack of transportation. All North Mississippians desired better transportation, but yeomen and poor whites had little money to contribute to railroad building. Yeoman farmers practiced subsistence farming and produced only small amounts of cotton, limiting their interest in the railroad. In fact, efforts to raise money in 1851 for the Pontotoc section of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad using a tax increase met with strong opposition, failing to receive the two-thirds vote necessary. Success came the


36 Bolton, 84-112.
following year when railroad promoters hit upon the notion of allowing residents to convert tax receipts into railroad stock.\textsuperscript{37}

The most notable example of political division within these counties occurred during the election of delegates to Mississippi’s secession convention in 1861. Even though only fifteen delegates opposed the secession ordinance, one should not think that the vast majority of Mississippians supported secession. The state’s citizens expressed a variety of opinions about how best to deal with the election of Abraham Lincoln and the secession of South Carolina, including a significant number of Democrats who wished to remain in the Union.\textsuperscript{38} A Democrat in Pontotoc County noted in 1858 “there is a goodly number of our fellow citizens who are wedded and joined to this intense Union loving party, and no reasoning can arouse them to the impending danger.”\textsuperscript{39} Because the convention refused to put the matter to a popular vote, determining the number and region of Mississippians who desired to remain in the union is impossible. It is significant, however, that the four northeastern counties sent coalition slates to the convention; that is, they sent delegates possessing differing opinions on secession. The Pontotoc County delegation included Robert Flournoy, a strong advocate for maintaining the union, along with Charles Fontaine and Hugh Miller, both of whom supported secession.\textsuperscript{40}

While these split delegations played into the hands of the secessionists by making true opposition all but impossible, the presence of anti-secessionists in these delegations may reveal more than a cursory glance allows.\textsuperscript{41} Consider that the election of delegates took place only six

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\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 89-90. \\
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Examiner} 1858. \\
\textsuperscript{40} Ferrell, 37; Winston, 312. \\
\textsuperscript{41} Many of these delegates did not refer to themselves as anti-secessionists. They styled themselves as cooperationists, meaning they opposed the timing of secession. As both Bolton and Barney have pointed out, however, this stance may have been the only safe form of dissent (Bolton, 163; Barney, 237-45).
\end{flushright}
weeks after a presidential election and that less than fifty percent of those voting in the presidential election bothered to vote in the election of convention delegates. In Pontotoc County, voter turnout averaged only thirty-eight percent of the number voting in the 1860 presidential race. Some historians have suggested that low voter turnout represented either apathy or ignorance about the question of secession or an attitude of inevitability. Others suggest that many voters believed the issue would come before the people in a popular referendum. As William Barney has noted, however, one should not overlook fear when considering low voter turnout. John H. Aughey, a Presbyterian preacher who rode circuit in Attala and Choctaw Counties, reported that Unionists did not canvas in Tallahatchie County for fear of being hanged. The minister’s personal experience at the polls also helps explain the election of secessionist delegates from many central counties. “Approaching the polls, I asked for a Union ticket, and was informed that none had been printed, and that it would be advisable to vote the secession ticket.” While Aughey had the courage to write out a Union ticket and cast it, many lacked such bravery. He continued, “I knew of many who were in favor of the Union, who were intimidated by threats, and by the odium attending it, from voting at all . . . Many suspected of Union sentiments were lynched.” With this type of violence and intimidation in other parts of Mississippi, the election of coalition slates from the northeastern counties, where voter turnout amounted to less than fifty percent of the eligible population, suggests the existence of substantial unionist sentiment.

Substantial, of course, does not mean majority. Even though opposition to secession came primarily from the hill country and old Whig strongholds, many yeoman farmers supported

42 Bolton, 171.
43 Ferrell, 37; Rainwater, 196; Bolton, 164, 171.
44 Barney, 268.
46 Ibid., 46-47.
47 Bolton, 171.
secession. Some did not believe that secession would lead to war or, if it did, the war would be short lived. They thought that secession would bring concessions from the North, which would shortly bring about reunion.\textsuperscript{48} Glover Moore suggests that the prosperous cotton economy of the 1850s made the small farmers self-confident and “caused them to view the prospect of Southern independence too optimistically.”\textsuperscript{49} Whatever their reasoning, many yeoman farmers in Northeast Mississippi supported secession and volunteered for military service. Even those who had opposed disunion, such as Robert Flournoy, followed the majority into war.\textsuperscript{50}

The hardships of war soon tempered whatever enthusiasm the Northern invasion excited in the lower classes of white Southerners. In addition, the conscription act passed by the Confederate government in 1862 angered and alienated many white Southerners not only because it forced military service but also because it exempted the wealthy. Disloyalty within the Confederacy became a serious problem as desertion rates soared.\textsuperscript{51} According to Aughey, vigilance committees in North Mississippi worked hard to round up deserters, draft dodgers, and unionists, especially those who spied for the Union and traded across enemy lines.\textsuperscript{52} They imprisoned Aughey himself in Tupelo along with forty-one other political prisoners.\textsuperscript{53} John Bettersworth described the “disloyal country” as including “the greater part of the hilly country stretching from the northeastern Mississippi-Tennessee border down through the central part of the state …It was an area predominating in yeoman …”\textsuperscript{54} Much of the unionist or anti-

\textsuperscript{52} Aughey, 76-77.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 87, 91-92.
confederate sentiment centered in Tishomingo County with considerable disaffection in neighboring Pontotoc and Itawamba counties, an area that included the later organized Lee County. In fact, once the Federal army pushed the Confederates out of Corinth in 1862, many in the area quickly took a loyalty oath. M. A. Higginbottom, a native of Tishomingo County, joined the Union army and served in the Federal Secret Service, guiding Union troops through the area. A number of Tishomingo County residents pledged not to support the Confederacy if the Federals would allow them to maintain their local government. Federal officers accepted their offer and in January of 1865, allowed the county to hold regular sessions of the circuit, probate and police courts. They also allowed railroad service on both tracks running through the county.

With the war’s end in 1865, the debate about readmission and reconstruction dominated politics for the next twelve years. As part of his reconstruction plan, President Andrew Johnson appointed William L. Sharkey governor of Mississippi and called for an election of delegates for a constitutional convention in August of 1865. The bitter taste of war spelled victory for Union Whigs over the secessionist Democrats. The convention focused only on those things necessary for readmission to the Union, and Johnson accepted the new constitution. Congress, rejecting Johnson’s reconstruction program, refused to seat Mississippi senators. As Washington wrangled over reconstruction programs, officials elected in 1865 continued to hold office in

55 Ibid., 219.
Mississippi as well as other Southern states. During this time, the state governments enacted the Black Codes – a set of laws that denied African Americans practically all rights of citizenship.\(^58\)

Major General Edward Ord took charge of the Mississippi-Arkansas district and immediately began reregistering voters, including all adult black males and excluding many white leaders. This political moment marked the formation of Mississippi’s first Republican Party, composed of Northern carpetbaggers, Southern scalawags and black ministers and teachers. In November of 1867, the state held an election to determine whether voters favored another constitutional convention. If so, they would elect representatives. White conservatives tried a variety of maneuvers to resist Congressional Reconstruction. They boycotted the election hoping to stall the convention, which required the participation of a majority of registered voters. Their plan failed. The convention assembled, and the Republicans won a large majority of the seats. The so-called “Black and Tan Convention” did not significantly change the structure of government but included some important new features: it prohibited slavery, forbade the state to withdraw from the Union, and excluded all former Confederate civil and military leaders from holding public office. In 1868, Democrats and Whigs joined under the Democratic label to oppose the new constitution. Despite the presence of federal troops, the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups used both subtle and overt acts to prevent African Americans from voting. They succeeded in defeating the new constitution; Mississippi remained under military rule.\(^59\)

Mississippi Republicans could not unite – the moderates opposed the proscription clauses upon which the radicals had insisted. President-elect Ulysses Grant sided with the

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\(^59\) Busbee, 153-156; Garner, 161-220; Harris, 550-566.
moderates and convinced Congress to approve a plan for resubmitting the constitution to Mississippi voters. This time, however, voters considered the controversial proscription clauses individually. In 1869, moderate Republican James Lusk Alcorn became governor and removed the constitution’s unpopular provisions. The new legislature convened in 1870 and quickly completed the requirements for readmission to the Union, restoring Mississippi to “proper relations” and ending military rule. The trouble for Mississippi Republicans, however, did not end. Factional strife continued as carpetbaggers and scalawags distrusted one another while the infighting disillusioned many black leaders. The most significant political struggles from 1867 to 1875 occurred between factions within the Republican Party. Many considered Governor Alcorn the man most able to lead Mississippi into the future. He disappointed many supporters by resigning as governor to accept a seat in the Senate. He also butted heads with many carpetbaggers over what he considered “schemes” whereby they could plunder the state. The most damaging rift to Mississippi’s Republican Party came during the gubernatorial election of 1873. Alcorn ran for governor again, opposed by Adelbert Ames, another of the most powerful men in the party. Whether driven by politics or personal attachment, the white voters split almost evenly, leaving the decision to black voters. The Republican decision to court black votes and the appointment of black officials after the election of Ames provided fuel for Democratic propaganda. Conservative Republicans who had supported Alcorn began to find common ground with Democrats.

By 1875, the Democratic Party began to reemerge. Economic hardships, higher taxes and fear of black domination herded many white voters into the Democratic camp. At the state convention in 1875, the Democrats devised the “First Mississippi Plan” for regaining political

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60 Busbee, 156-160; Garner, 272-277; Harris, 566-570.
ascendancy. They intended to keep African Americans away from the polls, stuff ballot boxes, destroy or alter Republican ballots and use any means necessary to reclaim power. It worked. The Democrats won overwhelming victories in the 1875 elections and the federal government showed no intention of intervening or questioning the results. Early in 1876, Democrats impeached Republican officials, charging them with theft, bribery and other unlawful actions. By the end of the year, Democrats had retaken all three branches of government; Mississippi had been “redeemed.”

While politicians struggled for power, most Mississippians showed more concern for personal survival. War had ravaged the state. Fields were overgrown and livestock stolen or killed. Railroads remained inoperable and roads impassable. One or both armies had confiscated cotton crops before war’s end. The people had no money and little food. Both races and all classes suffered as Mississippi’s economy remained tied to the fortunes of cotton. Although many farmers recognized the importance of diversification, they needed money to finance a new crop. The only crop for which they could get an advance was cotton. The high prices in 1865 and 1866, resulting from war shortages, also made cotton appealing to farmers. An overabundance of rain, however, limited crop production during these years. Many farmers found themselves saddled with heavy debt. The cotton crop of 1867 looked promising, but the bottom fell out of the market. Land values plummeted and landowners forfeited thousands of acres to state and local governments for unpaid taxes. Three wealthy men from Pontotoc County--Charles D. Fountaine, James Gordon and Henry Duke--lost large tracts of land for unpaid taxes. Signs of economic growth appeared between 1870 and 1874. Cotton production increased, which drove land values higher, and rail service returned. Nevertheless, by the mid

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62 Busbee, 161-163; Harris, 372-409; Sansing, 584-589.
1870s, most farmers throughout the state depended on local merchants or planter-merchants, themselves indebted to business firms in the Mississippi Valley or Northeastern United States.63

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) histories provide specific details about Reconstruction in Northeast Mississippi, including a letter from Richard Bolton of Pontotoc County dated July 9, 1866 printed in its entirety. Bolton, a land agent for the New York & Mississippi Land Company, described the situation in Northeast Mississippi:

“The wheat crop in this county is said to be about half a crop – say about five bushels to the acre or less. Other counties in North Mississippi have been about the same. The corn and cotton are much injured by the expansive quantity of rain, and crops are badly in the grass. There is much fear entertained that there will not be a supply of breadstuffs. …As the prosperity of this people, devoted almost exclusively to agriculture, depends on their crops, I fear from present appearances that we need not indulge great expectation from active business in the Fall and Winter. … I have heard of a few small farmers who … say they are doing nearly as well as formerly, but the greater number of planters think they will make less than their expenses the present year … There are no land buyers as yet, and no money yet to pay debts.”64

Politically, Northeast Mississippi suffered from uncertainty as the state negotiated the various manifestations of Reconstruction. Structural changes during Congressional Reconstruction caused confusion on the local level. County Boards of Police became Boards of Supervisors and several local offices gained or loss jurisdiction with the creation of new counties. Union County claimed land from Northern Pontotoc and Southern Tippah Counties. An area from the eastern part of Pontotoc County and the western part of Itawamba County became Lee County. Land previously belonging to Tippah and Tishomingo counties became Alcorn and Prentiss Counties. Tippah County also gave a portion of land to the creation of

64 WPA, Part II, 8-10.
Benton County (figures 5 and 6). Furthermore, counties held no local elections from 1866 to 1871, as the provisional governors appointed local officials. With few carpetbaggers in Northeast Mississippi, the appointees consisted of local men who had joined the Republican Party, otherwise known as scalawags.

FIGURE 5: NORTHEAST MISSISSIPPI COUNTIES BEFORE DIVISION

FIGURE 6: NORTHEAST MISSISSIPPI COUNTIES AFTER DIVISION

Northeast Mississippians, who believed that working with the Reconstruction government served the best interest of the state and the region, led the Republican Party in the

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65 Sansing, 576.
66 Braden, 136; Winston, 312; WPA, Part II, 2.
area. By analyzing several elections from 1871-1873, Warren A. Ellem determined that approximately 692 Scalawags voted in Northeast Mississippi, most of whom came from the old Whig Party. These men constituted just over one percent of the white population. Some had been openly unionist before and during the war. Most notably, Robert Worth Flournoy of Pontotoc County, a delegate to the secession convention, transitioned from plantation owner and slaveholder to radical Republican. His experience after the war reveals a great deal about Northeast Mississippi during Reconstruction.

Flournoy had come to Pontotoc County from Georgia in 1856. Before the war, he operated a plantation with sixty-six slaves in the northern part of the county near New Albany. Opposing secession, he successfully ran for a seat at the secession convention as a unionist. He voted for the secession ordinance after being “assured by five or six of the most prominent secessionists that if we would vote for the ordinance of secession they would submit that ordinance to the people of Mississippi.” He and several other members believed that the people of Mississippi would reject secession if allowed to vote. The convention, however, did not put the matter before the people. With the passage of the ordinance, Democratic leaders withdrew Mississippi from the Union. Flournoy, bitterly disappointed but resigned to the inevitable, returned to Pontotoc where he raised a company of soldiers and became a captain in the Confederate army. Shortly after his arrival in Virginia, however, Flournoy decided that his

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68 Ellem.
70 1860 Federal Census for Pontotoc County, Slave Schedule.
71 Robert W. Flournoy, "Testimony Taken by The Joint Select Committee to Inquire into The Conditions of Affairs in The Late Insurrectionary States," (Government Printing Office, 1872), 95.
conscience would not allow him to take up arms against the government of the United States and he resigned his commission. At war’s end, Flournoy lost his slaves and much of his property. He had managed to maintain possession of his cotton, which sold for nearly a dollar a pound. This money allowed him to move to the city of Pontotoc, provide a comfortable living for his family and become actively engaged in the politics of Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{72}

Flournoy helped to establish the first Republican Party in Mississippi. A radical Republican, he called for the political proscription of all former Confederates. By the 1870s, Flournoy had gained a reputation for being one of the most radical men in the state. He published a newspaper in Pontotoc called \textit{Equal Rights} in which he advocated civil rights for freedmen as well as integrated public schools.\textsuperscript{73} He even went so far as to challenge Governor Alcorn in a public debate via state newspapers over the creation of a black university in Mississippi. Flournoy believed black men deserved admission to the University of Mississippi at Oxford, negating the need to create a separate institution. Because of his paper and his outspokenness, Flournoy, who served as both deputy postmaster at Pontotoc and the county school superintendent, received a visit from the Ku Klux Klan on May 13, 1871. When friends warned Flournoy that a group of men had inquired as to the whereabouts of his home, he and his associates went out to meet the masked riders. Judge Austin Pollard, a chancery court judge, went unarmed into the street to face the group and demanded they surrender. They fired at Pollard and the rest of Flournoy’s company returned fire, driving the mob from town. One of the riders, mortally wounded during the incident, revealed before his death that the group had come


\textsuperscript{73} No extant copies of \textit{Equal Rights} can be located.
to capture Flournoy. Beyond that, the young man could not say what they intended to do with him.

Flournoy wrote to President Grant on May 1 and 3 stating that he had received death threats and requesting protection as a government agent, based on his position as deputy postmaster. He also telegraphed Secretary of War William W. Belknap on May 18 and wrote to US Senator Oliver P. Morton of Indiana on May 25 declaring that the group expelled from Pontotoc threatened to return and burn the town.74 Testimony taken by the Joint Select Committee on affairs in the late insurrectionary states as well local newspapers documented the activity of the Ku Klux Klan in North Mississippi. The Klan targeted black schools and teachers of black schools, as well as any black person accused of a crime against a white person. Just as elsewhere in the South, witnesses refused to testify against any of these lawbreakers.

Flournoy’s experience typified conflict with the Klan. Troops came to Pontotoc but stayed only one day and did nothing. The authorities dismissed the charges Flournoy filed against Democratic leaders in Cherry Creek, a small village north of Pontotoc believed to the home of the riders involved in the May 13 attack. Further, teachers whom Flournoy and the Pontotoc Board of Education had hired to teach in the black schools went unprotected. Most of the teachers Flournoy hired were local white men, but their membership in the Democratic Party did not prevent them from receiving threatening visits. Northeast Mississippi saw as much Klan activity as any other area in the South. The primary grievance centered on the public schools. Although many Northeast Mississippians did not oppose educating the freedmen, the taxes

employed to fund the public school system and the use of Yankee and/or Republican teachers, whom they believed would indoctrinate the freedmen with Republican ideas, angered them.\textsuperscript{75}

The most interesting aspect of the Flournoy affair stemmed from the reaction of the citizens of Pontotoc. A small-scale propaganda war ensued as each side tried to gain the support of the populace. As news of the May 13 events circulated around Pontotoc and its environs, C. D. Fountaine, leading Democrat and Grand Cyclops of the Pontotoc Ku Klux Klan, made it clear that had he been in town, he could have prevented the entire affair. Furthermore, he stated that the men of Cherry Creek had no right to make this raid; that if the citizens of Pontotoc could live with Flournoy in their midst, the men of the county should leave him alone.\textsuperscript{76} Not everyone agreed. Dr. H. H. Porter, a local dentist, published a circular in which he intended to “defend the raiders from the public censure their invasion had engendered.” He purported that these “boys” had been drinking and became mischievous when they encountered another group of “boys” in similar circumstance. The two groups fired on one another in their drunkenness. Both groups were very penitent, he declared. Of course, within this apology Porter jabbed at Flournoy and added a warning for his “colored friends,” admonishing them to abandon the Republican Party and “take the side of the white folks.”\textsuperscript{77} Clearly, many citizens of Pontotoc disapproved of the attack. Even Porter’s attempted explanation of the affair met with intense scrutiny, prompting him to admit publically that he had fabricated his account and to apologize for having published it.\textsuperscript{78}

The difficulty lay in determining whether the Klan and its tactics or the intended target drew local censure on this particular occasion. Interviewees provided accounts of Klan activity.

\textsuperscript{75} Abney, 246-249; Braden, ; Flournoy; Newton, 35.
\textsuperscript{76} Abney, 249.
\textsuperscript{77} WPA, 26-28.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
in the WPA histories, which shine a negative light on the organization. Just as many, however, make the claim that the group started out as a noble organization that later became corrupted.\textsuperscript{79} As for Flournoy, many found his political opinions repugnant, but on a personal level, he commanded a great deal of respect as evidenced by the town’s people who defended him and by the assertion of his political rival, Fountaine, that he should be left alone. Because his political power waned as the Mississippi Republican Party became more conservative, locals ceased to consider Flournoy a threat. He continued, however, to hold radical convictions. Still, at his death in 1894, the local newspaper lauded him as “a most highly respected and honored citizen … a true Christian [and] faithful friend.”\textsuperscript{80} Writing in the early 1930s, local historian E. T. Winston stated,

“We may therefore concede to Col. Flournoy at this late day and revere his memory, when soberly and calmly we reflect that he spared our people many of the evils that attended Reconstruction in other communities throughout the Southland, by relieving us of the crowning horror of carpet-bag rule. While the spoils of office were the chief cause of disagreement through this era, Colonel Flournoy managed to extend these favors to home people…”

Winston went on to praise Flournoy for the “magnificent public school system” in the county, which Flournoy created as superintendent of education and to note that “if he [Flournoy] had been inspired only by the prevailing motives of rapine and plunder, his prominence and talents would have entitled him to a more elevated and lucrative office.”\textsuperscript{81} Clearly, personality weighed heavier than one’s political stance when it came to personal relationships in a small town.

Within five short years, the Democrats once again held sway in Mississippi. The “Redeemers” wanted to diversify the state’s economy by building railroads and bringing in industry. Their railroad building efforts succeeded, but attempts to bring industry progressed

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 35-37; Abney, 250-253.
\textsuperscript{80} Sentinel, October 25, 1894.
\textsuperscript{81} Winston, 312-313.
more slowly. The state remained economically dependent upon cotton. As was the case in the rest of the state, farms in Northeast Mississippi had become smaller as farmers forfeited or sold all or a portion of their land for taxes and/or debt. In 1860, farms of ninety-nine acres or less numbered 4,375. By 1870, that figure had grown to 9,868 while farms over 100 acres had decreased from 1,259 to only 786. The price of cotton fell as well. High prices after the war encouraged many farmers to plant cotton in hopes of recouping their losses. They also planted the crop --cotton-- for which they could get a loan. Early crop failures in the mid 1860s left many farmers with large debts. Falling cotton prices throughout the 1870s increased that debt. Merchants were the only Mississippians who prospered.83

With few banks in Mississippi, farmers had to rely on credit from local merchants, many of whom secured a lien on the farmer’s crop to insure payment. Merchants also charged higher prices for goods bought on credit. In addition, he charged ten percent interest on debts at the end of the year. When the farmer harvested his crop, he had to sell it to the merchant because of the distance to cotton markets and because railroads charged higher fees to farmers with small shipments than they did to merchants with larger shipments. Seldom did farmers produce enough to pay for their purchases throughout the year. They began each new year already heavily indebted. Consequently, farmer discontent targeted merchants who appeared to prosper at their expense.84

The Redeemer or Bourbon government believed economic prosperity lay in attracting industry. For this reason, Mississippi politicians allied themselves with Eastern businessmen and railroad interests. Local merchants became boosters of their localities and sought to use tax

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82 Federal Census 1860 and 1870 for Mississippi counties Alcorn, Benton, Itawamba, Lee, Pontotoc, Prentiss, Tippah, Tishomingo, and Union.
84 Ibid., 9-10.
dollars to improve roads and build railroads and factories. Farmers felt increasingly at odds with the state government and local governments dominated by merchants. The railroads caused particular angst. Farmers disliked paying taxes to build railroads, which charged outrageous fees.  

During the 1870s and 80s, Northeast Mississippi towns competed with one another over the route of the Memphis to Birmingham railroad. The initial charter for the company laid a course that would move through Pontotoc and Chickasaw Counties. Nathan Bedford Forrest, who headed the company, traveled along the route soliciting stock subscriptions from counties, towns and individuals. The opening of coalfields in Northern Alabama caused railroad promoters to change the route. Frank Burkitt, a resident of Chickasaw County and leader of the Grange and Farmers’ Alliance, tried to prevent the change. Unable to do so, he demanded the company repay the subscriptions with interest, which it refused to do. Burkitt took his case before the public charging political corruption. Politicians and business leaders conspired against the interests of the farmers, he said. Burkitt warned Lee County residents that railroad construction would damage their property and would not reimburse them. As a result, several area farmers insisted on immediate payment when such damages occurred. This insistence placed a financial burden on Tupelo citizens.

An early effort by farmers to organize to seek economic relief came with the establishment of the Grange in 1867. Intended to be an educational and fraternal organization, the Grange had no political agenda, although some Grangers advocated for political reform, like the repeal of the lien law.  

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87 Revels, 610.
for farmers. Emerging in Mississippi in 1878, the party won converts in north and central Mississippi with its plan to increase the paper money supply. A state senator from Tippah County left the Democratic Party to join the Greenbackers, as did a senator from Chickasaw County, just south of Pontotoc. They were less successful, however, in most Northeastern counties. In Lee County, the leading Democrats agreed with the Greenback movement’s attempt to obtain more political influence for farmers. Once it became apparent, however, that the Greenbackers would challenge the local Democratic Party, area leaders denounced them as traitors.\textsuperscript{88} Citizens at a political meeting in Pontotoc County shouted down one Greenback candidate.\textsuperscript{89} Northeast Mississippi farmers preferred the Democratic Party. Michael Hyman has suggested that local party leaders in this region responded to the needs of small farmers, the majority of whom did not feel they had to look to another party to challenge state policies.\textsuperscript{90} Soon their feeling would change.

By the mid 1880s, the farmers’ situation had not improved, leading to increased dissatisfaction with Democratic leaders. At the same time, more and more farmers became involved in the Farmer’s Alliance. Working within the Democratic Party, Alliance men elected a number of Alliance Democrats to state and local offices. With success, agrarian protest grew louder, as they clamored for a new state constitution. White yeoman farmers wanted a reapportionment of the legislature because black majority counties held over half the seats in the legislature, while paying less than half the taxes and having fewer voters. Yeomen felt Bourbons manipulated the black vote to maintain their own power. Reapportionment would give white majority counties a stronger political voice. Small farmers also wanted an elected judiciary –

\textsuperscript{88} Grisham, 52.  
\textsuperscript{89} Cresswell, 24-25; Grisham, 52.  
one they hoped would be less likely to rule in favor of creditors.\textsuperscript{91} Mississippi drafted a new constitution in 1890, but the agrarians did not get all they wanted. The elective judiciary was defeated outright. Although white counties obtained a number of new legislative seats, black counties continued to outnumber them, sixty-nine to sixty-four.\textsuperscript{92}

The problem, of course, stemmed from the power of the wealthy white men who owned the large tracts of land in the black majority counties. One aspect of the 1890 agenda focused on how best to prevent black suffrage. While white leaders from black counties wanted to use African American residents in population counts to determine representation, they did not want black men to participate in choosing the representative. Considerable debate arose because delegates from black counties wanted strict voting requirements, which centered on property ownership and literacy. White county delegates favored a moderate approach to prevent the disfranchisement of a large number of poor whites.\textsuperscript{93} The plan framed by the suffrage committee called for the assessment of a poll tax on all adult males of two dollars per year. Authorities could not compel payment but they would not allow anyone to vote who had not paid the tax for two consecutive years. In addition, voter registrars required citizens to read or demonstrate understanding of a part of the state constitution. The one administering the test chose the specific section, which allowed them to administer easier tests to whites, while black men faced more difficult challenges.\textsuperscript{94} Regardless of this apparent loophole, many poor whites suffered disfranchisement along with nearly all African American men.

Aside from disfranchisement, the 1890 constitution targeted many civil rights of Mississippi’s African American citizens. Section 12 guaranteed the right to bear arms but

\textsuperscript{92} Cresswell, 106.
\textsuperscript{93} Busbee, 172.
\textsuperscript{94} Cresswell, 105-106.
included a new clause that forbade carrying concealed weapons. Authorities could enforce the law selectively. Lawmakers omitted several sections of the 1868 constitution intended to protect the civil rights of property less or illiterate persons. They reasserted property and educational requirements for jurors and officeholders, while section 263 specifically prohibited marriage between whites and African Americans, including mulattos, defined as anyone having “one-eighth or more of Negro blood.”

In 1891, white agrarians set their sights on Mississippi’s United States senators. Ethelbert Barksdale, an Alliance Democrat, challenged the incumbent, James Z. George. Despite or, perhaps, because of the disfranchisement of many black voters, violence not seen since Reconstruction characterized this election. Vigilantes burned the newspaper published by Frank Burkitt, a leader of Mississippi’s Farmer’s Alliance, in Chickasaw County. An unidentified man shot Burkitt in the head, though he survived as the bullet only grazed him. In addition, George supporters stole voter registration books in Pontotoc County hoping to prevent the election in a strongly agrarian county. In Lee County, Alliance men followed the example of other alliances and nominated their own slate of candidates within the Democratic Party. When party officials left their nominees off the ballot, over 800 farmers attended a mass rally in Tupelo vowing to support their candidates. After a heated election that preyed on racial fears, the Alliance men suffered a defeat that demoralized many farmers. Barksdale lost his bid and his defeat convinced some agrarians that the Democratic machine was too strong for them to fight from within the ranks.

In 1892, the presidential election divided Mississippi Democrats. Some favored Grover Cleveland’s fiscal conservatism while others preferred Benjamin Harrison because of

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95 Busbee, 172-173.
96 Grisham, 54-62.
97 Cresswell, 111-112; Stone, "The Emergence of the Populist Party" 16.
Cleveland’s staunch hard money views. The convention nominated Cleveland on the first ballot, and Mississippi Democratic leaders seemed satisfied. Agrarians, however, were not. The first hint of the emergence of a Mississippi Populist Party came on June 3, 1892 when Union County’s delegate to the Democratic National Convention decided to stay “up North” to attend the Populist Convention. By June 22, the Populists held a convention in Jackson with seventy-five delegates representing twenty-two counties. Prohibition proved a particularly contentious issue, but the party voted by a narrow margin to include it in its platform. Other planks endorsed by Mississippi Populists included tariff reform, the abolition of national banks, the graduated income tax, direct election of senators, direct two percent Federal loans to farmers, currency expansion, free silver, the sub-treasury system and the regulation of railroads.\(^98\)

Initially, the new party suffered poor organization and lacked leadership. On July 16, 1892, however, Frank Burkitt resigned as a Democratic Presidential Elector, denounced the Democratic Party as the “moribund carcass of bourbon democracy,” and became the leader of the Populist Party in Mississippi. Many Alliance men followed him, making the Populist Party a power in Mississippi politics virtually overnight. The Populists entered six candidates for the state’s seven congressional seats, Burkitt among them. Many Democratic newspapers went over to the Populist side, like the Pontotoc Democrat, which became the People’s Banner. In all, thirty-eight newspapers in the state promoted the cause of the Populists.\(^99\)

The campaign was violent and bitter. Opponents physically attacked the candidates. In early September, an editor in Tupelo caned Burkitt. Hardly two weeks later, a Chickasaw Democrat whom Burkitt had accused of stuffing ballot boxes, attacked him on the speaker’s platform. Burkitt’s supporters in Chickasaw and Pontotoc raised money to buy guns and

\(^{98}\) Stone, “The Emergence of the Populist Party” 19-21.
provided him a bodyguard for the remainder of his speaking tour. As Democrats sought to keep Alliance men in their party, they characterized Populists as Republican stooges and suggested a Populist-Republican conspiracy to re-impose “Negro rule.” Newspapers not only slandered local and national Populists figures but also warned Populists they faced a bleak future if they did not return to the Democratic Party. In Lee County, when Populists petitioned for the appointment of federal supervisors of election, the local paper printed the names of all who had signed the petition.  

The strength of the Populists worried the Democratic leaders. Senators George and Walthall came back to Mississippi from Washington to campaign against the party. In addition, Democratic candidates began to steal Populist issues, such as the graduated income tax, tariff reduction and free silver. Even Walthall, once a staunch gold bug, came out for free silver. Populist concern about election fraud stemmed from Democratic control of the election machinery throughout the state. The most common dirty trick did not involve stuffing the ballot box or even fraudulent counting but the printing of the ballot. Voters had to know all the names of the electors. Printers intentionally left off party affiliation. Democratic electors occupied the first nine names on the ballot, making it easy for the Democratic voters. All others appeared randomly toward the bottom of the ballot.

The Populists did not win a statewide election in 1892. They demonstrated local strength, however, in several counties. In Pontotoc, nearly every county officer from sheriff to the coroner denounced the Democratic Party and joined the Populists. Their only loss came in a special election for a legislative seat in Pontotoc County – the result of fraud as Democrats refused to open the polls in some precincts. The action of Democrats actually sent more people

100Cresswell, 123; Stone, "The Emergence of the Populist Party," 21-24.  
102Ibid.: 23; Cresswell, 124.
into the Populist camp. In January 1894 during a special session of the state legislature, twenty-two legislators withdrew from the Democratic Party and created a Populist caucus. The Democrats jockeyed to prevent the Populists from holding a “balance of power” on issues that divided Democrats. Nevertheless, this development buoyed the hopes of Populists as it entered the congressional election later that year.\(^{103}\)

The depressed economy received the most attention in the congressional election of 1894 – cotton at the New Orleans market sold for only five cents per pound. President Cleveland’s refusal to act on free silver did nothing to help Democratic candidates in Mississippi. Despite Cleveland’s unpopularity, Democratic divisions and the discontent of the depression, the Populists still lost all seven congressional races. The partition of congressional districts divided the northeastern counties among three separate districts, preventing the Populists in this area from voting as a bloc. Still, Populists gained in strength, increasing the percentage of votes garnered from twenty-five percent in 1892 to thirty-one percent in 1894. Encouraged by the returns, Populists looked to gubernatorial, legislative and county elections in 1895.\(^{104}\)

Going into the 1895 elections, Populists called for a twenty percent reduction in the salaries of state officers, criticizing the Democratic administration as extravagant. They also called for fair and honest elections and advocated free silver, the development of industry and the abolition of national banks. They nominated the state’s most famous Populist, Frank Burkitt, for governor. The Democrats responded by selecting the pro-silver Anselm J. McLaurin as their candidate and adopting a platform that looked like a Populist document. As the race progressed, Democrats sought again to link Burkitt to Reconstruction Republicans. Their manipulation of the election machine, however, insured their victory. On Election Day Burkitt won only twenty-

\(^{103}\) Cresswell, 127-131.
\(^{104}\) Ibid., 134.
eight percent of the votes and carried one county, Choctaw. Claims of election fraud abounded in Populist heavy counties, especially in Burkitt’s home county of Chickasaw where a number of names disappeared from voter registration rolls, supposedly for non-payment of taxes. Yet, 101 Democrats remained on the rolls despite having not paid their taxes or moving away. The editor of the People’s Banner in Pontotoc lamented over fraud in his county as well but surmised that a contest before Democratic judges would prove useless.\(^\text{105}\)

Failure in 1895 and fusion in the 1896 presidential election devastated Mississippi Populists. The party did not die immediately, however, and held on until 1899. In the northeastern part of Mississippi, Populist continued to struggle onward in Lee, Pontotoc and Tippah counties.\(^\text{106}\) Historian Thomas Adams Upchurch offered a variety of reasons for the failure of Populism in Mississippi. He argued that the Democratic machine convinced most white farmers that Democratic leadership knew of their grievances and would act to provide relief. He also believed that most farmers wanted to work within the Democratic Party making them unreceptive to the creation of a new party. The most significant reason for failure, he suggests, centered on the controversial sub-treasury plan. This issue proved the most divisive among Mississippi farmers and kept many from voting the Populist ticket.\(^\text{107}\) Whether the divisiveness of the sub-treasury plan or the effectiveness of the local Democratic machine, the farmers of Northeast Mississippi were as divided as the rest of the state.

By the turn of the century, Northeast Mississippi continued with the rest of the state to struggle economically – tied to cotton. The size of the farms in the area began to increase because more merchants became merchant-farmers, owning the land of the farmers working as tenants. In 1880, the combined number of sharecroppers and renters in the northeastern counties

\(^{105}\) Ibid., 143-148.  
\(^{106}\) Ibid., 180.  
\(^{107}\) Upchurch, 256.
equaled 5,564. The number increased slightly in 1890 to 6,684 but by 1900, the number grew to 11,449. Small white farmers who farmed their own land remained more numerous among the white population at 9,183 in 1900, but all farmers struggled with extreme poverty. (see figures 7 and 8 for farmer percentages) Meanwhile, Mississippi politicians on both the state and local levels sought to improve area economies by luring industry.

FIGURE 7: WHITE FARMERS IN NORTHEAST MISSISSIPPI IN 1900

White yeoman: 51%
White sharecroppers: 35%
White tenants: 6%
Farms larger than 260 acres: 8%

Footnote: 108 Federal Census 1880, 1890 and 1900 for Mississippi counties Alcorn, Benton, Itawamba, Lee, Pontotoc, Prentiss, Tippah, Tishomingo, and Union.
FIGURE 8: ALL FARMERS IN NORTHEAST MISSISSIPPI IN 1900

- **White yeoman**: 44%
- **Black yeoman**: 4%
- **White sharecroppers**: 30%
- **Black sharecroppers**: 15%
- **White tenants**: 1%
- **Farms larger than 260 acres**: 2%
CHAPTER II
COTTON AND COWS: THE SEARCH FOR ECONOMIC STABILITY

The post-Reconstruction South continued to stake its economic existence on growing cotton. The absence of both cash and banks played an important role in the development of the crop-lien system and the rise of a new economic class—the creditor merchant. Merchants refused credit to farmers unless they agreed to plant cotton, the only viable cash crop.\(^1\) While the price of cotton fluctuated during Reconstruction and thereafter, the price continued downward. Southern cotton growers faced competition from producers in Brazil, Egypt and India. At the same time, world demand for cotton dropped from an annual growth rate of five percent in the antebellum years to only one and three-tenths percent from 1866 to 1895.\(^2\) An increased supply drove prices down at a time when the United States experienced deflation, which increased the value of farmer debt.\(^3\) The farmers responded by growing more cotton in an effort to obtain enough money to pay their debt. The consequential increase in the supply of cotton drove prices even lower. Foreclosures and a steady increase in farm tenancy from 1900 to 1930 resulted. The future of an economy shackled to cotton looked bleak at best, prompting the new merchant elite


\(^2\) Flynt, 64.

\(^3\) Escott, 174.
to seek alternatives for investment and regional economic development. They turned to the cotton textile industry.

Cotton mills existed in the South before the Civil War. Early proponents of industrializing the region believed that cotton mills offered the best chance of success, given the amount of raw material available. The mills, they said, would attract related industries, like machine shops, into the region as well. The growth of industry would lead to urbanization, which would in turn create a local market for meat and grain, promoting agricultural diversification. In short, the cotton textile industry could free the South from the grip of the one-crop economy. This early drive had some success with a number of cotton mills established throughout the South as early as the 1840s. By 1860, Mississippi boasted eight cotton mills scattered about the state. The South continued, however, to focus on the production of raw cotton. Growing cotton during the mid 1800s remained more profitable than turning it into cloth.

Efforts to industrialize the South continued throughout the war and during Reconstruction. The number of mills increased across the South from 1860-1880 with the greatest concentration in the Piedmont regions of North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. As Southern Democrats regained control of the post-Reconstruction South through “Redeemer” governments, the cotton mill campaign reached full stride. In 1880, 161 cotton mills existed in the region. By 1890, the number grew to 239, an increase of forty-eight and four-tenths percent. Throughout the decade, the number of mills increased by sixty-seven and four-tenths percent.

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6 Rowland, 541.
7 Hearden, 14.
bringing the total to 400.\textsuperscript{8} Between 1890 and 1900, the capital invested in cotton manufacturing increased by 131.4 percent. The high margin of return brought greater growth and willingness to invest. In 1882, the profit on investment in Southern cotton mills averaged twenty-two percent. In the following decade, profits at times reached between thirty and seventy-five percent.\textsuperscript{9} Boosterism also contributed to the rapid growth of cotton manufacturing in the South. Economic development became a public crusade – a means of lifting the South out of poverty.\textsuperscript{10} The moral language of the New South played a key role in the development of Southern mills, as local capital proved essential. Boosters and local newspapers appealed to merchants and farmers promising markets for raw materials and jobs for poor whites. Many of the mills obtained funding by selling small shares on weekly payments. This broad participation and language of community fueled the image of mill builders as civic leaders.\textsuperscript{11} Rhetoric aside, profit remained a strong motive. The average worker in South Carolina in 1880 and his or her dependent survived on twelve cents per day, while investors counted profits of eighteen to twenty-five and one half percent per year.\textsuperscript{12}

The state’s lack of cheap power sources and the scarcity of capital after the Civil War hampered Mississippi’s attempt to attract industry.\textsuperscript{13} In 1872, the state legislature offered a token of encouragement to manufacturing by allowing tax refunds for firms that made only small profits.\textsuperscript{14} This effort hardly offset the depression of the 1870s, but three new mills increased the

\textsuperscript{9} Woodward, 133; Simkins, 241; McLaurin, 3-9.
\textsuperscript{10} Mitchell, 265; Simkins, 239; Wright, 44-45.
\textsuperscript{11} Simkins, 239-240; Woodward, 133; Wright, 131; Carlton, \textit{Mill and Town}, 13.
\textsuperscript{12} Woodward, 134; McLaurin, 43.
\textsuperscript{14} Busbee, 158.
number in Mississippi. Economic improvement in the 1880s coupled with an 1882 law that exempted new industries from taxation for the first ten years of operation encouraged the establishment of another four mills. The failure of three previously existing mills, however, kept the total number of mills in Mississippi at nine. Despite the efforts of agricultural journals and local newspapers espousing the virtues of industry and cotton mills in particular, the cotton mill campaign of the 1870s and 80s failed in Mississippi. The political conflict between the Bourbons and the Populists in the 1890s further hampered the campaign. The Bourbons had favored mill building and been willing to offer tax incentives. The Populists, however, were anti-business. Their hostility toward railroads and banks made many Mississippi farmers distrustful of all businessmen and any industry they proposed. As a result, the 1890 state constitution placed restrictions on corporations. The new constitution authorized the legislature to charter all corporations and to tax the property of all private corporations operating for financial gain. It furthermore prohibited local governments from buying stock in or making loans to railroads or corporations and limited tax exemptions on corporations to a period of five years, rather than the ten-year term offered in 1882. Nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century mill builders had established five additional operations in the state bringing the total to sixteen.

By 1900, anti-business attitudes had diminished. The state legislature extended the five-year tax exemptions for factories and allowed ten-year tax exemptions from city taxes. Special invitations for investment in cotton factories revitalized Mississippi’s mill campaign. The state

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16 Strickland.
18 Strickland.
also funded the establishment of a textile school at Mississippi A&M College to train workers.\textsuperscript{19}

The change in Mississippi attitudes towards textile factories is understandable given the success of the mills in the Piedmont area. By the turn of the century, the South had overtaken New England in the production of coarse goods for both domestic and foreign markets. Southern textile manufactures also began to challenge their northern counterparts in the production of fine yarn.\textsuperscript{20}

Several components contributed to the success of the Southern mills. Historians have pointed to lower taxes, lower transportation costs in obtaining raw materials, high tariffs that limited foreign competition and the tremendous increase in railroad building after the Civil War as key factors in the profitability of Southern mills.\textsuperscript{21} The most significant factor, however, lay with the cheap and ample supply of labor drawn from the poor white population. The newly constructed Southern mills took advantage of the latest technologies in the manufacture of textiles, allowing them to hire unskilled workers straight from the farm.\textsuperscript{22} The wage discrepancies between the Northern and Southern mills provided a distinct advantage to Southern mill owners because labor accounted for a significant cost in the production of cotton cloth. Between 1849 and 1927, Southern workers earned forty percent less on average than their Northern counterparts.\textsuperscript{23} Even so, the vicious cycle of debt peonage and the resulting poverty among the up-country poor whites made work in the cotton mill with its weekly cash paycheck quite appealing. In addition to the low wages made possible by an overabundant work force who lacked employment options, cotton mills in the South benefitted from lax legal requirements.

\textsuperscript{19} Bettersworth, \textit{Mississippi}, 393.
\textsuperscript{20} McLaurin, 9.
\textsuperscript{22} McLaurin, 12; Galenson, 12; Eason, 60; Goldfield, 124; Hearden, 47; Simkins, 244; Wright, 45.
\textsuperscript{23} Galenson, 10-11.
regarding hours of work and the age of workers. In addition, employees showed no initial interest in labor organizations.\textsuperscript{24}

The economy of Northeast Mississippi differed little from the rest of the region. Yeoman farmers in the area had typically grown small amounts of cotton for cash. After the Civil War, however, they became victims of the same debt-peonage cycle as their upland Southern neighbors. As the number of farms increased in the area, so too did the percentage of farms operated by tenants. The table below illustrates the increased tenancy of the eight counties in the northeastern most corner of Mississippi.

Increased tenancy led to greater poverty and a stagnant economy. Businessmen in Northeast Mississippi, primarily merchants, embraced the New South rhetoric and began seeking

\textsuperscript{24} Simkins, 244.
\textsuperscript{25} Based on 1880 and 1890 federal census and the Mississippi State Planning Commission, "Planning Commission Reports," no. 7 (1937).
economic diversification for their towns and counties. Just as in the larger South, industrialization in Northeast Mississippi was slow and sporadic. Also in keeping with the Southern trend, local businessmen initiated and financed industry in the area. No textile factories existed in the hills before the war. The first cotton mill appeared in Corinth, the seat of Alcorn County, near the Tennessee border. Initially called Cross City, the town sat at the junction of the Mobile & Ohio and Memphis & Charleston (later the Illinois Central) railroads.

The Whitfield Cotton Mill began operations near Corinth in 1869. Located along the Mobile & Ohio Railroad just east of the Whitfield home, this mill belonged to F. E. Whitfield, a North Carolina native. The 1866 Mississippi state tax roll listed Whitfield as a lawyer. In the 1870 federal census, he described himself as a farmer. The Whitfield Cotton mill was likely a small operation intended to use the produce of the Whitfield farm. Nevertheless, the mill gained a reputation for producing high quality fabric, sharing first prize with the Wesson mill (located in Choctaw County, Mississippi) at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. The mill suffered from the depression of the 1870s, however, and closed in 1878.\(^{26}\)

Another post-bellum effort in Corinth began when Reece P. Sawyers, a local merchant, joined forces with William G. Ford, a native of New York and a cotton factor in Memphis, and Mobile, and Arthur E. Reynolds, a Corinth attorney, to establish the North Mississippi Cotton and Woolen Manufacturing Company. They purchased property in the town and began the construction of buildings in 1869. The factory never went into production, as the company faced financial difficulties from the start. Sawyers tried again in 1874, reorganizing with a new group of stockholders, mostly local men. Creditors of the North Mississippi Cotton and Woolen Manufacturing Company sued the new corporation and won judgments against it. In 1875, the court ordered the property sold for debt. The buildings and some equipment changed hands.

\(^{26}\) Strickland.
several times until Dr. Paul Jones and his sons from Bolivar, Tennessee established the Alcorn Woolen Mills in 1896. The father and sons had run a successful mill in Bolivar for several years and intended to move their operation to Corinth and enlarge the business. The 150 female employees of the Alcorn Woolen Mills wove cloth and manufactured men’s pants. After eight years, the mill failed.27

Another attempt to combine agriculture with industry occurred in Corinth about 1874. French immigrant Marie Louise Combs accompanied her parents from Lyon, France to St. Louis, Missouri in 1864. There she met and married Frederick Doche, who had emigrated from France as well. The couple moved to Corinth, Mississippi and bought property on May 27, 1873. Frederick built cabinets while Marie entertained her own productive ambitions. The following year they purchased an additional eighty acres on which Marie planted mulberry trees for the feeding of silk worms. She also constructed a feeding barn and a steam powered reeling factory.28

Not new to the South, sericulture tended to be, just as Doche’s operation, limited to individual endeavors rather than large-scale enterprises.29 This changed in 1878 when C. V. Riley became the Entomologist for the United States Department of Agriculture. Riley actively promoted sericulture. As a result, in 1879, the Department conducted experiments in feeding silkworms and distributed eggs. In 1882, they began distributing mulberry trees as well. The same year, L. S. Crozier purchased forty acres of land near Corinth and established the Corinth Silk Company.30 Crozier, a silk expert who had been employed by the French government to travel the world in search of healthy breeds of silkworms, had spent 10 years in Kansas working

for E. V. Boissiere, a wealthy Frenchman who built a model community for the production of silk. Crozier concluded that nowhere was better suited for silk culture than the middle and southern states of America. He constantly corresponded with the U. S. Department of Agriculture and provided silkworm eggs for experimentation. The Corinth Silk Company also offered eggs, mulberry trees and mulberry cuttings for sale to the public. In addition, the company offered to buy cocoons produced by worms raised on “proper kinds of mulberry trees.”

In the 1880s, sericulture looked promising. Congress appropriated $15,000 for the promotion of silk culture and the Department of Agriculture continued to supply eggs and mulberry trees to applicants. Despite the efforts of the Department, interest in silk production waned. The cost of domestic reeled silk continued to exceed that of imported silk. Crozier gave up his enterprise in Corinth and sold the land in 1889. Marie Doche’s facility burned in the late 1880s and Doche, now a widow, did not rebuild. Her role in industrial development did not end with the demise of sericulture in Corinth, however. In 1901, Doche became one of the first employees of the Corinth Woolen Mills.

The apparel industry found more success in Corinth than did the manufacture of cloth. Around the turn of the century, W. T. Adams and Samuel L. Nelson founded the Corinth Clothing Manufacturing Company. Nelson and Shelby Hammond Curlee managed the company for a time. In 1901, both Nelson and Curlee left Corinth Clothing and, along with John Rufus Curlee and John C. Stanley, Jr., established their own company, the Corinth Woolen Mills. This factory also produced trousers but was more successful than Alcorn Woolen Mills.

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33 Klose: 230.
34 Price: 257.
Unfortunately for North Mississippians, two of the founders, Shelby Hammond Curlee and his brother John Rufus, decided to move the mill to St. Louis, Missouri in 1905 where they reincorporated the company as the Curlee Clothing Company.\(^{35}\) Conversely, the Weaver Pants Corporation began operations in 1908 and remained a successful North Mississippi industry into the 1950s.\(^{36}\) The Corinth Engine & Boiler Works opened for business in 1904 and the Corinth Machinery Company started production in 1912.\(^{37}\) These factories, in conjunction with the garment plants, made Corinth the unrivaled manufacturing center of Northeast Mississippi in the 1920s.\(^{38}\) By the 1930s, another Northeast Mississippi town would take that title.

In 1858, when the Mobile and Ohio railroad laid tracks in the bottomland below the village of Harrisburg in Itawamba County, the residents quickly moved closer to the tracks. Initially called Gum Pond due to the swampy land and profusion of gum trees, the town changed its name to Tupelo when platted in 1860. Tupelo’s primary commercial interests were saloons.\(^{39}\) During the Civil War, authorities turned the hotels into a Confederate prison for pro-Union sympathizers.\(^{40}\) The small town benefitted from the division of counties during Reconstruction, becoming the county seat of the newly formed Lee County in 1866. The location of the county courthouse in Tupelo brought important jobs to the city as well as attorneys and rural traffic. The town became the center of a lucrative cotton trade. In 1887, the Frisco railroad opened a line through Tupelo, making the town a crossroads.\(^{41}\)

\(^{35}\) Margaret Greene Rogers, "Industrialization," in *The History of Alcorn County Mississippi*, ed. Alcorn County Historical Association (Dallas: National Share Graphics, Inc., 1983), 23; Sandy, 36.\(^{36}\) Rogers, "Industrialization," \(^{37}\) Sandy.\(^{38}\) Rowland, 683.\(^{39}\) Hodding Carter, "The Cities of America: Tupelo, Mississippi," *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 17, 1951, 32; Grisham, 29.\(^{40}\) See chapter 1 for a discussion of pro-Union sentiment in Northeast Mississippi.\(^{41}\) Grisham, 30, 40.
Despite some success with hardwood industries, Tupelo, much like any other Southern town, depended in on the cotton trade. With the depression of the 1890s and the sharp decline in the price of cotton, Tupelo fell hard. Seeking an economic savior for the town, local businessmen landed squarely in the middle of the revived Southern cotton mill campaign. Initially, they sought outside capital for the construction of a mill but failed to muster interest. As a result, local political and business rivals set aside their personal differences and pooled their resources to establish the town’s first large industry.\(^42\)

A board of directors incorporated the Tupelo Cotton Mills in 1899. All capital came from local sources. The charter of incorporation listed forty-three individuals and three companies as stockholders. All but six individuals appeared in the federal census of 1900 and/or 1910. The companies were local mercantile businesses, while thirty of the individuals—bankers, merchants, two attorneys and four physicians, as well as a local congressman and the Chancery Clerk--operated businesses in Tupelo.\(^43\) Some of the most prominent investors were John M. Allen, John Clark, John R. Dabbs, S. T. Harkey, B. M. Dillard, J. J. Rogers, W. L. Joyner and C. P. Long. L. D. Hines, who appears to have been the motivating force behind the cotton mill project, served as the mill’s first president.\(^44\) A native of Tippah County, Hines owned a successful mercantile company, was director and stockholder of the G & C Railroad, president of the Memphis Queensware Company, the general manager of the Tipton Cotton Mills in Covington, Tennessee and a member of the directorate of the Bank of Tupelo. Hines moved from Ripley to Tupelo in 1900 to oversee the building of the Tupelo Cotton Mill.\(^45\)

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 42-47.
\(^{43}\) Federal Census 1900 & 1910.
In January of 1900, Hines and Long traveled to North and South Carolina to investigate the cotton manufacturing business with particular interest in the type of machinery needed to establish a new mill. Upon their return, the board of directors decided to produce the same type of cloth as the mill in Dalton, Georgia because the Georgia mill had declared a dividend of ninety percent on one year’s business. The board ordered an assessment of ten percent on stock subscriptions in February and authorized Hines to proceed. He ordered the machinery and let a contract for the construction of houses for the mill workers. Will Robins and Will Wilson, two stockholders, contracted in March to build eighteen cottages of four and five rooms along the western boundary of the mill lot. By April, the number of houses under construction had increased to twenty-three and work on the mill began.\textsuperscript{46}

The mill’s board of directors still sought investors in June 1900. Clark and Hines toured the northern part of the county in an effort to convince farmers to invest in the cotton mill and raise the capital stock to $150,000. The \textit{Tupelo Journal} reported that they met with success.\textsuperscript{47} The Guntown newspaper printed a short article a few days after the tour praising those who had purchased stock and strongly encouraging others to do so. It assured its readers that the mill was in capable hands and that citizens need not hesitate to invest, indicating that the public did indeed hesitate.\textsuperscript{48} In early July, the mill directors ordered another assessment of ten percent on stock subscriptions in order to meet contracts for materials. Management delayed the start date from October of 1900 to January of 1901. Despite a sluggish beginning, production started the following summer.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Tupelo Journal} January 26, 1900; \textit{Tupelo Journal} February 23, 1900; \textit{Tupelo Journal} March 2, 1900; \textit{Tupelo Journal} April 6, 1900.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Tupelo Journal} June 1, 1900.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Guntown Hot Times}, reprinted in \textit{Tupelo Journal} June 15, 1900.
\textsuperscript{49} “L. D. Hines.”, \textit{Tupelo Journal} July 6, 1900.
Mill owners invited the public to attend the opening of the Tupelo Cotton Mills, which began operation at 1:30 pm on May 6, 1901. Powered by steam engines, the mill had 5,000 spindles and 170 looms. It produced heavy sheetings, drillings and shirtings – all domestic brown cloth. In 1902, officials added a dye works that allowed the mill to begin running blue denim and blue shirtings. The company also built a hotel for its operatives. The cost for both the dye works and hotel amounted to $8,000 and came out of the first years’ profits. In October

1902, more workers hired to operate additional looms, which allowed the mill to run day and night. After just over a year of operation, the mill had done well enough to warrant an additional building. By 1903, management reported the capitalization of the company at $128,000.\textsuperscript{52} In the Blue Book Textile Directory for 1904-5, the Tupelo Cotton Mill listed its capitalization at $180,000. Employing 180 people, the mill turned out 200,000 yards of cloth per month.\textsuperscript{53}

L. D. Hines resigned as president of the cotton mill in August 1905, moving to Memphis to look after other business interests. Joshua Heard Ledyard became the next president and general manager of the mill.\textsuperscript{54} Ledyard, a native Mississippian, graduated from Mississippi State College in 1892. Three years later, the Meridian Cotton Mills elected him secretary of the new organization. The company allowed him a year’s leave during which he traveled to Lowell, Massachusetts to work in a cotton mill and attend the Lowell Textile School.\textsuperscript{55} He then returned to Meridian and became superintendent of the mill. In 1901, he married Annie Robins of Tupelo. Ledyard had attended college with Annie’s brother Will Robins and met his future wife when invited to the Robins’s home. Annie and Will’s older brother John Robins was one of the directors of the First National Bank in Tupelo in 1900. Both of the Robins brothers owned stock in the Tupelo Cotton Mill. The Robins relatives included Congressman “Private” John Allen, who connected the family to S. J. High, Allen’s son-in-law. High, also a cotton mill stockholder, helped to organize and served as an officer of the Peoples Bank and Trust of Tupelo. These


\textsuperscript{54} “Stockholders Meet,” Tupelo Journal, August 4, 1905.

\textsuperscript{55} “Souvenir Booklet and Program of Annual Outing of the Employees of Tupelo Garment Co. Reed Bros., Inc.,” (Tupelo, Mississippi, August 24,1935), 4.
connections along with his education and success in Meridian brought Ledyard to Tupelo in 1905.\textsuperscript{56}

The Tupelo Cotton Mills prospered under Ledyard’s leadership. In 1912, the company added a finishing plant consisting of a sewing machine, washing machine, a starch mangle, tentering machine and dryer. This machinery enabled the production of the “higher class” goods, which Northern factories produced.\textsuperscript{57} By 1913, the mill produced eight and one half miles per day of a distinctive Tupelo cheviots cloth. In addition, the mill turned out denims, pin checks, madras cloth and shirtings on its 8,000 spindles and 300 looms. The capitalization had now reached $220,000 and the company had sales agents in New York City.\textsuperscript{58} Ten years later, the local paper reported that the company reinvested each year’s profits, making it worth a million and a quarter dollars in 1923. The number of spindles now reached 20,000 and the mill employed 416, mostly women and girls. The annual payroll reached $350,000 with many of the employees earning three dollars per day and some earning as much as thirty dollars per week.\textsuperscript{59}

The Tupelo mill shipped cloth to both domestic and South American markets.\textsuperscript{60}

As the mill grew, so too did “Mill Town” – an area south of the mill described in the mid 1930s as a small-unpaved district of standardized four and five room houses painted alternately yellow trimmed in white and white trimmed in yellow. Each house sat on an unsodded yard behind a picket and wire fence. Many of the houses had gardens and some residents kept chickens in the yard.\textsuperscript{61} A recreational ground with a grandstand and small baseball diamond occupied the northeast corner of the village. Management had also constructed a clubhouse,

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. Frances Ledyard Ivy, interviewed by Elizabeth Payne, 15 March 2007, copy in possession of author.
\textsuperscript{57} Tupelo Journal September 27, 1912.
\textsuperscript{58} Tupelo Journal January 17, 1913; Compiled by the Textile World Record, \textit{Official American Textile Directory} (Boston: Lord & Nagle Co., 1913), 179.
\textsuperscript{60} WPA, \textit{History of Lee County}.
\textsuperscript{61} Frances Ledyard Ivy interviewee.
basketball court and tennis courts. Mill Town had a primary school for the younger mill children: a one-story brick building built before 1920 and named Ledyard School in honor of the mill’s president and general manager. Tupelo’s mill village resembled mill villages across the South with two significant exceptions: Tupelo’s mill village was not an isolated community but existed within the corporate limits of the city of Tupelo. The residents mingled freely with other townsmen and shopped with many area retailers. The mill had no commissary because the majority of men who invested in the mill were merchants, all of whom sought more consumers. Thus, no one merchant monopolized mill employees. About seventy percent of the mill’s $350,000 annual payroll in 1923 purchased groceries at a variety of Tupelo businesses, making the mill vital to the economic stability of the small town.

FIGURE 11: MILL VILLAGE

Tupelo Cotton Mill and Village in 1911

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62 Pepper. Frances Ledyard Ivy interviewee.
65 “Tupelo (Miss) Cotton Mill and Village. Conditions rather good.” Location: Tupelo, Mississippi. Date Created/Published: 1911 May. LOC original medium: 1 photographic print. Child labor pic by Lewis Hine.
While the cotton mill prospered, it provided only a limited number of jobs for Lee County’s total population. The mill employed 180 workers in 1905 while the total population of Lee County reached 28,894 in 1910.\(^{66}\) Given that most of these workers were women, the majority of Lee County residents continued to live and work on farms and depended upon cotton as their primary source of income. Because of this continued dependence, agricultural diversity became the next avenue for economic development. Local advocates of diversity decided the dairy industry offered the most feasible option. The small hill farms could not support beef herds but proved capable of supporting a small number of dairy cows.\(^{67}\) No one sought to replace cotton production but to augment it. The Extension Department of the Mississippi State Agricultural and Mechanical College lauded the dairy cow as a “mortgage lifter.”\(^{68}\) Several key factors, however, hampered Mississippi’s early efforts to promote dairying: the presence of the Texas-fever tick; the lack of large urban centers as markets; a limited number of paved roads; few suitable pastures; and the lack of adequate refrigeration.\(^{69}\) The outlook would soon improve.

By 1912, promoters of the dairy industry gained confidence with the establishment of a farmers’ cooperative creamery at the State A&M College in Starkville. The following year Mississippi participated in a federal program to eradicate cattle ticks. Initially resistant to the dipping technique, federal inspectors and county agents worked with area farmers and helped the program achieve its goals.\(^{70}\) The success of the creamery at Starkville encouraged the establishment of other creameries in the state. L. A. Higgins, an extension dairyman for the A&M College, explained in 1923 that dairying spread largely through the farmwomen. Once the


\(^{67}\) Carter, 78.

\(^{68}\) Lowe, 41.

\(^{69}\) Halene Hatcher, "Dairying in the South," Economic Geography 20, no. 1 (1944): 58; Lowe, 41.

\(^{70}\) Hatcher: 59.
women developed the business to the point that they reaped more profits from milking cows than their husbands received for growing cotton, the husbands were “ready to claim it as their business.”

Nothing, however, proved more successful in nurturing the dairy industry than the arrival of the boll weevil. The havoc wrought by the boll weevil on the North Mississippi cotton crop of 1916 convinced some of Tupelo’s leaders that dairying deserved consideration. Inspired by unpaid farm debt, S. J. High, president of the Peoples Bank and Trust of Tupelo, visited the land grant Colleges in Mississippi and Tennessee to speak with agricultural authorities about diversification. He sought not an alternative to cotton but an avenue of supplemental income. He returned to Tupelo believing that “the cow, the sow and the hen” could provide economic stability for the local farmers. “The cow” received primary attention, leading to the establishment of the Tupelo Creamery the same year. High made several trips to dairy regions in the US and Canada where he purchased high quality dairy cows to bring back to Tupelo. With increased milk production, the Tupelo Creamery grew to become the Mississippi Creamery Company in 1920. In addition to operating the creamery, the company also sold feed and dairy equipment. Shortly thereafter, High went to the Lee County Bankers’ Association and convinced them to take the money they usually spent on calendars for their patrons and use it instead to hire a full time dairy expert to assist the farmers. The Lee County Board of Supervisors followed the bankers’ lead and hired a full time county agricultural agent.

The bankers’ association hired Sam Durham to educate the local farmers. They purchased an old projection machine with which Durham and V. S. Whitesides, an employee and

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73 Mildred Caldwell, "Industry," in *Source material for Mississippi history: Lee County*, ed. Susie V. Powell (Jackson, Mississippi: Works Progress Administration for Mississippi, 1936), microfilm.
74 Carter, 78; Gunning: 4.
future president of the Peoples Bank, traveled around the county showing films about dairying and soil building programs. The two also sowed experimental plots of pasture grasses and Whitesides used the 4-H clubs to promote the growth of hybrid corn.\textsuperscript{75}

According to Durham, the bankers actually forced dairying on farmers in some locations, advancing loans to buy cows instead of the crop loans the farmers sought. They could then milk the cows and sell the milk to obtain cash with which to make a crop. By 1924, approximately 820 Lee County dairymen with an average of six cows each sold cream to the Mississippi Creamery Company. The Company turned out over 12,000 pounds of butter per week – a significant increase from the 100 pounds per day of 1917. Tupelo also boasted the largest ice cream establishment in the state, the McLearan Ice Cream Company. In addition to the production of milk, 143 breeders of pure Jersey cattle shipped over 200 hundred freight cars of stock out of the county prior to August 1924. Profits from the dairy industry convinced some land owners to put their tenants in the dairy business on a fifty-fifty basis.\textsuperscript{76}

Commercial dairying affected four principle regions of Mississippi: Oktibbeha, the Gulf Coast, and the Memphis region as well as the Northern Prairie Region, which consisted of Tippah, Lee, Prentiss, Union and Pontotoc counties. Although comparatively less dairying occurred in this region, milk production tended to be slightly higher than state averages, high enough in Lee and the surrounding counties to persuade the Carnation Milk Company to build a condensary in Tupelo in 1927.\textsuperscript{77} The following year James R. Treverton, the farming editor of the \textit{Commercial Appeal}, declared Lee County the Dairy Empire of North Mississippi.\textsuperscript{78} By 1931, Mississippi economists believed that the dairy industry on a statewide basis remained in its

\textsuperscript{75} Carter, 78.
\textsuperscript{77} Clyde F. Kohn, "Development of Dairy Farming in Mississippi," \textit{Economic Geography} 19, no. 2 (1943).
\textsuperscript{78} James R. Treverton, "Lee County Become Dairy Empire of Northern Mississippi," \textit{Tupelo Journal} (July 17, 1928).
infancy. They noted, however, that the Northern Prairie Region had the most progress and cited the numerous creameries and buying and shipping stations located there. Tupelo, with its creamery, ice cream plant, condensary, and cheese plant gained a reputation as a leading dairy town. The charts below illustrate the growth of the dairy industry in Lee County. Even though the number of dairy cows decreased from 1920 to 1930, milk production increased, marking the success of the dairy improvement programs.

**FIGURE 12: LEE COUNTY DAIRY COWS**

**FIGURE 13: LEE COUNTY MILK PRODUCTION**

Growth of the Dairy Industry in Lee County

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79 Sale Trice Lilly, "The Dairying Industry in Mississippi and its Possibilities" (University of Mississippi, 1931), 12-13.
80 Based on the Agricultural census for 1910, 1920 and 1930.
When discussing Tupelo bankers and businessmen in relation to Lee County farmers, one is not always talking about two distinct groups. Many Tupelo businessmen owned farms. Some of the men owning a significant number of dairy cows included Will Robins, mayor of Tupelo; Rex Reed, leading merchant; Ed Foster, local physician; and S. J. High, banker and main proponent of the dairy industry. These men constituted Tupelo’s elite citizenry, owning stock in the Tupelo Cotton mill and sitting on or related to members of the Board of Directors of the Tupelo Chamber of Commerce. Given the participation of Tupelo and Lee County’s wealthiest citizens, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the dairy industry affected the small farmers of the area.

Neither the success of the Tupelo Cotton Mill nor the growth of the dairy industry in Lee County accounted for the most significant industrial development in the region. As had been the case in Corinth, the garment companies, arriving in the 1920s, made the most considerable contribution to the economy of Northeast Mississippi and Tupelo in particular. Early in 1921, J. H. Ledyard, president and general manager of the Tupelo Cotton Mills, installed twenty-four sewing machines in the mill. Perhaps inspired by the success of the garment factories in Corinth, he decided to manufacture shirts as a way to move a quantity of chambray the mill had on hand. Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson* came to Tupelo from the Broadgage Manufacturing Company in Memphis to run the new department. The venture proved quite successful. The company added another twenty-two machines in September. The following year, the department expanded, adding twelve machines in July and another fourteen in December. By 1923, the shirt manufacturing operation consumed more than one million yards of shirting per year as the

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81 “New Board of Directors of the Tupelo Chamber of Commerce,” *The Mississippi Builder* Vol. 2, no. 1 (September 24, 1924); Treverton.
82 *First names of the Stevensons were not published.*
82 “Souvenir Booklet,” 19.
company turned out men’s work shirts in one color only. At this point, the board of directors decided the operation of the shirt unit in connection with the Cotton Mill was impractical. On July 8, 1923, therefore, the Board of Directors organized and incorporated the Tupelo Garment Company as a separate business. The Board of Directors consisted of familiar Tupelo faces: B. A. Rogers, president; R. F. “Rex” Reed, vice-president; J. P. Hunter, secretary and treasurer; J. H. Ledyard, S. J. High, W. L. Joyner, J. M. Thomas, F. C. McGaughy and C. W. Troy. Several years later, D. W. Robins, E. L. Joyner, W. B. Fields and R. W. “Bob” Reed joined the board. These men or their relatives sat on the boards of directors for the Tupelo Cotton Mill, the Tupelo Garment Company, the Chamber of Commerce and both of the local banks. Tupelo’s oligarchy was a small group.

The garment company continued to grow, adding more machines as demand dictated. In 1925, the company operated sixty machines but the directors saw the possibility of increasing the operation to a much larger scale. As a result, W. B. Fields became general superintendent in 1926. Fields, originally from Oklahoma, had been an employee of the Ferguson-McKinney Company of St. Louis, a dry goods company. Having gained experience in their other factories, Fields came to Mississippi in 1923 to manage the company’s garment plant in New Albany, located about thirty-five miles west of Tupelo in Union County. The New Albany Manufacturing Company occupied an old grain elevator that had retooled for the manufacture of men’s dress shirts. It began operations in October 1923 with fifteen women and a view toward hiring one hundred. The plant had difficulty obtaining workers, however, and ran help-wanted

84 “Souvenir Booklet,” 19.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid, 3.
ads in the local paper for several months early in 1924.\footnote{Union Weekly Times, February 21, 1924; March 13, 1924; March 20, 1924, April 17, 1924; April 24, 1924; May 1, 1924; May 4, 1924.} One such ad expounded the merits of this type of business in New Albany as it appealed to the booster spirit and civic pride. The ad also noted the benefit of allowing young women to earn their own money and reassured the readers that the company treated women courteously, “such as a Southern Lady is accustomed to receive.”\footnote{“How Would You Like to Learn a Good Trade,” Union Weekly Times April 17, 1924.} There is no indication of exactly how and why it closed, but the New Albany Manufacturing Company ceased operations within a couple of years. The Allen Shirt Company occupied the building next but also had a short life span.\footnote{“Local Factory in Tenth Year of Industrial Activity,” New Albany Gazette September 16, 1937.}

Despite Fields’s troubles in New Albany, the directors of the Tupelo Garment Company willingly used his experience in the industry. He moved to Tupelo to oversee the garment company in 1926. Under his supervision, the Tupelo Garment Company grew to 180 sewing machines.\footnote{“Souvenir Booklet,” 19.} In June of the same year, the company received a certificate of merit from the Garment Manufacturers Association headquartered in Chicago, recognizing the quality and skilled craftsmanship of the garments submitted, which included shirts, nightwear and underwear. Because of this recognition, the local newspaper reported that Fields rapidly increased the company’s output and found “ready sale” for every garment produced.\footnote{“Tupelo Garment Co. Wins Certificate of Merit at Chicago, Ill.,” Tupelo Journal June 9, 1926.}

As demand for the garment company’s products increased, so too did the demand for workers. Although the company stated that “it would be in the interest” of their workers to establish branch plants, the need for more workers overall prompted the expansion. Tupelo Garment Company had sold six months ahead and remained behind schedule.\footnote{“Branch of Tupelo Garment Co. to be at Booneville,” Tupelo Journal October 24, 1926.}

88 Union Weekly Times, February 21, 1924; March 13, 1924; March 20, 1924, April 17, 1924; April 24, 1924; May 1, 1924; May 4, 1924.
89 “How Would You Like to Learn a Good Trade,” Union Weekly Times April 17, 1924.
91 “Souvenir Booklet,” 19.
93 “Branch of Tupelo Garment Co. to be at Booneville,” Tupelo Journal October 24, 1926.
Prentiss County.\textsuperscript{94} Booneville merchants eagerly secured the factory and readily accepted “the proposition of the Tupelo parties.” Area leaders offered the second floor of an existing building to the company with the first year’s rent to be “donated.” In addition, the machinery would be exempt from taxation for five years. Local businessmen subscribed $500 to cover these expenses. The factory began operations in November 1926 with forty machines and about fifty female employees.\textsuperscript{95}

The addition of the Booneville plant did not sufficiently supply the steadily increasing demands for the company’s products. In April 1927, the company established another branch in Baldwyn, a town located in northern Lee County about halfway between Tupelo and Booneville. Fields and Will Robins, who had become mayor of Tupelo, went to Baldwyn to let the business leaders know they sought another plant location. “They told the business men of Baldwyn what they wanted and the latter got busy and by 5 o’clock all their requests had been complied with.”\textsuperscript{96} Operations began in May with forty machines.\textsuperscript{97}

Meanwhile, the plant in Booneville had grown to sixty machines and sixty-eight employees.\textsuperscript{98} In July, Fields, B. A. Rogers and Rex Reed went to Booneville to announce intentions to expand operations further by adding fifty more machines. They also made clear that they would need a larger facility. Booneville businessmen agreed to provide such a place.\textsuperscript{99} Work began in September on a new brick building built to the specifications of the Tupelo Garment Company. The number of machines added to the Booneville plant increased from fifty to one hundred and the company promised to employ between 250 and 300 people.\textsuperscript{100} The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{94}“Souvenir Booklet,” 19.
\item \textsuperscript{95}“Souvenir Booklet,” 12; "Branch of Tupelo Garment Co. to be at Booneville."
\item \textsuperscript{96}“Tupelo Garment Locates Branch at Baldwyn," \textit{Tupelo Journal} April 20, 1927.
\item \textsuperscript{97}Ibid. “Souvenir Booklet,” 14.
\item \textsuperscript{98}“Shirt Factory to Expand,” \textit{Tupelo Journal} May 18, 1927.
\item \textsuperscript{99}“New Building for Shirt Factory," \textit{Tupelo Journal} July 24, 1927.
\item \textsuperscript{100}“New Shirt Factory Building," \textit{Tupelo Journal} September 18, 1927.
\end{itemize}
number of employees in relation to the number of machines indicates that they intended to operate two shifts.

The exponential growth of the Tupelo Garment Company in 1927 led to the establishment of a third branch plant in New Albany. The company moved into the old grain elevator previously occupied by the New Albany Manufacturing Company and the Allen Shirt Company. The Tupelo based company had more success in getting workers than the New Albany Manufacturing Company. They began operations, as at other times, with forty machines. With four factories in operation, the garment company filled its orders. Business tracked along nicely until the early 1930s. Instead of experiencing a downturn at the beginning of the Great Depression, however, the Tupelo Garment Company entered a new era of expansion. The business built a new facility in Tupelo, a two-story building 200 by fifty-five feet. In 1933, builders erected a second three-story building of the same dimensions in Tupelo and expanded the building in New Albany. Additionally, mill officials opened a fourth branch plant in Fulton, nineteen miles east of Tupelo in Itawamba County. In 1935, the company operated 1000 sewing machines at its six plants and employed 1400 people in the manufacture of men’s work shirts.

The success of the garment company spawned other manufacturing businesses as well. The Reed brothers came to Tupelo from Itawamba County in 1907. Upon their arrival, they worked for J. J. Rogers in his wholesale company. Rogers assisted the young men in forming the R. W. Reed Company, a mercantile business, in 1911. Soon R. W. “Bob” Reed discovered that he could make more money selling ties than he could barrels of flour, so the company narrowed

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102 “Souvenir Booklet,” 19; WPA, History of Union County.
its focus to dry goods. The business incorporated as a wholesale dry goods company in 1919 and became Reed Bros., Inc.\textsuperscript{103} The Reeds quickly became members of the Tupelo elite, obtaining stock in and sitting on the boards of various local businesses – most notably the Tupelo Cotton Mills and the Tupelo Garment Company.

Because of the increasing orders for the garment company, Reed Brothers Inc. entered the garment manufacturing business as well. Management relocated the dress unit of the Tupelo Garment Company, approximately twenty-four machines, to the second story of a Reed Brothers building early in 1927. Shortly thereafter, Reed Brothers purchased the operation. According to a company pamphlet published in the 1950s, the company had manufactured “a few” shirts since 1919. The acquisition of the dress unit marked its official entry into the manufacturing business.\textsuperscript{104} Riding on the success of the Tupelo Garment Company, Reed Brothers quickly expanded its dress unit. Hiring a sufficient number of workers proved challenging, however. In October 1927, the company ran a help-wanted ad in the local newspaper, seeking “girls for sewing” and wanting them “at once.” They sought “energetic” fourteen to seventeen year-old girls for apprentice work and promised steady employment and good pay. They further asked any homeowners willing to rent or take in boarders to notify the company “at once.”\textsuperscript{105} Still lacking a sufficient number of workers, Tupelo businessmen came up with a solution to satisfy all of the companies’ need for workers. They started using the local school buses to bring rural women to town to work in the plants. The buses ran in the morning, picking up the women within a thirty-mile radius and dropping them off at the plant. Afterwards the bus picked up the schoolchildren. In the afternoon, the buses took the children home and then returned to the

\textsuperscript{103} Jack Reed Sr., interview by author, Tupelo, Mississippi, August 5, 2010, copy in possession of author. "Souvenir Booklet" 2, 5.
\textsuperscript{104} A Quick Tour Through Reed Brothers, Inc., (Tupelo, MS1954), 1-3.
\textsuperscript{105} Tupelo Journal October 12, 1927.
plants to begin their second route carrying the farm women home again. The workers paid a fee for riding the buses but the plan worked. Reed Brothers Inc. secured enough workers to ship 24,000 dresses to Sears Roebuck in April 1928 and to add a playsuit division in 1929. By 1932, it needed more space, so the company built a three-story annex of 13,000 square feet in which to house its 280 machines and 300 workers. Two years later the business produced housedresses, smocks, Hoover aprons, playsuits, men’s and boys’ dress shirts, and boys’ blouses. Their employees, numbering around four hundred, turned out 156,000 dozen garments per year with an annual payroll of $300,000.

Tupelo also hosted another successful garment company. Milam Manufacturing was smaller than the other companies and its beginning dramatically differed. The company grew out of a home business started by Elizabeth Milam. Milam began sewing as a young girl making clothes for her dolls. As an adult, she made clothing for her children, which garnered the attention of family and friends. The entrepreneurial Milam then decided to take the train, the Accommodation, to Memphis. She carried examples of her work in a suitcase to various department stores. The enthusiastic stores soon overwhelmed her home business. “A dozen [orders] soon turned into twelve dozen,” she said. Her granddaughter noted, “It was natural for her to turn her talent into a business for extra income during the Depression.” Initially, Milam farmed out excess orders to neighbors but they continued to pill up. At age forty-six, she bought twelve sewing machines, hired a few workers, and opened a shop on Spring Street in Tupelo where they produced children’s aprons and little boys’ suits and sun-suits. Milam’s successful endeavor convinced her husband, L. G. Milam, to assist his wife in creating the Milam

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108 A Quick Tour Through Reed Brothers, Inc., 3; WPA, History of Lee County.
110 Betsy Hamilton to Elizabeth Payne, New Albany, Mississippi, October 30, 2010 copy in possession of author.
Manufacturing Company in 1929, with Mr. Milam as president and Mrs. Milam as vice-president. While starting a business at the beginning of the Great Depression might seem unfortunate timing, Milam Manufacturing successfully weathered the economic storm. They did not grow as quickly as the Tupelo Garment Company or Reed Brothers Manufacturing but they grew and prospered. Despite the depressed economy, Milam Manufacturing touted eighty-five machines and 125 employees by 1937.\footnote{Betsy Hamilton, interview by Elizabeth Payne, Tupelo, MS, September 17, 2009 copy in possession of author; Kurt Salmon Associates, "Milam Manufacturing Company: An Engineered Style Operation," \textit{Southern Garment Manufacturer}, May 31, 1961; WPA, \textit{History of Lee County}.}

In general, the manufacturers of Tupelo fared well during the Depression. In 1928, the Tupelo Cotton Mills reported a “substantial operating profit,” for the previous year, noting that production stayed “well behind the sales and the mills are kept running at capacity to fill orders.”\footnote{“1927 Was Good Year for Tupelo Cotton Mills Co.,” \textit{Tupelo Journal} Feb. 1, 1928.} The mill began running night and day in 1928, and there is no indication that production decreased during the 1930s.\footnote{WPA, \textit{History of Lee County}.} The garment companies continued operations uninterrupted as well, expanding operations as the school buses continued to ferry women workers to and from the plants.\footnote{Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (Miss.), 262.} That is not to say that the residents of Tupelo or Northeast Mississippi were unaffected by the Depression. Many felt the sting of economic peril but Tupelo’s businessmen, like J. H. Ledyard, were “not particularly affected,” on a personal level.\footnote{Frances Ledyard Ivy interview.}
CHAPTER III

“THE FAMOUS STRUGGLE AT TUPELO”: THE COTTON MILL STRIKE

For Mississippians, the sharp decline in cotton prices proved to be the most devastating aspect of the Great Depression. In 1931, cotton sold for less than six cents a pound. Throughout the state, low prices and a drought forced small farmers off their land as they failed to pay debts or taxes. By the mid thirties, 40,000 families lost their farms through foreclosure. Eighty-five Mississippi banks failed and the state treasury ran so short of funds that the state lost its credit worthiness. In 1932, the state faced a thirteen million dollar deficit.¹

Tupelo and Lee County were no different. When President Franklin Roosevelt closed the banks for a “holiday,” the People’s Bank and Trust of Tupelo remained closed for several years. Frances Ivy, daughter of J. H. Ledyard, remembered, “The people were hungry.” Residents of the town visited their relatives in the country, hoping for an invitation to lunch. “Of course, they were [invited],” she recalled, “and for many that meal was the only meal of day.” The manufacturing companies survived by cutting wages.² The garment factories fared better than the Tupelo Cotton Mill, which shared in the misfortunes of the industry at large.

The cotton textile industry had experienced difficult times since the collapse of the industrial boom during World War I. In the 1920s, prices declined steadily due to overproduction. The most successful Southern mills earned profits far lower than usual with less

¹ Busbee, 226-227.
² Frances Ledyard Ivy, interview.
than half paying regular dividends between 1926 and 1932. To compensate, mill managers looked for ways to cut costs. The most notorious method was the stretch-out, a system that required individual workers to operate more machines than previously. This system reduced the amount of labor necessary to produce an equal amount of cloth. Even before the Depression, cotton mill workers faced wage reductions, layoffs, and an increased production rate. Managers asked the operatives who remained to do more work in fewer hours for less pay.³

For the cotton textile industry, the Great Depression brought more of the same – declining prices and overproduction by the myriad small mills dotting the countryside. For this reason, the cotton textile industry eagerly sought to take advantage of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and formed the Cotton Textile Industry Committee before the NIRA passed Congress on June 1, 1933. The committee quickly drew up a code of fair competition, which the president signed just one month after the passage of the NIRA, making it the first industry code implemented. Based on the cotton textile code of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), Southern mills paid workers a minimum weekly wage of twelve dollars. The code limited hours to forty per week and mills to two forty-hour shifts. No rules, however, regulated the stretch-out. The committee left the controversial money-saving method to an investigating body.⁴

The initial result of the NRA code met expectations, creating a boom in the cotton textile market. The Agricultural Adjustment Act, which included a processing tax on raw cotton, caused this upswing. Buyers, anxious to obtain supplies before the tax went into effect, temporarily drove up prices. By October 1933, the short-lived boom subsided. Without the rush to beat code-induced price increases, demand dropped and prices fell. Yet, high production costs

⁴ Irons, 60; Salmond, 25-29.
remained, owing to the wage and hour provisions in the industry’s code. The disparity between price and cost led to an epidemic of code violations. Mill managers increased rather than decreased hours of operation, failed to uphold minimum wage provisions and ignored section 7(a) of the NIRA, which guaranteed collective bargaining rights. These abuses coupled with the workers’ conviction that the government would enforce section 7(a) brought about the general textile strike of 1934.\(^5\)

Textile workers suffered from unemployment, reduction in working hours and increased cost of living. Yet, in June 1934, the textile board hoped to stem overproduction by cutting machine hours twenty-five percent. Many mills closed every fourth week. On July 14, textile unionists in Alabama pulled 20,000 workers out of the mills, demanding union recognition, abolition of the stretch out, a thirty-hour workweek and a twelve-dollar minimum weekly wage. Southern workers dominated a United Textile Workers convention the following month and convinced the union to set a general strike date of September 1.\(^6\) “Flying squadrons,” groups of workers driving from mill to mill, encouraged workers to walk off the job and closed mills from Maine to Alabama. Some mill owners, who owned excess stock, decided to close their mills and wait out the strikers. Others turned to state and local authorities to stop the “flying squadrons” and prevent picketers from interfering with employees entering the mills. In South Carolina, Governor Charles Blackwood called out the National Guard and highway patrol. In Augusta, Georgia, local police kept strikers away from the mill and did not permit them to visit family members in the village. Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge, in the midst of a reelection campaign, refused initially to do anything claiming local authorities could handle the situation.

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\(^5\) Irons, 69; Salmond, 30.
\(^6\) Hall, "Disorderly Women," 280.
After three weeks, he declared martial law and ordered the National Guard to arrest all strikers and incarcerate them in quickly constructed internment camps.7

Reacting to the violence, President Roosevelt decided to step in. On September 5, he appointed a special three-man board, the Winant Board, to mediate the strike. The Board’s report did not suggest any changes in the code regulations or wage rates. Instead, it proposed the creation of a Textile Labor Relations Board to handle collective bargaining cases. It did not address the implementation of the stretch-out except to say that the matter needed further investigation. The president then asked the owners to open the mills and the workers to return to their jobs. He also wanted the Board’s recommendations to be a basis for a final settlement. The union tried to claim a victory but no formal agreement resulted from the board’s proposals. When the operatives returned to the mills, many remained locked. The mills that resumed production refused to rehire strikers. The action ended in bitter disappointment.8

The Tupelo Cotton Mill employees did not participate in the general textile strike of 1934. Nevertheless, the “perfect harmony” that reportedly existed in 1928 between workers and management was no longer present.9 The mill instituted the stretch-out as a way to circumvent the hours and wage rates implemented by the industry code. Similarly, the garment companies, included in the cotton textile code, implemented the piece-rate system. Operators had to meet production quotas to earn the new wage rates.10 Management “laid off” workers who failed to meet the quotas, regardless of their seniority. H. K. Parrish, an unemployed railroad switchman and member of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen number 216, wrote to the American Federation of Labor (AF of L) in August 1933 to report these practices and to inform the

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7 Salmond, 50-73.
8 Ibid., 52-76.
9 Lowe, 71.
10 Bessie Gann, Testimony, National Labor Relations Board Hearing, XV-C-55, Tupelo, Mississippi, July 7, 1937, National Labor Relations Board, Transcripts and Exhibits, File 311, Box 450, U. S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (hereafter referred to as NLRB-TE).
federation that the workers in Tupelo were “anxious to join the union.” He said the town was “badly in need of a live wire organizer at once.”\(^1\) Frank Morrison, secretary of the AF of L, forwarded the letter to David Dubinsky of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), stating that the workers fell under the ILGWU’s jurisdiction. The unions showed little interest in Tupelo at that time.

The residents of the town focused more on becoming the first city to obtain power from the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) than on labor discontent. Due to the efforts of Congressman John Rankin, a native of Tupelo and vehement anti-unionist, TVA electricity began flowing into the city in 1933. In June of the following year, Lorena Hickok, a chief investigator for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, visited Tupelo. She reported to Harry Hopkins, “In Tupelo everybody seems to be feeling grand.” The garment companies and textile mill went “peacefully along under the code.”\(^2\) Hickok did not mention the source of this information. Perhaps the promise of cheap electricity prompted workers to believe that management would share company profits with them. The employees had accepted pay cuts as their share of the financial troubles the companies faced.\(^3\) The language of management suggested that their businesses constituted joint endeavors between management and the employees. Workers must have thought they would benefit from the company’s economic gain. They did not. Instead, with the removal of the NRA codes the following year, Tupelo’s factory workers suffered more of the stretch-out and even higher production quotas.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) H. K. Parrish, Letter, August 8, 1933. David Dubinsky, President's Records, 1932-1966, 5780/002, Box III, Folder 8, Catherwood Collection, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York (hereafter referred to as Kheel).
\(^3\) "Organizer Expected Here Today," Tupelo Daily Journal, April 14, 1937. Bessie Gann, Testimony, NLRB-TE.
\(^4\) Bessie Gann, Testimony, NLRB-TE.
AF of L representatives appeared in Tupelo in the spring of 1935. Three organizers came to Tupelo and held an evening rally at the courthouse. Reed Brothers warned its workers not to attend the rally via a notice posted on the company bulletin board, which stated that any employee attending the meeting “would be automatically fired.” When asked about the effect of the notice, one woman responded, “It made me know not to go.”

Few, if any, of the women from the garment plant attended the union rally, for fear of losing their job. Nevertheless, the following day, “Brother Howie,” the minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Tupelo, came to the Tupelo Garment Company to address the workers. Officials turned off the machines and the workers assembled toward the rear of the building. The minister advised the workers to avoid the union. He assured them that they worked reasonable hours and received reasonable pay. Unions caused disturbances, he admonished. Things “had always” run smoothly in Tupelo and the NRA codes protected workers. Brother Howie had full confidence in the codes and judged they would remain in place. The next day supervisors insisted employees sign loyalty pledges indicating their satisfaction with working conditions.

Contrary to “Brother Howie’s” prediction, the Supreme Court invalidated the codes in May. As labor conditions worsened and wages decreased, worker discontent simmered.

Two years later, courage replaced fear when, on April 7, 1937, forty cotton mill employees began a sit-down strike. Jimmy Cox, a machinist who had worked at the mill for seven years, organized a group of weavers and initiated the strike. The group, consisting of just over one quarter of the night shift, went on strike at 6:30 pm, pulling the switch that stopped all machinery. A large crowd of sympathizers gathered outside the plant indicating that workers from different departments supported the strike. The striking workers enjoyed the support of a

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15 Kathleen Patey, Testimony, 45-50, 53-56, NLRB-TE.
16 Ibid. Bonnie Graham, Testimony, 106., NLRB-TE.
number of local businessmen as well. Several merchants gave the workers boxes of food containing sandwiches and fruit. Another local business supported the strikers by placing the following advertisement in the *Tupelo Daily Journal*. It was subtle and, yet, a more public expression of support.

FIGURE 14: “SIT DOWN” ADVERTISEMENT

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18 Cox: 42.
Strikers wanted the workweek shortened from forty-five to forty hours, a general wage increase of fifteen percent over the NRA standard and fair treatment of all employees regarding the new work schedule. Local workers initiated and effected this action. Both the employees and mill management publically acknowledged the absence of union organizers in the city. In an effort to distance themselves from popular perceptions of unions and strikers, the workers declared that they had agreed among themselves to tolerate no violence or sabotage of company property.\footnote{40 Tupelo Cotton Mill Workers Go on Sit-Down,” Tupelo Daily Journal, April 8, 1937.}

J. H. Ledyard, mill manager, declared the mill would open the next morning, allowing any who wished to work the opportunity to do so. After consulting with other plant officials, however, the mill closed indefinitely.\footnote{Ibid.} The mill owners claimed the plant had been losing money for several years. Given the state of the industry at large, the declaration was viable. Management noted, however, that the factory became profitable again only recently. They made public Ledyard’s assurance to employees that he would raise their wages as soon as possible. Mill officials argued that the workers had “jumped the gun” and indicated that the mill would not reopen until they settled the dispute. A reporter from the Memphis \textit{Press-Scimitar} reported that trouble had been brewing “for some time” and that the owners declared beforehand that any major labor trouble would result in the permanent closure of the plant.\footnote{“Sitters Hold Tupelo Plant,” \textit{Press-Scimitar}, April 8, 1937.} Employees of the mill believed management was bluffing.

The next day, the number of strikers increased to 100, as the day shift weavers joined the men and women of the night shift. They moved quilts and blankets into the plant to prepare for an extended struggle. The strikers also submitted a list of demands to plant officials, who promptly returned them because no one had signed the document. It “bore no proof of...
authenticity.” In response, the workers asked the *Daily Journal* to publish the following statement:

“We assure you that our requests are serious; that we wish settlement without union intervention except as a last resort. We will not tolerate sabotage of company property while we are domiciled in same. We have treated you fairly, honorably, and in the friendliest possible manner and anticipate like treatment. We number approximately 400 strong and 100 percent for above resolution.”

On April 10, the board of directors met to discuss employee demands, which arrived as a formal resolution including the signatures of the majority of mill workers, many of whom had not participated in the initial sit-down. The company reported 264 signatures on the resolution, while the number of strikers now numbered 348. The mill employed approximately 400 operatives. None of the foremen or office workers signed the resolution, which read:

“We, the undersigned, in a combined resolution, do hereby offer the following as our proposals and requests for solution of our common problem. As soon as possible we are expecting action on same. To wit: 1. A return to eight hour shifts forty hour week. 2. A general wage increase of 15 percent over NRA scales. 3. The promise that when we return to work no one will be discriminated against due to strike participation; that everyone will be returned to their regular jobs, and that no one who signs herewith or hereunder shall lose their jobs or seniority. 4. The enactment of the foregoing requests into legal contract form, due to the fact that bygone promises have been ignored. In conclusion of this part of this paper we must say that we have gone more than half way in giving a square deal and honorable custody of the things with which we have had contact. In witness of, and in verification of the above as being our valid and official agreement for cessation of strike, and in authentication of foregoing acts, we the undersigned do hereby set our hands.”

Both sides dug in as mill officials threatened to leave the plant closed and the strikers responded with a threat to leave the city en masse. Undaunted by the warning, the executive committee of the cotton mill issued a statement indicating their readiness to reopen the mill

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under the same schedule and wage rate in effect at the time of the strike. They further stated that should the mill earn a profit during the year, it would share “a just part” with the operatives in the form of a bonus at the end of the year. If work did not resume under these terms, they concluded, the mill would remain closed. Ledyard stated, “We didn’t start this strike and we are making no effort to end it.” The workers rejected the proposal and threatened to bring in the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO).

While the strike leader, Cox, sought to distance initial strike efforts from any association with a national labor union, employees discussed joining a union before the issuance of the latest threat. The statement released the day after the strike began hinted at this possibility when the workers suggested, “we wish settlement without union intervention except as a last resort” (italics mine). A Memphis reporter claimed that some mill operatives wanted to bring in the CIO earlier. A number of workers, if not already seeking union affiliation, were prepared to join in order to secure their demands. Still, Cox tried to steer strikers away from an official union connection. When rumors surfaced about the arrival of a union representative for the AF of L, Cox replied, “If he’s here, he’s just wasting a hotel bill. We don’t want any union if we can get our demands without it.” As the mill officials seem uninterested in negotiations, the stance toward a union changed and the workers threatened again to bring in the CIO. Cox, aware of the negative connotations associated with union membership, styled this move as one forced upon them. “We don’t want a union, the board of directors doesn’t want it, and the citizens of Tupelo

26 "Strikers at Tupelo May Ask CIO Help," Commercial Appeal, April 9, 1937.
27 "New Threat Hurl in Mill Strike."
28 "Strikers at Tupelo May Ask CIO Help."
29 "Mill Officials to Discuss Demands."
don’t want it but we will organize this week if we do not get our demands.” He then wired the CIO for assistance.

An additional factor in Cox’s decision to seek CIO assistance came from the perceived threat of the National Guard. The local unit assembled on the grounds next to the cotton mill and began firing artillery. The commander insisted this was only a practice drill. The workers alleged that the display amounted to intimidation. The timing was certainly suspect. Armed with wrenches and other pieces of metal, the mill workers stormed across the field. The guard unit pulled back to avoid confrontation.

Management announced the next day that it would pay all employees in full and close the plant. The workers declared they would not leave the plant until officials sold the machinery. They also applied for a CIO charter, reiterating their unwillingness to compromise on their demands. Cox called further negotiations useless until management “brought all their marbles to the table.” As the workers waited for the CIO representative, mill officials began a public relations campaign, releasing a statement they claimed to have read to mill employees on March 15:

“For the past ten years or more the textile industry has passed through a season of low earning power. Hundreds of small mills have been closed down because they could not be operated profitably. Our little plant has struggled on paying its employees a living wage and maintaining the physical condition of the plant.

For twenty years no dividend has been paid to the stockholders. They have been willing that the wage earner be considered first and at no week-end has a single employee failed to receive his pay envelope.

In arriving at a just scale of wages for employees, the management must consider three things.

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30 "New Threat Hurl ed in Mill Strike."
31 "Strikers at Tupelo Plant Issue Threat."
32 Grisham Jr, 105-106.
FIRST, the maintaining of the productive capacity of the plant to meet in quality and quantity the fabrics offered in competition by other mills. If this is not done, the mill loses its customers, labor loses its opportunity to work, - the stockholders lose their investment.

SECOND, is the obligation to pay labor a just and fair part of the service rendered and placed on a basis in hours and dollars made necessary by competitive mills.

THIRD, pay to the stockholders who have invested their money in buildings and capital, a reasonable return on this money. In November of 1935, conditions facing the mill were extremely critical. The mill was operating at a loss and goods were piling up unsold in the warehouse. In an emergency, the management called a meeting of the employees and proposed a schedule on a basis of 45 hours weekly work at the same pay, as the employees were receiving for 40 hours, and the management assured the employees that just as soon as conditions justified it, that there would be made an adjustment of hours or wages. For the balance of 1935, conditions continued unfavorably and the operation for the year showed a loss of approximately $3600.00. For 1936, conditions continued unfavorable and the net earnings for the year were slightly less than $6,000.00. Under these conditions, no change could be made in hours or pay.

For 1937, the month of January and February show substantial earnings and conditions are better. Should they continue on this level throughout the year of 1937, it will enable the mill to pay to the employees a substantial bonus on their years’ wages, and also pay to the stockholders a reasonable return on their money invested.

If the earnings for 1937 warrant it, at the close of the fiscal year this bonus will be cheerfully paid and no coercion from outside sources is needed to get this just demand satisfied. For many years relations between employer and employee in this mill has been friendly and based on the belief that the management would do all it possibly could for the welfare of its employees. The management believes now, as it has always believed, that this is a free country where any man or woman has the right to work, or not work, for any corporation as their decision may be made. If the job suits them, they should be protected in their opportunity to work. If their job does not suit them, it is their right to quit and demand their pay for services performed.

This policy will be continued at this plant and if conditions arise from outside interference to bring strife and dissatisfaction between employee and employer, it will mean a closing of the plant and a loss to all of us of our jobs."

34 “Organizer Expected Here Today."
Mill owners justified their decision to the public, particularly to the town’s other merchants whose businesses depended on the mill workers. Some of these merchants openly supported the strikers. With 400 employees and an annual payroll of $250,000, the closing of the mill affected many businesses in Tupelo. Additionally, the mill owners adopted the standard mantra of cotton mill owners throughout the South – they attributed the agitation and the consequent results to “outsiders.” They blamed the closing of the mill on the strikers, accepted no responsibility themselves and claimed the status of victim. No national union came to organize cotton mill workers, however. Mill management acknowledged that fact the day after the strike began. The only “outsider” to whom they could have referred was Jimmy Cox, who was not a native of Tupelo.

How and when Charles F. “Jimmy” Cox came to Tupelo is unknown. In 1930, at twenty years of age, the recently married Cox lived in the city with his in-laws, William and Martha Davis. He worked at a coffee factory while his wife and father-in-law both worked at the cotton mill. This family connection explains how Cox came to work at the mill. At the time of the strike, he had been there for seven years. Regardless of the length of time he worked at the mill or lived in Tupelo, the mill operatives did not view Cox as an outsider. They readily accepted him as their leader. This acceptance may stem from the transient nature of cotton mill workers. Neither Cox nor the Davis family appeared in the 1920 Tupelo census, yet the mill workers clearly accepted Cox as both a member and a leader of the mill community. Tupelo residents with no formal connection to the mill may have viewed him otherwise. When asked about the attitudes of Tupelo residents toward the mill people, Jack Reed, Sr., a youth at the time,

35 Cox: 42.
37 The Fifteen Census of the United States, 1930.
38 Caldwell, “Politics.”
said he had no direct knowledge of derisive attitudes but that “it was likely among some, human nature being what it is.”

Mississippi governor Hugh White’s arrival in Tupelo brought renewed hope to the strikers and the community at large. White had campaigned for governor on the need to attract industry and since his victory had seen the passage of his Balance Agriculture with Industry Act – an attempt to lure industry into the state. While sympathetic to workers, White also adamantly opposed sit-down strikes, claiming at one point that he would not hesitate to use the National Guard to remove strikers. The trouble at Tupelo put him in a difficult position. He hoped his personal mediation would bring an end the stalemate. In a gesture of good faith, the strikers agreed to postpone association with the CIO until after the governor’s visit. Cox, optimistic about the visit, claimed to know the governor personally because he had worked for him in the governor’s Columbia mill.

Upon his arrival, the governor visited the strikers who occupied the plant to discuss the situation. The meeting lasted approximately thirty minutes. Later that evening, a rumor circulated that the employees had disrespected the governor, even going so far as to ask him to leave. The rumor attempted to discredit the strikers and thwart any progress at ending the strike. The governor, however, issued a personal statement denying the allegations. He declared that the workers had treated him with “perfect courtesy.” The next day he sat down with the mill’s executive committee. Tupelo industrialists cared little for Governor White. They opposed his method for attracting industry. The bond issues particularly aroused their ire because they believed the bonds placed unnecessary taxes on citizens and communities who already struggled

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39 Jack Reed Sr., interview.
41 "White's Arrival Raises Strike Settlement Hopes."
to provided local services. As a political opponent, White neither impressed nor moved Tupelo’s mill owners. After the meeting, a reporter asked Ledyard about the conference. He replied that the situation remained unchanged. The governor’s visit made no difference. When the press reported that both sides remained unyielding, Cox stated that the governor had not asked them to yield on their demands. The strike leader further stated that the governor had tried to reason with plant officials, suggesting that White asked them to compromise with the employees. Cox blamed management for the failure of White’s mediation efforts.\textsuperscript{42} Mill officials began liquidation.\textsuperscript{43}

After the governor’s failure, dissention tore the ranks of the strikers. A faction coalesced to oppose Cox’s leadership and the rival groups sought to usurp the right to bargain on behalf of all employees. An address delivered to the workers by Josh Whitesides, a member of the mill’s board of directors, sparked the dispute. He reported that two mill employees called on Ledyard at his home the night before, offering their opinion that a large majority of the mill’s former employees wanted to go back to work. If this were true, Whitesides continued, the employees should elect a committee to represent the majority of workers in discussions with the board of directors. The discussion aimed at reopening the mill. At this suggestion, the rival groups held elections; each elected a committee of five men and claimed to represent the majority of workers. The followers of Jimmy Cox, labeled “the Cox group” or the “Cox committee,” elected Jimmy chairman and Homer Davis, Mack Davis, Charlie Ridge and Earl Spencer as representatives. The Cox group claimed 208 signatures (a majority). The rival faction elected G. J. Burroughs as chairman and J. T. Bramlett, C. L. Stevens, Sid Clark, and G. C. Flaherty as representatives. Immediately, charges of forgery surfaced, as workers claimed their name appeared on the

\textsuperscript{43} "Liquidation Planned for Tupelo Factory," \textit{Commercial Appeal}, April 16, 1937.
opposing committee’s list without their consent. Cox claimed the other faction “was made up of outsiders” who tried to go around Cox and the strikers to negotiate the reopening of the mill. He further claimed that the mill owners sought to break the solidarity of the strikers by sponsoring the other group. Mill management refused to bargain with the Cox committee.

The Cox group next contacted the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to mediate the election dispute. Once again, they postponed affiliation with the CIO until the NLRB had a chance to intervene. In the meantime, they continued their sit-down strike. Workers sat in shifts, allowing some to go home while others took their place holding the mill. Sitters left the building only to smoke explaining that insurance rules forbade smoking in the weaving department. Offering such particular information to the public suggested an attempt to disclaim responsibly should a fire start in the mill. A rumor claimed that mill owners intended to burn the mill and blame the strikers. Three days later, the strikers decided to evacuate the mill and picket instead. They did not want the public to blame them for damage to the plant, emphasizing to the local press once again that they had forbidden anyone to smoke in the plant during the strike.

Meanwhile, the Burroughs faction had not given up on its attempt to usurp the role of negotiator. On April 26, this group initiated a vote to determine how many of the former employees wished to go back to work. The ballot presented to workers had two options – “I want to work,” or “I do not want to work” – and a signature line. Workers complained that no conditions of labor appeared on the ballot. Cox announced that he had received a wire from the

49 Grisham, 106.
NLRB in Washington, informing him that it referred the situation to the district office in New Orleans. The New Orleans office notified Cox that the regional chairman, Charles H. Logan, would arrive in Tupelo as soon as possible.51

On May 5, five representatives of the striking workers met with NLRB officials in New Orleans. Upon their return, Jimmy Cox, Sam Gregg, J. E. Cox, Walter Patey, and Hollis Kitchens called a general meeting of mill workers on the grounds of the plant at 10:00 am May 6, the same day Logan arrived in Tupelo. The Cox committee had filed a petition with the Board alleging that the mill had locked workers out and had violated an agreement to recognize the bargaining committee elected after the abandonment of the independently called sit-down strike.52 A week after Logan’s initial visit, workers planned to hold another election to determine who would represent them in negotiations with management. Mill officials affirmed they would bargain in good faith with “the employee representatives chosen in election under the terms of the Wagner Labor Relations Act.”53 Management believed the Burroughs group would win. The semblance of total compliance with a government representative also presented mill management as a willing party to negotiations with the majority of employees, whom they felt Cox did not represent.

Efforts to sabotage the election began before balloting started. On May 11, the Tupelo Daily News, a rival of the Tupelo Daily Journal, reported that if the strikers won the election, the mill would remain closed. NLRB regional chairman, Logan, refuted the statement calling it “grotesquely absurd.” He clarified that the election would not determine whether the mill opened or remained closed. The election sought to determine which of the rival committees

would represent the mill workers in negotiations with mill management.\textsuperscript{54} He further explained that employees voted by secret ballot. The \textit{Daily Journal} printed instructions for marking the ballot the day before the election. The article reminded voters once again that they should not sign their name to a secret ballot. Employees marked their choice of representation with an “X” and folded the ballot to conceal the vote cast. Only eligible voters entered the voting location. Employees on the payroll of the week beginning April 5, the Monday before the strike began could vote. The company provided a list of piece-rate and hourly employees to election officials.\textsuperscript{55} Both Cox and T. C. Bagget, the new leader of the rival committee, verified workers’ identities.

Of the 409 workers eligible to vote, 375 appeared at city hall to cast ballots. The Cox committee carried the election with 240 votes to 121, giving them a two-to-one victory.\textsuperscript{56} NLRB officials and workers expected negotiations to open shortly after the election. The Cox committee met with several directors the following Tuesday evening. A formal meeting could not take place because of the absence of one member of the board of directors.\textsuperscript{57} Upon his return, the two parties met to begin negotiations. The employee representatives met with the mill’s board of directors: B. A. Rogers, president; J. H. Ledyard, secretary and general manager; R. F. “Rex” Reed, J. P. Nanney (the mayor of Tupelo), V. S. Whitesides, George F. Maynard, B. F. Worsham and F. G. Thomas. The meeting ended abruptly with no compromise and no date set for further negotiations.\textsuperscript{58}

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\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} “Good Feeling is Restored at Mill,” \textit{Tupelo Daily Journal}, May 13, 1937.
\textsuperscript{56} “Cox Committee Wins Election 240 to 121,” \textit{Tupelo Daily Journal}, May 17, 1937.
\textsuperscript{57} “Negotiations to Open at Session this Afternoon,” \textit{Tupelo Daily Journal}, May 19, 1937.
The following day, mill officials began an inventory of the plant. Stockholders met on June 4 and accepted the recommendation of the board to liquidate the mill. Logan, who had left Tupelo to deal with a dispute in Arkansas, hoped that negotiations would proceed giving him no reason to return to Northeast Mississippi. With no date set for further negotiations and Logan occupied in Arkansas, G. Van Arkel, an attorney for the NLRB New Orleans office, came to Tupelo in Logan’s stead hoping to reopen negotiations. Within a few days, the employees had a new proposal to submit to the stockholders at their June 4 meeting. Company officials told Van Arkel that the stockholders would consider the proposal. Neither party made the terms of the new offer public. Regardless of the new provisions, stockholders voted to liquidate the entire property – the factory, thirty-five acres of land and the 105 houses occupied by striking employees. Cox responded by wiring Logan and asking for a NLRB hearing. He declared that the company had ignored the employees’ new proposal and refused to negotiate with them, despite the written agreement to do so. One board member admitted that no one brought the employees’ proposal before the stockholders.

Meanwhile, the strikers suffered from the lack of a paycheck for nearly two months. Governor White decided to step in and offer relief. Cox phoned White and reported that twenty percent of the workers desperately needed food and money, and that, if present conditions persisted, the other eighty percent would be in the same condition before long. White chose to

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63 Charles H. Logan, Telegraph to Benedict Wolf, National Labor Relations Board, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 15, 1937, National Labor Relations Board, File C-240, Folders 1-2, Box 1170, U. S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (hereafter referred to as NLRB-C-240).
64 "Mill Stockholders Meet Today; Union Organizer Leaves," Tupelo Daily Journal, June 4, 1937; "Liquidation of Mill is Approved."
use surplus funds from the Emergency Relief Administration to aid the workers.\(^{65}\) He told a Jackson newspaper, “I do not propose to permit unnecessary suffering among the workers. We are going to give relief to non-strikers and strikers alike. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) is unable to assist and I am only discharging my responsibility to relieve hunger and distress in the families of the former employees by using ERA funds at my disposal for this purpose as long as the funds last.”\(^{66}\) The White’s administration appointed W. B. Wilson of Tupelo, formerly associated with the WPA, to distribute relief in the form of vouchers for groceries and medicine. Before proceeding, he reviewed the rolls of mill employees, ensuring that he turned no one away without an investigation. He further stated, “Employed persons among the former mill employees will be given aid only if it is shown that their income is too low to keep their families from suffering.”\(^{67}\)

During this time, Lucy Randolph Mason, an agent for the CIO, came to Tupelo. She visited Jimmy Cox in his home, which she described as “wretched.” The house had two rooms and a back porch with running water but no bath. The bedroom had two double beds, while the other room functioned as kitchen, sitting room and storeroom. Shortly after Mason’s arrival, Cox called a special meeting of the “cotton mill union people,” whose members voted to continue the strike. Within an hour, rumors flew throughout the town that a mob sought to hang Jimmy that night. Union men warned him to leave town. Another of Jimmy’s friends brought him a pistol. Mason persuaded Jimmy to give it back, arguing that it would be suicide for opponents to see him with a gun.\(^{68}\)

\(^{65}\) "White Provides Relief Funds for Striking Mill Employees," *Tupelo Daily Journal*, June 10, 1937.
In an attempt to defuse the situation, Mason called on Claude Clayton, city attorney. Cox believed that Clayton would take steps to protect them as well as Ida Sledge, a representative of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union seeking to organize Tupelo’s garment plants. The attorney had warned Tupelo’s citizens that if anyone interfered with Sledge again he would go to “all limits” in prosecuting, “let the chips fall where they may.” Unfortunately, Clayton was not home when Mason sought him. She left a note explaining the situation and discovered later that Clayton, upon receiving the note, had gone straight to the chief of police, who stationed special officers around mill village but nothing occurred. Nevertheless, the rumor persisted that if the town could rid themselves of Jimmy Cox, the strike would end, the mill would reopen and people could go back to work.

In July, attorneys for the NLRB tried to prevent a judge from appointing a receiver for the Tupelo Cotton Mills. Their efforts failed and the plan to liquidate the mill continued. By August, the receiver for the mill began evicting striking employees from company housing for failure to pay rent. Anticipating this move, Cox wired Governor White and asked for National Guard tents to house the strikers temporarily. The governor suggested he try the state office of the WPA; which he did to no avail. He next tried the local Red Cross, appealing to Nell Reed, the chairman of the Tupelo Red Cross and wife of R. F. “Rex” Reed, a member of the mill’s board of directors. She promised to present the request to the local board. Not surprisingly, nothing came of the request, despite the fact that cotton mill employees had been encouraged to contribute to the Red Cross via a payroll deduction. Cox then sent a telegram to President Roosevelt asking him to give Governor White permission to furnish army tents for the evicted

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69 Clayton’s comment concerning interference with Ida Sledge references two incidents in which the organizer was ushered out of Tupelo. These events are described in chapter five.
70 Mason, 51-53.
workers. After this last failed attempt to procure temporary housing, Cox tried to discover how much money workers owed in back rent. C. R. Bolton, attorney for the receiver, replied that he would not accept payment. According to Cox, all of those evicted were strikers.73 It mattered little at this point. The Tupelo Cotton Mill ceased to exist. A short-lived attempt to reopen it early in 1938 as a cooperative ended almost as soon as it began. The workers could not come up with sufficient cash to buy into the business. Only the mill’s previous board of directors possessed enough money to restart the plant but they refused to accommodate the defeated workers.74 The Tupelo industrialists took the strike as a personal affront.

The strikers of the Tupelo Cotton Mill were disappointed and dismayed. They had believed the strike would be successful.75 Despite mill owner claims that the company had not paid dividends for years, the employees knew that the mill saved a good deal of money due to its TVA contract. In fact, the mill’s manager, J. H. Ledyard, traveled to Chattanooga, Tennessee in March 1935 to advise that city to take advantage of the TVA’s power program. In his effort to convince area businessmen, Ledyard explained that the savings of “one corporation” in Tupelo amounted to forty-eight percent – a total of $15,768 per year.76 The company did not share these savings with the operatives. Additionally, the board of directors admitted that in the first months of 1937 the mill had made “substantial earnings.”77 Based on the language of cooperation often used by mill management, the employees saw no reason to wait until the end of the year to benefit from the company’s financial rebound.

In addition to the mill’s improved financial condition, employees drew courage from events covered in area newspapers. The editor of the Tupelo Daily Journal, George McLean, a

74 Grisham Jr., 107; WPA, History of Lee County.
75 Ivy, interview.
77 "Organizer Expected Here Today."
previous member of the Socialist Party in Memphis, held a favorable view of labor unions and championed the working man. He criticized Governor White’s BAWI plan, not because he opposed industry, but because he opposed the type of industry it lured to Mississippi. He published an expose of the garment plant located in White’s hometown of Columbia, Mississippi in November 1936. The article, written by Tupelo native Harry Rutherford, highlighted the long hours, low wages and extremely high production quotas. In the same edition, McLean printed an editorial, in which he declared,

“We are convinced that the Columbia situation is not the pattern on which we wish to build the prosperity of Mississippi … What we have done is balance our exceedingly low agricultural income with an equally low industrial income. We have taken the women off of the farm and put them to work for a wage which is below the level of a decent standard of living … Mississippi is effectively aiding in the breakdown of American living standards and wage standards by its failure to safeguard the rights of its workers.”

McLean wanted labor legislation that would protect Mississippi workers from exploitation.

Along with this invective, whose sting Tupelo garment manufacturers felt, McLean’s newspaper covered a number of strikes in nearby Memphis and in various towns throughout the state of Mississippi. The Memphis Press-Scimitar and Commercial Appeal also circulated through Tupelo and carried many of the same reports, occasionally in greater detail. In March alone, hundreds of workers struck in Memphis. The employees of three Memphis garment plants struck for higher wages and fewer hours. After a relatively short strike, employees of the Tri-State Dress Manufacturing Company won a five-day, forty-hour week, a twelve-dollar minimum wage and a closed shop. Just over one month later, women from the Kuhn Manufacturing Company and Nona-Lee Dress Company, both of Memphis, won the same concessions. All

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three companies contracted with the ILGWU.\textsuperscript{81} Memphis’s Yellow cab workers obtained an increase in their percentage of receipts after a strike lasting only a few hours. African-American women at Memphis Pecan and Walnut Company successfully struck for higher wages, as did the charcoal sackers at Forest Products Chemical Company.\textsuperscript{82} After a prolonged strike, furniture workers at Memphis Furniture Manufacturing Company and Hartwell Brothers Manufacturing Company won concessions as well. Management did not meet their demands entirely but the employees gained a wage increase.\textsuperscript{83}

In Mississippi, successful strikes occurred in Vicksburg at the M. Fine and Sons shirt factory, in West Point at the Knickerbocker Manufacturing Company and the West Point Shirt Company, and in Greenville at the Chicago Millings and Lumber Company. The Vicksburg and West Point garment companies came to Mississippi because of local subsidies under White’s industrial plan. The strikers did not win a closed shop as the plants in Memphis had done but their affiliation with the United Garment Workers of America gained recognition. The organization of the Vicksburg local marked the first union to enter Mississippi’s textile industry.\textsuperscript{84}

McLean used the strike in Vicksburg to continue his attack on the low-wage industries coming to Mississippi. With a banner headline that read, “Vicksburg Strike Threat Warning to State,” he assaulted White’s industrial plan, which did not protect Mississippi workers. McLean used the conditions of the Vicksburg plant to show that northern companies would take advantage of Mississippians, extracting free buildings and tax exemptions while refusing to pay

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{82} "Three Local Strikes Ended, One Continues," \textit{Commercial Appeal}, March 18, 1937.
\item \textsuperscript{83} "One Strike Settled But Another Begins," \textit{Commercial Appeal}, March 23, 1937.
\end{itemize}
living wages. M. Fine and Sons, McLean reported, had suffered strikes at its Indiana plants in 1936 when, after the repeal of the NRA codes, they cut wages from thirteen dollars per week to four dollars per week. This company epitomized the type of business McLean did not want in Mississippi.  

Aside from the successful strikes mentioned above, headlines that told of a $500,000 war chest designated to organize textile workers in the South affected the Tupelo Cotton Mill employees most. The establishment of a CIO regional headquarters in Atlanta encouraged the workers and came at a time when wages began to rise in textile mills across the South. Additionally, one week after the regional headquarters opened, the head of the Cotton Institute reported that Southern factories tried to improve working conditions and that mill management planned no organized effort to combat the unionization drive.

The knowledge that the cotton mill once more earned a profit and the success stories in the newspapers prompted mill workers to believe in their ability to succeed. The Tupelo businessmen held a different opinion. The profitability of the cotton mill had returned only recently. Given the condition of the cotton textile industry as a whole, the board of directors had no reason to believe it would last. The strike proved an opportune way to get rid of a struggling business without bearing the blame of closing the plant and inflicting hardship on the community. The failure to bring the employees revised terms before the stockholders on June 4 clearly indicates that the directors viewed recent events as an escape route.

Although the failure of the strike at the Tupelo Cotton Mill replicated that of other Southern mills, the experience of the strikers differed in significant aspects. Because of their

integration into the community as consumers, mill owners could not cut off access to goods by closing the village commissary, as the Cones had done in Greensboro.\textsuperscript{87} Rather than reprimand the strikers, local ministers held services in the mill for the striking employees.\textsuperscript{88} The strikers achieved a unity rare among Southern operatives.\textsuperscript{89} When some employees challenged the strike leader Jimmy Cox, an NLRB election demonstrated that over two-thirds of the employees stood firmly behind the strike. The lack of violence marked the most significant difference.\textsuperscript{90} Mill workers who occupied the plant during the strike did not face forced eviction. Mill owners did not seek to resume operations with non-union workers, so picketers posed no threat to public safety. Neither state nor local authorities intervened as they had in Georgia and South Carolina. The singular attempt at intimidation via the National Guard failed when guardsmen withdrew to prevent confrontation.

Had the cotton mill been lucrative, mill officials might have reacted differently. As the situation stood, owners saw a greater benefit in closing the factory. They ridded themselves of an economic albatross and sent a less than subtle message to Tupelo’s other industrial employees, who had recently expressed their desire for collective bargaining rights, increased wages and fewer hours. The women of the garment plants occupied a better bargaining position than that of the mill workers. Tupelo industrials needed to ensure they were too intimidated to take advantage of it.

\textsuperscript{89} Salmond, 58.
\textsuperscript{90} Irons, 131-134, 148-149; Salmond, 50-73.
CHAPTER IV

“THEY FAILED TO STICK”: THE FIGHT FOR THE GARMENT WORKERS

After the victory at Tri-State Dress Manufacturing Company in Memphis, the CIO and the ILGWU announced plans to move into Mississippi. The unions boasted a one million dollar war chest for organizing the South. The announcement made headlines in Tupelo on March 12, 1937. The three days later, Tupelo learned of a strike in Vicksburg at the M. Fine and Sons shirt factory. In just over two weeks, the Vicksburg strike ended in favor of the employees. At the same time, on March 31, 350 garment workers in West Point initiated a sit-down strike. One week later, their strike ended; wages went up and Mississippi had two garment plants with active AF of L unions.

Buoyed by the success of garment plants in the region, the perceived commitment of the ILGWU/CIO and the boldness of the nearby cotton mill operatives, the women at the Tupelo Garment Company decided to act. The original plan called for the strikes at the cotton mill and garment factory to coincide. The garment factory sat on a lot across the street from the cotton mill. As documented, the owners and management of both plants were synonymous. Neither group of workers associated with a national or international union. Both efforts were independent, but the workers hoped that eventually the organizations from both mills would

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3 "350 West Point Garment Workers Go on Sit-Down," Tupelo Daily Journal, March 31, 1937.
4 "Garment Strike At West Point Ends; Wages Up."
function as a joint unit. The cotton mill employees implemented their plan faster than did the women in the garment plant.\(^5\) The mill workers, therefore, became impatient with the garment workers. Choosing to act on Wednesday, April 7, the weavers went on strike. Five days later, on April 12 at 9:00 am, Kathleen Patey and Maggie Martin pulled the two electrical switches that stopped power from reaching the machines in the sewing department. Stopping power signaled the beginning of the sit-down strike. The women made the decision neither lightly nor in haste. They had been planning the event for some time.

Tupelo’s garment workers wanted the same thing most workers wanted – better working conditions, fewer hours, and higher wages. The garment employees in Tupelo worked the same long hours and received the same low wages McLean had railed against in his editorial.\(^6\) Patey complained that she worked on the piece-rate system as a cuff setter. Even though she made some of the highest production, she earned only nine dollars per week while working nine hours each day.\(^7\) Martin, an inspector, earned between twelve and thirteen dollars per week but she had to work between twelve and thirteen hours every day to achieve this pay scale. Her major concern focused on the unfair rate structure. While she worked long hours for her pay, others earned as much as sixteen or eighteen dollars per week and worked only eight hours per day. She lamented that some women earned as little as five dollars each week.\(^8\) They claimed that the factory floor was too crowded. The tables were too close together. Their proximity blocked the movement of work, slowing production, which prevented the women from increasing their earnings. Patey and Blanche Brassfield, who made buttonholes, expressed their concern to Mary

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\(^5\) Ibid.  
\(^6\) McLean, "Vicksburg Strike Threat Warning to State."  
\(^7\) Kathleen Patey, Testimony, NLRB-TE  
\(^8\) Maggie Martin, Testimony, 167, NLRB-TE.
Long, the forelady. She replied there was nothing “they” could do about it; presumably, she meant management.\(^9\)

Bessie Gann offered a clear description of the women’s experience at the Tupelo Garment Company during the 1930s. Before the NRA codes, the women typically worked from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. If they fell behind in their production, management instructed them to come back at 7:00 pm and dismissed them between 9:00 and 10:00 pm. With the advent of the NRA codes, the women began working only eight hours. Before long, however, the hours increased to nine or ten per day. The women had no complaints about the hours under the NRA, however, due to their satisfaction with their paychecks. The minimum was twelve dollars per week. Gann could make over twelve dollars, averaging around fifteen dollars per week. She accomplished this because the company instituted the piece-rate system. Women who worked very quickly could earn more than the minimum wage, but the company fired women who could not meet production quotas.\(^10\) For button setters, like Gann, the quota was forty dozen buttons every day – 480 buttons. They received five and three quarter cents for each dozen.\(^11\)

When the Supreme Court invalidated the NRA on May 27, 1935, Tupelo Garment increased production quotas and decreased the prices for piecework. Management expected button setters to turn out sixty dozen (720 buttons) every day at a rate of four and one quarter cents per dozen. Just like the stretch-out in the cotton mill, the garment factories paid less while expecting workers to produce more. At the same time, the company made physical changes to the plant. Mill officials presented the changes as an attempt to improve productivity by eliminating bins and moving machinery closer together. The cramped space, however, impeded

\(^9\) Bessie Gann, Testimony, 238, NLRB-TE
\(^11\) Gann, Testimony, 236-240, NLRB-TE.
the women’s progress. With the new arrangement and decreased rates, Gann’s paycheck declined from fifteen dollars to ten or eleven dollars per week. Some weeks she earned as low as eight dollars.\textsuperscript{12} Her experience typified those of employees at Tupelo’s garment plants. Such circumstances drove the women to take action on April 12.

Rumor of union activities and newspaper headlines prompted W. B. Fields, vice-president and general manager of the Tupelo Garment Company, to address the workers in early March.\textsuperscript{13} He instructed all of the employees to gather in the cutting room. Fields asked a local radio company to install a public address system for the occasion. During his address, Fields made it clear that the company would not recognize any union. It would not negotiate with a union, and it would fire any employee who became a member of a union.\textsuperscript{14} R.F. “Rex” Reed, a member of the board of directors of both the Tupelo Garment Company and the Tupelo Cotton Mills and brother of B.R. Reed, the president of the Tupelo Garment Company stood at Fields’s side during this address. He shared ownership of Reed Brothers Incorporated with his brothers, also members of the boards of directors of these three companies. Additionally, Reed Brothers Inc. held the largest share of stock in the garment company and functioned as its chief distributing agent.\textsuperscript{15} Although he did not address the workers directly, Rex Reed’s presence conveyed the seriousness of the matter from the perspective of the Reed family.

Fields concluded his speech with a racial slur directed at Meyer Pearlstein of the ILGWU, “Now just what good do you think a man with a name like that could do you girls.”\textsuperscript{16}

From the outset, Tupelo businessmen demonstrated that they would follow the beaten path of other Southern factory owners and managers who had faced organization. They would use the

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} “Mississippi Scene of Next Textile Drive.” Gann, Testimony, NLRB-TE.
\textsuperscript{14} Patey, Testimony, 50-53, NLRB-TE.
\textsuperscript{15} Charles H. Logan, Case summary, NLRB-C-240.
\textsuperscript{16} Patey, Testimony, 52, NLRB-TE. Gann, Testimony, 227, NLRB-TE. Bonnie Graham, Testimony, 122, NLRB-TE. Blanche Brassfield, Testimony, 193, NLRB-TE.
ethnicity of labor leaders and reported communist affiliations to make unions unpalatable and to bring any would-be members into disrepute. Once the “talk” was over, the men demonstrated their munificence by paying the workers fifty cents for the hour of lost work, an unusual gesture since the company had never recompensed workers for time lost to company speeches.\footnote{Patey, Testimony, 53, NLRB-TE. Gann, Testimony, 219, NLRB-TE.}

The women feared continuing their organizational efforts. As they did not want company officials to discover their intentions, they could not hold mass meetings. Additionally, a gathering of any size proved geographically impossible because so many of the women lived outside the city. As a result, their efforts proceeded in a person-to-person campaign. Leaders who sought to establish an organization met with fellow employees before working hours in the morning, during lunch breaks, and after work in the afternoon and evening. The women established a network through which the employees could express their willingness (or opposition) to the organization via a representative. Each representative inquired about the opinions of a particular group of workers, the women who worked in their immediate area, for instance. The agent next met with one of the six women who led the movement. Leaders gathered to give and receive reports on the progress of their union. In this way, the women gauged the attitude of the other workers without arousing the suspicion of management.\footnote{Patey, Testimony, 45-50, 53-56, NLRB-TE. Graham, Testimony, 106, 118-119, 129-130, NLRB-TE. Martin, Testimony, 165, 169, 171-172, NLRB-TE. Gann, Testimony, 214-215, NLRB-TE.}

Cotton mill workers used the same approach to organize.\footnote{Logan, Case summary, NLRB-C-240.} The meetings stopped after Fields’s speech, but by early April, representatives once again met secretly in work bins – wooden compartments approximately six by twelve feet designed to store work material.

On Friday, the garment women held a number of hurried conferences via their network. They decided to begin their strike on Monday, April 12. The decision to cut the power to the
machines had a twofold purpose. It signaled the beginning of the strike and attempted to prevent any damage to company property. If the power remained on, the cloth on the sewing machines could have become tangled in the pulleys and irreparably damaged. Like Cox and the cotton mill workers, the women at the garment plant knew that property damage could swing public opinion against them.

The garment women intended a sit-down strike like the one at the cotton mill. When they turned off the power, all operatives remained seated at their machines. According to the plan, once the strike began, employees would draw up demands and present them to management. Unfortunately, the plan fell apart. The work stoppage brought Mary Long, the forelady, out of her office. She demanded to know who turned off the power. Her inquiries went unanswered. She asked for the persons who had pulled the switches to turn them again. When no one moved, Long went to the switches and restored power. Some of the women began working immediately; others allowed their machines to remain idle for a moment then they too resumed their work. Shortly thereafter, Fields appeared accompanied once again by Rex Reed. Fields ordered the machines turned off and reportedly went on a tirade. Informing the workers that the company would not tolerate a sit-down strike, he warned that he could have a writ of evacuation within two hours. He stated further that he felt sorry for “those people” sitting at the cotton mill but, if any garment workers had similar notions, they should “go over and sit with them.” Attempting to foster division among the workers, Fields added that he believed most of his help was “better cultured than that,” adding that anyone who would do something like that was “not any more than a traitor and a yellow dog.” “If you have any intention of any organization you had better get out now, because if I find it out I will put you out, and I will be sure to find it out,” Fields

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20 Patey, Testimony, 65, NLRB-TE.
21 Patey, Testimony, 52, NLRB-TE. Graham, Testimony, 122, NLRB-TE. Brassfield, Testimony, 193, NLRB-TE.
blustered.”22 Bonnie Graham, a collar finisher, reported that Fields was “madder than I had ever seen him.”23

After the tirade, Fields asked for the names of those who had turned off the switches. Getting no response, he next asked who in the room wanted to work and who did not want to work. All held up their hands on the first question; they wanted to work. As Patey explained, however, they wanted to work under different conditions. From the women’s perspective, the question was not about wanting or not wanting to work; the question concerned the conditions of work. Management refused to engage the question of conditions; in their mind, the strike meant that the employees no longer wished to work. For the workers, both at the garment company and cotton mill, the question was tricky. They desired to work, but they wanted better conditions. Asking if they wanted to work was a ridiculous question in their minds. By reducing the question to such simple terms, mill officials attempted to label the strikers as lazy and to confuse and divide the employees.24

At the raising of hands, Fields asked Reed what to do: run the plant or close it. With the threat lingering in the air, Reed finally answered, “We will run the plant.”25 Plant supervisors restored power and work resumed. Even the would-be strikers resumed their work, unsure what to do next. Both Fields and Long toured the room asking for the names of the women responsible for pulling the switches.26 An operative named Donnie B. Flynn reported to Long

22 Gann, Testimony, 227-230, NLRB-TE.
23 Graham, Testimony, 193, NLRB-TE.
24 The testimony given during the National Labor Relations Board Hearing in Tupelo on July 6-7, 1937 reveals the confusion caused to workers by such questioning, as the company lawyers repeatedly used the hand-raising incident to suggest that the workers who raised their hands did not desire to strike.
25 Patey, Testimony, 53, NLRB-TE. Gann, Testimony, 229, NLRB-TE.
26 Patey, Testimony, 54, NLRB-TE.
that Patey, Martin, Gann and Brassfield were among the most active in efforts to organize the workers.\footnote{Jimmie Clark, Testimony, 141-142, NLRB-TE.}

The event was over by 10:00 am. All employees, including the organizers, restarted their work. The attempted strike had failed. No one said anything else about the matter until quitting time at 4:30 p.m. At the end of the work day, Long appeared and handed Patey, Martin, Gann, Brassfield, Graham, Jimmie Clark and Minnie Lee Rector their checks. She discharged them on Fields’s order. Their pay included the week’s work, which the company typically held back, as well as the work for the current week.\footnote{Patey, Testimony, 54-56, NLRB-TE.} Graham spoke to Fields that afternoon, telling him that she had “no more to with the union than any of the other women,” insinuating the involvement of a large number of others. Fields responded that he could fire whomever he wished.\footnote{Graham, Testimony, 126-127, NLRB-TE.}

Graham received similar treatment on April 20 when she and Clark returned to ask for reinstatement or a letter of recommendation. Fields replied, “You need not come to me with your troubles.” As far as he was concerned, Fields continued, they would never work at any factory. He refused reinstatement or recommendation, telling both women that they had been some of his best operators but that he would not employ any union member.\footnote{Ibid.} He then asked where they intended to work. The women responded that they sought employment at the garment plant in West Point. At this, Fields told them to have the company, write to him, and he would “tell the truth” about their work record.\footnote{Clark, Testimony, 138, NLRB-TE.} The women felt the truth was on their side, but they understood what constituted Fields’s version of “the truth.”

The events at the cotton mill overshadowed the news of the women’s dismissal. In fact, the local newspaper made no mention of the discharged women. On April 14, both Memphis
newspapers reported the incident but did so in stories that focused on the cotton mill. The Commercial Appeal provided the most detailed report, listing the names of the discharged women along with their reasons for attempting to strike. In reference to the women who did not follow through with the strike, Patey stated, “[they] lost their nerve and failed to stick when the showdown came.” The Tupelo Daily Journal remained silent on the women’s attempt to organize until June 4 when it reported that Ida Sledge, the educational director of the Memphis ILGWU, had made a brief visit to Tupelo to investigate the local situation. She had returned to Memphis the same night, the newspaper reported. Lucy Randolph Mason revealed that the women from the garment plants had contacted Sledge and asked her to come to Tupelo. Sledge’s name appeared in the Commercial Appeal as it covered the organization of the Nona-Lee Dress Company and Kuhn Manufacturing Company.

The Tupelo workers sought help from the union that had been successful in Memphis, but they were careful to approach a union representative with semi-local ties. Sledge was a member of a prominent Memphis family who had attended Wellesley College and became a social worker. She quit her job at a welfare agency to join the staff of the ILGWU. Believing that low wages accounted for continued Southern poverty, Sledge’s background in Memphis society provided important middle-class support for the garment workers and the ILGWU. Given the proximity of Memphis to Tupelo as well as the business and familial ties that existed between the two cities, Sledge was someone with whom the workers felt comfortable. Although her first visit to Tupelo lasted only a few hours, it must have been encouraging because she returned ten days later.

33 “Strikers at Tupelo Plant Issue Threat.”
34 “Mill Stockholders Meet Today; Union Organizer Leaves.”
35 Mason, 52.
37 Honey, 81; Mason, 51.
Despite the lack of publicity, the discharged women did not walk away defeated. On May 14, the women requested forms from the National Labor Relations Board to charge the Tupelo Garment Company with violating the National Labor Relations Act. Cox, the leader of the cotton mill operatives, proved instrumental in the women’s use of the NLRB. He had brought the board to Tupelo to intervene in the cotton mill strike. The women obtained the NLRB forms from Logan, who had supervised the cotton mill election. One day after the Cox committee had won the election to represent the cotton mill workers, the women filed a complaint with the board. Beginning in June, Cox and the New Orleans office of the NLRB frequently contacted each other concerning both the situation at the cotton mill and the discharged employees of the Tupelo Garment Company.

Patey, Gann, Graham, Clark, Brassfield, Martin and Rector charged the Tupelo Garment Company with violations of section 8, subsections 1 and 3 of the Wagner Act. They claimed the company had issued threats, warnings and orders to refrain from union organization and that the mill manager had fired them as a disciplinary action for their organization efforts. The complainants sought reinstatement and back wages. The NLRB notified the garment company of the charges and the impending hearing on June 26. The company admitted firing the women and refused to reinstate them. It denied, however, all other allegations. The NLRB scheduled the hearing for July 6.

The hearing opened at 10:00 am in Tupelo City Hall. D. Lacy McBryde was the trial examiner. Attorneys for the Tupelo Garment Company were F. G. Thomas of Tupelo (a member of the Tupelo Cotton Mill’s Board of Directors) and J. A. Cunningham of Booneville. Representing the NLRB were Samuel Lang and G. P. Van Arkel. Ida Sledge, the ILGWU representative, offered testimony concerning her experience of being ushered out of Tupelo at
the hands of Reed Brothers employees. The NLRB lawyers emphasized the interlocking directorate of the garment companies and the cotton mill, making the Sledge incident relevant to anti-union charges made against the Tupelo Garment Company.

FIGURE 15: IDA SLEDGE AT THE NLRB HEARING

Ida Sledge is pictured on the right. The woman on the left is unidentified.

The company lawyers began with several efforts to have the charges dropped. First, they filed a motion to dismiss the charges made by Gann, Graham, Brassfield, Clark, Martin and Rector because only Patey’s name appeared on the formal charge. They claimed that none of the above mentioned women had filed charges and that the company had not been notified of charges filed against them by these other women. They attempted to isolate Patey and force her

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38 The event is discussed at length in the following chapter.
40 “Memphian at Labor Hearing,” Commercial Appeal, July 8, 1937.
to stand alone against the company. The examiner overruled the motion. They next requested dismissal of the charges filed by Patey because her complaint did not conform to the written charges filed by the NLRB regional director, Charles Logan. The company, the attorneys argued, could not verify that Patey or any of the other women had authorized this complaint. They proceeded then to lecture the examiner on the proper protocol for filing complaints with NLRB. Failing once again to have the charges dropped, Thomas argued that no evidence existed to prove that Patey or anyone else had attempted to organize a union. He then filed a motion of particulars seeking to obtain the name of the organization, when and where the women created it as well as the names of the employees belonging to the organization. He sought this information, he stated, only to verify the existence of such a group. It was a thinly veiled attempt to identify all employees associated with the strike attempt so that the company could fire them.

Their motions overruled, Thomas and Cunningham entered a special plea acknowledging the dismissal of the women by the Tupelo Garment Company and its refusal to rehire them. The company stated, however, that they fired the women not for union activity but because they committed a malicious trespass. When they pulled the electrical switches turning off the power, Thomas and Cunningham argued, the women attempted to take possession of the property of the Tupelo Garment Company. Their assertion hinged on the fact that the women had not issued demands to management before the attempted strike. The company did not have the ability to negotiate before the employees attempted to strike and because the women undertook this action without notice, it constituted a criminal act. The examiner accepted the plea but did not act upon it.42

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41 F. G. Thomas, In the matter of Tupelo Garment Company and Kathleen Patey, et. al., National Labor Relations Board Hearing, XV-C-55, Tupelo, Mississippi, July 6, 1937, 3-15, NLRB-TE.
42 Ibid.
Board attorneys called six of the women to testify. Minnie Lee Rector had moved to Memphis after her firing, where she found employment with a cotton broker. She wrote to the NLRB and asked them to excuse her from testifying because she did not have the money to make the trip back to Tupelo. She also asked that they remove her name from the petition. Thomas asked the examiner to dismiss the charges related to Rector. Van Arkel did not object in view of her absence. The attorneys then asked the rest of the complainants to describe their job and state the number of years they worked for the Tupelo Garment Company. Martin had been there for the least amount of time, three and a half years. The others had terms of service between eight and eleven years. During that time, management reprimanded none of these women for behavior nor criticized them for incompetence. The women described the work hours and the piece-rate system that determined their wages. They explained that the hours changed randomly from ten to eight to nine. They wanted “regular” hours – hours upon which they could depend. Martin explained that she had three children for whom she alone provided and that she wanted to be able to make a living in eight hours. She felt forced to work twelve in order to earn enough money to survive. Thomas pointed out that she was required to work only nine hours and that she worked overtime by choice. Martin testified that she had to work twelve and thirteen hours a day in order to earn twelve dollars per week.

The women provided details about their efforts to organize their fellow workers. Women worked in groups around tables, which averaged eight workers. The leaders appointed to each table a representative who would report to one of seven leaders. The agents reported the feelings of the women at her table regarding organization and a possible strike. These reports took place in work bins, the location of which varied in place and time to avoid arousing the suspicion of

43 Minnie Lee Rector to Edwin S. Smith, June 30, 1937, NLRB, C-240.
44 Martin, Testimony, 166-167, NLRB-TE.
plant management. Using these networks, the women determined that around 150 employees favored a strike. The leaders chose the day, time and a signal, the pulling of the switches. At the appointed time, however, many of the women “lost their nerve.”

During cross-examination, Thomas and Cunningham again tried to obtain the names of others involved in the attempted strike. They tried to justify the wages women earned by insinuating that worker ability and effort caused the wage differential, making low pay the fault of the workers. Some could not work any faster, in which case the company benevolently allowed these poor women to continue in their employ, they explained. Other low-wage earners simply did not apply themselves, the implication being that they were lazy and must be content with their earnings. The company attorneys also justified the long hours, which resulted from flooding in the Ohio Valley that had disrupted garment factories in that region. The generous men of the Tupelo Garment Company tried to help their competitors.

Thomas and Cunningham sought on several occasions to confuse the witnesses concerning the issue of how many workers agreed to strike. They used Fields’s hand raising request on April 12, suggesting that any worker who raised her hand wanted the plant to continue to operate under the current conditions. These seven women acted on their own, they claimed, without the consent of the majority of the employees. The attorneys seized upon the fact that Patey and Gann had picked up sticks after pulling the switches, suggesting that they intended to prevent other employees from leaving. The women explained that they picked up the sticks when the other workers failed to do what they had promised. They sought to protect

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46 Cark, Testimony, 148, NLRB-TE. Martin, Testimony, 176-177, NLRB-TE. Gann, Testimony, 224, NLRB-TE.
themselves. The *Commercial Appeal* published images of the violence that erupted at the garment plants in Memphis and the women knew about the forced removal of Ida Sledge.

At other times, the company lawyers were intentionally obtuse. They asked questions, which repeated and distorted the witnesses’ testimony in order to confuse the employees and make them feel foolish. When Gann explained that they feared expressing their dissatisfaction by a show of hands because they would be “thrown out,” Cunningham tried to insult her intelligence by asking, “How many has he thrown out the window?” In response to this insult, Gann provided a cogent description of the working conditions that existed before and during the implementation of the National Recovery Administration codes, as well as the changes that occurred after the invalidation of the NIRA. She provided particularly damning evidence on the issue of the interlocking directorate, explaining that company officials had transformed the dress division of the Tupelo Garment Company into Reed Brothers and that Fields managed both factories for several years. The companies continued to “borrow” operatives when one or the other was behind schedule. When company attorneys tried to brush this comment aside as friendly relations, “like neighbors borrowing a cup of sugar,” Gann pointed out that the “borrowing” never included Milam Manufacturing, a company owned and operated exclusively by the Milam family.

Maggie Martin suffered similar treatment after she demonstrated that the long work hours at the Tupelo plant in which these six women worked had nothing to do with the Ohio Valley flood. The company sent flood-related work to other branches. Because of her explanation,

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48 Patey, Testimony, 81-83, 9-96, NLRB-TE. Gann, Testimony, 216-218, NLRB-TE.
50 Gann, Testimony, 228, NLRB-TE.
51 Ibid, 243-252.
52 Martin, Testimony, 177, NLRB-TE.
Cunningham sought to make her feel and look foolish as she tried to explain the strike attempt in light of the Wagner Act. The following exchange occurred:

Q (Cunningham): Will you tell me why you didn’t go to the company with it instead of doing all that business and preserving secrecy if you were trying to help the company?
A (Martin): Well, we were fixing to go about it in a lawful way and not a begging way.
Q: Just going to pull the switches and stop the machinery?
A: Yes, sir.
Q: Was that your idea of a lawful thing?
A: That is what Mr. Wagner said.
Q: Who is he?
A: Wagner.
Q: What is the name?
A: Mr. Wagner.
Q: Mr. Wagner told you that would be the lawful way to do?
A: That is what we decided.
Q: Did he tell you that as a group?
A: No.
Q: Did he just tell you personally?
A: I read it.
Q: Where did you read it?
A: In the papers.
Q: In the papers?
A: In the proceedings.
Q: Who is Mr. Wagner?
A: Senator Wagner.
Q: Senator Wagner?
A: He is the organizer; he is the one that introduced the Wagner Act.
Q: What?
A: He is the one that introduced the Wagner Bill.
Q: And you had been taught under the Wagner Bill that was the lawful way to throw a strike, is that right?
A: No, not exactly.
Q: Well, tell us what you meant?
A: We meant to organize and ask for collective bargaining, our part in collective bargaining.
Q: I am asking you about that lawful way; I am not talking about the other; you said you were taught that was the lawful way by Mr. Wagner?
A: No, sir.
Q (Trial Examiner): Do you mean you didn’t say that?
A: I mean I didn’t understand that.
Q: Didn’t understand what?
A: What you asked.
Q: Did you understand that Mr. Wagner said to pull a strike in that way?
A: Well, that was just our way of organizing. I understand that we had to organize in order to demand collective bargaining; that is what I mean.\(^53\)

Despite the attempts to confuse and intellectually intimidate the witnesses, the women demonstrated a remarkable ability to stay true to their original accounts of the working conditions, Fields’s speeches and the events of April 12. Patey in particular remained undaunted. She testified after Fields on the first day of the hearing. The NLRB lawyers questioned her first. The company attorneys then cross-examined her. Van Arkel redirected and Thomas cross-examined again. She remained in the room while three of her cohorts received the same treatment. At the end of the day, Van Arkel recalled her to be sure that the record showed Patey had not earned any money since her dismissal from the Tupelo Garment Company.

During the cross examination, Cunningham posed the following the questions.

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\begin{align*}
Q: & \text{Do you have a family?} \\
A: & \text{Yes, sir.} \\
Q: & \text{A husband and children?} \\
A: & \text{Yes, sir.} \\
Q: & \text{And still got a husband and children?} \\
A: & \text{I suppose I have; I had when I left home.} \(^{54}\)
\end{align*}
\]

With that exchange, the trial examined adjourned proceedings for the day.

With Gann’s testimony concerning the relationship of Tupelo Garment Company and Reed Brothers and the information printed in the companies’ 1935 souvenir booklet from their annual “outing,” Van Arkel demonstrated the interlocking management of both garment

\(^{53}\) Ibid, 177-179.
\(^{54}\) Patey, Testimony, 185, NLRB-TE.
companies and the cotton mill. Additionally, Van Arkel succeeded the next day in getting Fields to admit that he delivered the March speech to all five of the company’s plants with the intention of preventing union organization. Fields further admitted that he fired the six women because of their efforts to initiate a strike.  

After Fields’s testimony, McBryde adjourned the hearing to reconvene the following morning. That evening defense attorneys met privately with McBryde and the NLRB lawyers in the trial examiner’s hotel room. There the company attorneys rested their case. McBryde said he would submit his report to the Board in Washington for a ruling, which would take ten to thirty days.  

Thomas and Cunningham reported to the press the next day that they would appeal the decision. At the same time, Lang, counsel for the NLRB, revealed that charges could be filed against the Tupelo Cotton Mill and Reed Brothers. The hearing was over, but both sides made clear the struggle was not.

Mississippi Senator Pat Harrison and Congressman John Rankin appealed to the chairman of the NLRB, protesting the “attitude” of the board investigators assigned to the Tupelo plants. The chairman, J. Warren Madden, and fellow Board member, Edwin Smith, had a “long talk” with Senator Harrison and Congressman Rankin on July 13. After their meeting, a secretary informed Charles Logan, regional director of the NLRB, that Madden believed the regional office should try to reach a settlement in the Tupelo case. Senator Harrison suggested to the people of Tupelo that they communicate with Logan regarding a settlement. Logan replied that he “would be strictly opposed” to such a settlement for five specific reasons. “First,” he wrote, “an interlocking Tupelo Garment-Tupelo Cotton-Reed Garment directorate has closed the

55 W. B. Fields, Testimony, 346-354, NLRB-TE.
Tupelo Cotton Mill and launched a starve out drive against three hundred union members and refuses to bargain in spite of [a] written agreement with us to do so after [the] consent election.”

His second and third reasons centered on the clear cut nature of the Tupelo Garment Company’s discrimination case and the fact that the women lost three months salary. The fourth motive stemmed from the public demonstrations against union members and representatives. His fifth and most forceful reason was that a Tupelo newspaper had “violently and inexcusably attacked” the Board and “urged bloodshed.” The newspaper to which Logan referred was the Tupelo Daily Standard. Other newspapers quoted from its articles but no copies of this newspaper could be located. Logan offered to meet with Harrison or his representative to work out policy pertaining to the Tupelo factories but, if a meeting was not agreeable to Harrison, Logan stated, “We must stand squarely on the issues or forget Mississippi.”

At his New Orleans office, Logan hosted a couple of unannounced visitors on July 17. M. M. Winkler, president of Tupelo’s Chamber of Commerce, and J. V. Whiteside came to the New Orleans office wanting to meet with the regional director. Logan hoped that the men had come to discuss the “Tupelo situation,” so he offered again to meet with Senator Harrison or his representatives. His offer had no result. He reviewed the entire situation with the men – the cotton mill election, the garment workers’ dismissal and the pending case against Reed Brothers for the eviction of Ida Sledge. No compromise was forthcoming in the Tupelo Garment case, so Logan accepted Winkler’s challenge to allow that particular case to go through the courts. Logan then suggested that Winkler make a “peace move” for the benefit of his community; specifically, that Winkler, in his official capacity as chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, ask all of the employers in Tupelo to meet with the regional board and the employee representatives to draw up a general labor policy for all concerned. Winkler refused. The regional director then

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60 Charles Logan to Benedict Wolf, July 15, 1937, NLRB-C-240.
asked if they would agree to present the entire matter to a “certain prominent Mississippi corporation lawyer” and abide by his recommendation. They refused this proposal as well. When the men left, Logan confessed, “We were pretty much at a loss to guess just why they had come here.” He recommended that the Board make a decision on the Tupelo Garment case as soon as possible and that they go through the Circuit Court of Appeals simultaneously to get an enforcement decree. “Because,” he said, “an unmerciful fight is being waged against some six hundred families in that Tupelo section, and in a matter of days it will be too late for us to prove our point.” Logan visited the six women in the garment case and the cotton mill workers the week before, the same day mill-town evictions began. “Until we can get these jobs behind us,” Logan warned, “any effort to produce Reed witnesses would be a joke.”

Almost a month after the hearing, McBryde submitted his intermediate report concerning the discharged women and the Tupelo Garment Company. After a summary of the charges, company denials and testimonies, the trial examiner offered his conclusions and recommendations. He concluded that the Tupelo Garment Company, by its dismissal and refusal to rehire the discharge employees, engaged in and continued to engage in unfair labor practices in violation of Section 8, subsections 1 and 3, and Section 2, subsections 6 and 7, of the National Labor Relations Act. He then recommended that the respondent “cease and desist from interfering with, restraining and coercing its employees in the exercise of the rights to self organization” and that the company bargain collectively with employee representatives. In addition, the company had to cease and desist from discouraging organization by discrimination with regard to hiring and tenure. He recommended further that the company reinstate the dismissed employees and pay them back wages covering the period from their dismissal to the

date of reinstatement based upon their average earnings. The company should also post a notice in each department of all five plants for at least thirty days stating that it would stop its anti-union policies and that employees were free to join or assist any labor organization.\footnote{D. Lacy McBryde, Intermediate Report, National Labor Relations Board, XV-C-55, August 4, 1937, NLRB-C-240.}

The next week, on August 9, Kathleen Patey wired the New Orleans office asking if the Board had reached a decision in their case. Logan was in Tupelo on the 11\textsuperscript{th} concerning charges against Reed Brothers for the eviction of Ida Sledge in June.\footnote{"Union Charges Against Reed Brothers Withdrawn," \textit{Tupelo Daily Journal}, August 12, 1937.} He met with Patey to tell her he had not received word of a decision. The women dismissed from the Tupelo Garment Company had been unemployed for nearly four months. Patey and her family faced dire circumstances, which prompted her to sign a petition to dismiss the charges against the Tupelo Garment Company. F. G. Thomas, attorney for the garment company, traveled to New Orleans on August 27 to present the petition, notarized by him, to Regional Director Charles Logan. Thomas told Logan that Patey had written to him wanting to withdraw the charges. Logan reported that Thomas believed this petition would dismiss the entire proceedings against the garment company because Patey had been the one to sign the charge. The regional director replied that the Board in Washington would decide the matter but that it did not seem logical to him that Patey’s independent action would dismiss the claims of the other persons involved. Nevertheless, Thomas speculated that the NLRB would have to institute new proceedings to pursue charges on behalf of the other women. The process would have to begin again and “this time the testimony will be different.” Logan admitted that he had no way of knowing just what Thomas meant by that comment but concluded that should there be a new hearing Patey and perhaps other
complainants would reverse their testimony for the same reason that prompted Patey to submit the petition for dismissal of the charges.\textsuperscript{64}

The following day, Logan received a letter from Ida Sledge notifying him that the other women had learned of Patey’s action and did not concur. The other five women also wired Logan informing him of their desire to proceed.\textsuperscript{65} Additionally, they wrote to J. Warren Madden, the chairman of the NLRB, acknowledging that they had authorized Patey to act to secure their rights under the National Labor Relations Act. They did not authorize her, however, to withdraw their claims. “It is our position now, as at the time of filing claims, and at the time of the Hearing, that we are entitled to restitution within the meaning of the Act. Any negative action taken by Mrs. Patey, without our knowledge or consent, should not be applicable to the group, but to her alone.” They added, “We feel that …inquiry should be made into the nature of Mrs. Patey’s appearance in the office of F. G. Thomas, respondent’s attorney, where the petition mentioned was made.” Graham, Clark, Martin, Gann and Brassfield signed the letter.\textsuperscript{66} They knew the circumstances surrounding the petition were suspicious but took care not to open themselves to charges of slander.

The trial examiner filed his report on September 8, sending copies to all parties. On September 27, the respondent filed exceptions to the report. They took exception to nearly everything in the report as well as several rulings made during the hearing. They also requested an opportunity to file briefs and present oral argument before the Board. The Board granted their request and sent notices of the hearing to all concerned parties.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{64} Charles H. Logan, Memorandum in RE: Tupelo Garment Company Matter, XV-C-55, September 1, 1937, NLRB-C-240.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Bonnie Graham, Jimmie Clark, Maggie Martin, Bessie Gann, Blanche Brassfield to J. Warren Madden, Chairman, National Labor Relations Board, Tupelo, Mississippi, October 5, 1937, NLRB-C-240.
\textsuperscript{67} Decision and Order of the National Labor Relations Board, Case C-240, May 24, 1938.
As for Kathleen Patey, she and her family had suffered the most. Neither she nor her husband could find work in Tupelo. No one was willing to hire them and risk incurring the wrath of the Reeds or other members of the Tupelo elite. On November 24, Patey wrote to the NLRB asking them to restore her name to the charges pending against the Tupelo Garment Company. In the letter, she explained why she had petitioned to drop the charges and why she now requested the return of her name to the list of complainants.

Dear Sir,

In the Matter of Tupelo Garment Co.…I Kathleen Patey, asked that my name be withdrawn from the charge – and by doing so I thought it would make it easier on myself and my husband in earning a living here in Tupelo as all industries here were owned by these men whom the charge was made against.

But instead it has been ten times harder and I have given up my house and it nicely furnished and me and my family of five are living in a one room storehouse and have only two beds and a cook stove and my children are naked and I don’t know from one day to the next where my next meals are coming from.

The town Chamber of Commerce and Mr. Thomas the lawyer from the Garment Co. promised to use their influence in helping me to get work or my husband and instead they have used their influence against us. So please don’t act on the decision until I get my name back on the charge. I did not take anything back I said. It was all so and more too. … I was forced to withdraw under conditions of certain things, as living conditions and I am still worse off. …

I have never been officially notified if I was withdrawn. But if I have been please add my name back to the charge – and under no circumstance never dismiss the charge for there is no fairness in the Co. I do not mean to be “wish wash” but I felt that by withdrawing I could at least live in Tupelo and earn a living. I was advised by Congressman Rankin that I was doing the right thing by withdrawing. And the Co. lawyer told me that I would not be sorry. When I told him I wanted to withdraw. Now they advise me not to even ask for work at any other place. So please do not consider me withdrawn.

Yours Truly,

Kathleen Patey

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68 Kathleen Patey to NLRB, Tupelo, Mississippi, November 24, 1937, NLRB-C:240.
Several days later, Jimmy Cox wrote to the Chairman of the NLRB. He offered a similar justification for Patey’s behavior, noting that her family had pressured her. He explained that Thomas and Winkler, chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, had conceived the idea that disqualification of Patey’s testimony would undermine the indictment entirely. To that end, Thomas instructed Patey to sign a petition to drop the charges and claimed that she had admitted to him that she committed perjury before the examiner. Prompted not only by Patey’s situation but also by the treatment of the other women who “were made to feel they didn’t have a friend” and the vehement opposition he and Sledge faced in trying to organize the garment workers, Cox asked the Board for permission to attend its deliberations on the Tupelo Garment Company case. He wanted to appear with “sworn proofs” of what was happening in Tupelo. “If the intimidation promulgated and substantiated by local industrialists and authorities be allowed to continue,” he concluded, “the cause of labor, organized or otherwise, is lost here.”

An NLRB secretary notified Patey of receipt of her letter and assured her the Board would consider the case carefully. The Board decided to act on neither Patey’s petition to dismiss nor her letter seeking to rejoin the complainants. In its view, the original allegations filed by Patey and the other women remained unchanged. It notified Patey, therefore, that the Board would hear oral arguments on January 21, 1938. Upon receipt of this notice, Patey wrote to Madden once more. She, like Cox, requested permission to attend the hearing in Washington. Financially unable to make the trip, she asked the Board to pay her railroad fare to Washington and back. In addition to her request to appear before the Board, Patey included the December 31, 1937 issue of the Commercial Appeal. The newspaper had printed a propaganda piece for Tupelo’s manufacturers entitled, “The Truth About Tupelo Needle Industry Presents the Ideal Picture of Happy, Prosperous Workers Who Have Made Northeast Mississippi the Perfect

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69 Charles F. Cox to J. Warren Madden, Tupelo, Mississippi, November 27, 1937, NLRB-C-240.
Example of Balanced Agriculture and Industry.” Patey marked specific passages in the article, which claimed that Tupelo did not have “labor trouble.” The city had never had labor trouble, the article noted, having no need for it. “It doesn’t exist; it doesn’t belong in this section.” Patey made notes across the pictures that accompanied the article. The pictures came from the company’s annual picnic and represented the “happy, prosperous” workers to which the article referred. Patey noted that each of the individuals in the pictures representing the Tupelo Garment Company’s Tupelo branch were office workers. The “office girls,” she wrote, “are extended special favors by the company in order to use their influence over the many, many employees that is not permitted to have a voice in any affairs of the company.” She further explained that management designed the annual outing and accompanying program to instill gratitude in the employees and to “fool the public.” She encouraged the Board members to review the program from the company’s 1935 picnic, which Van Arkel had presented as evidence during the July hearing, and to pay particular attention to statements made by Fields under cross-examination. Patey felt the need to bring this to the Board’s attention so that they would not “be impressed with bought news.” She also sought to inform the Board of the continued effort to organize the women of the garment plant. To her knowledge, local 322 of the ILGWU had “lots of members” and “lots of others” who would join but for fear of being fired. She concluded, “Please consider the advantages that the Co. has, and the disadvantages that we six individuals has against them. Our only hope of justice is in the Board that the government made it possible for us. So please be sacred in your decision for God in Heaven sakes …”

On January 14, 1938, barely a week before the Board heard oral arguments in Washington; the Tupelo Garment Company was ready to end the matter. It entered a stipulation

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71 Kathleen Patey to J. Warren Madden, Tupelo, Mississippi, December 31, 1937, NLRB-C-240.
for settling the issue. Winkler called the NLRB regional office saying that he, as president of the Chamber of Commerce, brought the parties together and felt a compromise was imminent. The women, however, demanded that an agent for the Board participate in any conference for an adjustment. These women knew better than to try to negotiate on their own. The company had sought earlier to force an agreement upon them that consisted of a flat settlement of $100 each. They had refused the offer and waited for an NLRB representative, feeling that the presence of a government official would prevent Thomas and Winkler from attempting further intimidation.

Samuel Lang, one of the attorneys for the Board who had participated in the July hearing, arrived on the morning of January 14. The Board postponed the Washington hearing pending its consideration of the stipulation provided the parties reached agreement.

Winkler, Thomas, Lang and the six women sat in conference for an entire day. Lang made it clear that he was there to listen and report any agreement to the Board for its independent action. It had not authorized him to accept or reject any offer. By the end of the day, the group reached an agreement. The company agreed to stop interfering with the rights of its employees to form or join a labor organization “of their choosing” for the purpose of collective bargaining and mutual protection. The mill owners agreed to inform personally the plant’s supervisory personnel not to interfere with the said rights of the employees. Management would also post a notice in the plant at Tupelo, which would remain there for thirty days. It would read:

“NOTICE: The Tupelo Garment Company recognizes the rights of its employees to form, join or assist any labor organization of their own choosing for purposes of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection; and the said Tupelo Garment Company hereby advises all who may be concerned that it will cease and desist from any activity, through its supervisory or other officials or otherwise, which is contrary to the principles herein set forth or to the rights stated in Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act.”
The company also agreed to pay back wages based on the amount of weeks the factory operated since the women’s dismissal. Management had closed the plant on December 20 due to lack of orders and excessive inventory. For three weeks prior, the company had operated at only three days per week. Based on the average earnings of each woman before their dismissal and the weeks the factory had operated since that time, the company agreed to pay the following amounts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie Graham</td>
<td>$450.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathleen Patey</td>
<td>$336.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blanche Brassfield</td>
<td>$345.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmie Clark</td>
<td>$441.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bessie Gann</td>
<td>$417.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie Martin</td>
<td>$453.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As to the issue of reinstatement, the women felt that the company would find an ostensible way to discharge them again – some manner that would seem legitimate. They wanted employment but not with the same company. After three hours of argument, Thomas and Winkler contacted the local office of the WPA as well as some area businessmen. They assured the women they would have employment before the week was out. All terms of the agreement depended on Board approval. Logan was enthusiastic about the settlement and encouraged the Board to accept it.\(^\text{72}\)

Thomas agreed that the company would act on all provisions within seven days. The respondent notified Logan on January 21 that the company had complied or was complying with all of the provisions in the stipulation. It paid the women their back wages and located employment for each of them. On February 1, Bonnie Graham wrote to Samuel Lang offering the women’s gratitude and informing him that she and the others had jobs with which they were

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\(^\text{72}\) Charles H. Logan, Memorandum in RE Tupelo Garment Company and Kathleen Patey et al., XV-C-55, January 15, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
The Board accepted the stipulation, issuing its “Order and Decision” on May 24, 1938. Its order included all aspects of the stipulation and added one other – The Tupelo Garment Company would “cease and desist from discouraging membership of its employees in any labor organization by discrimination with regard to hire or tenure of employment.” The Board must have felt stronger language necessary in this particular matter.

For Patey and the other five women, the nine-month battle was finally over. They had won a victory against the company and the businessmen of Tupelo, who conspired to prevent them from obtaining employment and to make an example of them. The women received the justice of back wages and the right to work for a living in Tupelo. In 1940, Kathleen Patey and Blanche Brassfield continued to work for the local office of the WPA. The women did not get the union for which they had worked and suffered but, perhaps, they counted themselves fortunate to have survived the ordeal. A victory of any sort against Southern mill owners in the 1930s was an anomaly. Their particular fight was over. Ida Sledge, the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union, and the National Labor Relations Board were not finished with Tupelo, however. While Patey and the others had sought to form a local, independent union, Sledge and her successors worked to bring an international union to Tupelo. Their fight would be bitterer and last even longer.

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73 Bonnie Graham to Samuel Lang, Tupelo, Mississippi, February 1, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
74 1940 Federal Census.
CHAPTER V

“WE MUST HAVE A UNION”: THE STRUGGLE FOR THE GARMENT WORKERS

While Patey and the others waited for the NLRB to act, Ida Sledge and a number of female employees in Tupelo’s garment companies kept fighting to establish a local of the ILGWU. Sledge’s first trip to Tupelo on June 4 was a short one-day affair barely exciting notice. Her second visit, however, caused quite a commotion. She and fellow organizer, Lillian Messer, arrived in Tupelo on June 15 for the stated purpose of organizing the employees of Reed Brothers and possibly Milam Manufacturing. They had no interest at this time in the Tupelo Garment Company, they said, because their organization consisted only of “makers of ladies garments.”¹ The organizers may have targeted Reed and Milam because they were smaller firms with single locations. If they could successfully organize these plants and negotiate a favorable contract, organizing the larger Tupelo Garment Company with its many branches would be far easier than entering into an already tense situation involving Patey et al.

The Reeds sought to prevent their workers from organizing. Reed Brothers management circulated a petition among the workers, which acknowledged their job satisfaction. The petition was, management stated, “purely voluntary” and “in no way sponsored by company officials.”² The secretary of the Chamber of Commerce had drafted it, however. Three hundred of the 375 employees endorsed the petition as the foreladies presented it to them and stood waiting for their

¹ “Two Organizers Arrive Here to Open Union Drive,” Tupelo Daily Journal, June 16, 1937.
² “Reed Workers Ask Union to Cease Activities Here,” Tupelo Daily Journal, June 17, 1937.
signature.\textsuperscript{3} The petition stated that the workers were happy with their present working conditions, hours and wages. It also asked the ILGWU representatives to abandon their efforts. The mayor, J. P. Nanney, delivered the petition on behalf of the employees.\textsuperscript{4} It failed to move the organizers.

The next morning at Reed Brothers, management instructed its employees to come to the plant earlier than usual. Mill officials met them and explained that the union threatened their welfare. A company spokesman told the women that if a union organized they would lose their jobs and he would close the plant.\textsuperscript{5} He also promised legal immunity to any who would drive this “menace” out of town.\textsuperscript{6} About seventy-five workers made their way to the hotel where Ida Sledge was staying. Six of the women went to Sledge’s room. They asked her to leave town. Sledge made no effort to comply, attempting instead to reason with the delegation. The women asked her to leave three times. When she did not, they grabbed her by the arm and began to escort her out of the room. Because the organizers had been in bed, the employees reported that they allowed Sledge to slip on a dress and shoes before moving her out. Messer was less cooperative, so the plant women dressed her themselves. The women physically propelled the organizers down the stairs and out to waiting cars, one of which belonged to Sledge but a male employee of Reed Brothers occupied the driver’s seat. The Reed workers drove Sledge and Messer about five miles out of town along highway six toward Pontotoc where they released the organizers and instructed them not to return to Tupelo. Sledge suggested that the union might send a man the next time. The Reed employees replied, “There are plenty of boys in the cutting

\textsuperscript{3} Cox: 42; Mason, 52.
\textsuperscript{4} “Reed Workers Ask Union to Cease Activities Here.”
\textsuperscript{5} Informal Report, Regional Office, 15\textsuperscript{th} Region, National Labor Relations Board, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 26, 1937, NLRB-C-240.
\textsuperscript{6} Cox: 43.
department to give him the same treatment.” Cox reported later that this “illegal act inflamed the town” which was already deeply divided by the cotton mill strike.

The following day, members of the Chamber of Commerce began accepting donations from local merchants to host a banquet for the “Reed girls” in appreciation of their efforts to rid the town of union organizers. At the banquet, J. S. Crenshaw, a local minister, praised the women saying, “You have restored my faith in women. You have demonstrated the spirit of true Americanism.” Paul Ballard, a civic leader and the principle speaker at the event, told the workers, “You represent the finest families in the world; you live in a community where there has always been peace, contentment and a sympathetic feeling and you have resented the fact that outside connivers have come into our midst to try to upset the community feeling which we have and appreciate.” Once again, Tupelo’s anti-union faction used the “outsider” label to distinguish between trouble-making union organizers and the good, decent, peace-loving inhabitants of Tupelo, who were neighbors and friends.

With public recognition for the women’s perceived heroics still lingering in the air, the Tupelo Garment Company and Reed Brothers celebrated their fourth annual “Outing and Barbecue” on July 3, an all-day affair with sporting events, a talent show and beauty contest. The companies warned in both a newspaper announcement and on the front and back of the souvenir program that “only those wearing identification buttons will be admitted to the park,” making it clear that union representatives were not allowed entrance. The program’s back cover lauded employees again, “We hope you all have a good time at this, our Fourth Annual Picnic and we want you to know that we do appreciate the fine Cooperation and the genuine Loyalty

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8 Cox: 43.
shown by our employees, and we pledge ourselves to do our best to maintain a condition of good
will and prosperity among our people.” The capitalization of “Cooperation” and “Loyalty” were
not typographical errors and the meaning of the phrase “our people” was not lost on the reader.10
The date is also significant; the picnic occurred just three days before the NLRB hearing on the
Patey petition.

Sledge came back to Tupelo for the hearing. She attended both days of testimony ready
to testify about her forced removal from the city should the NLRB attorneys call on her.
Although they did not call her to testify, Sledge’s presence indicated her commitment to
establishing a union among Tupelo’s garment workers. After the hearing, she and Cox spent the
next day compiling mailing lists and discussing options for organizing the town’s workers.11
Sledge concentrated her efforts on the employees of Reed Brothers and Milam Manufacturing.
Her assistant this time was Josephine Smith of Forrest City, Arkansas and Mrs. W. L. Scott, a
friend from Memphis. Smith once lived in Verona and had many relatives in the area.12 The
organizers hoped to use these local connections to win the confidence of the garment workers.

On July 10, area businessmen in the guise of their newly formed Citizens’ Committee
escorted Sledge and her colleagues out of town once more. After a secret meeting at Tupelo’s
City Hall in the afternoon, a number of the city’s “leading” businessmen went to Sledge’s hotel.
The men gave the women thirty minutes to prepare to leave. They conducted the women to
waiting taxis and drove them out of town. As they left the hotel, someone told a reporter for the

10 “Tupelo Garment Company and Reed Brothers, Inc. Employees Celebrating Their Fourth Annual Outing and
Barbecue,” (Tupelo, Mississippi, July 3, 1937).
11 Cox: 43.

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Commercial Appeal not to take pictures. When he did not move, they snatched away his camera. An unnamed individual returned the camera a short time later – without the film.\textsuperscript{13}

On this occasion, the Citizen’s Committee took the organizers all the way to Pontotoc, left them at the train station and told them not to return. If they returned, the men warned, someone would have to take “more drastic measures.” Sledge returned to Tupelo later the same evening to get her car. Reporter Benton Strong of the Memphis Press-Scimitar had followed Sledge to Pontotoc. It is unclear whether Strong played a role in Sledge’s return but within five minutes of her arrival in Tupelo, local authorities arrested him for public drunkenness at a local café. The Tupelo Daily Journal reported that he was having his second beer. Strong’s editor managed to pull some strings and get him released.\textsuperscript{14}

Eleven CIO organizers and one AF of L unionist, George Warford of McComb, Mississippi, arrived in Tupelo earlier the same week.\textsuperscript{15} The influx of organizers and the poor showing of the garment company at the NLRB hearing prompted local businessmen to action. Despite their efforts and warning, Sledge returned. She spent the night at Cox’s home with an armed guard of about fifteen men scattered around the house. An unnamed citizen of Tupelo, who “possessed the confidence of both sides,” met with Sledge and Cox to present the side of the Citizen’s Committee. He ended the meeting with another request that she leave. “I will not leave Tupelo unless I have finished my organization [or] I receive orders from my regional headquarters,” Sledge replied. The next day she met with NLRB officials in Kosciusko, Mississippi to discuss the charges filed against Reed Brothers for violation of the Wagner Act by discouraging union organization. The CIO issued a subpoena for Sledge as a government


\textsuperscript{14} “Organizers Escorted From City but Return.”; “Evicted Twice; Back to Tupelo.”; “Ida Sledge Escorted Out of Tupelo Again.”

\textsuperscript{15} “Memphis CIO Organizer Renews Campaign at Tupelo.”; “Organizers Escorted From City but Return.”

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witness for the NLRB and thereby provided her the protection of the United States Justice Department. The union representative returned to Tupelo confident that the residents would not defy the United States Government. Nevertheless, instead of staying in the hotel, Sledge slept in the spare room of a young couple living in mill village and used part of a room in Jimmy Cox’s house for an office, which consisted of a typewriter atop a trunk.

In the mean time, Tupelo “citizens” insisted they would not tolerate a union, while factory owners announced they would close their plants if forced to submit to CIO unionism. With the fate of the garment factories in the balance, business leaders refused any attempt to reopen the cotton mill or to entertain the demands of the Cox committee. Local industrialists carried out their pledge of liquidating the mill to ensure that the women in the garment factories understood that plant closure was not a hollow threat. The real fight, however, was just beginning. With Sledge and other union organizers in the city, the Citizens’ Committee and factory owners began waging war on two fronts. They sought to dissuade the employees from joining the ILGWU and they conducted a publicity campaign. The Committee felt it should remind the public that unions were evil and that the NLRB, although part of President Roosevelt’s administration, unfairly targeted Tupelo and her benevolent business leaders. Only local people could be trusted. They knew far more than “outsiders” what was good for Tupelo. After all, they built the city from nothing; everyone knew the local men, good Christian men – deacons and Sunday school superintendents. These union people were outsiders and communists.

17 Mason, 52.
On July 12, the companies made their next move. They formed three local independent unions at each of the garment plants – Tupelo Garment Company plants number one and two, Reed Brothers, and Milam Manufacturing. The *Tupelo Daily Journal* reported that local businessmen “advised” the women about forming their union but assured the reader that the women elected their own officers and bargaining committee. Company officials had nothing whatsoever to do with the organization, the newspaper reported. Employees created the union on their own initiative.  

The Memphis newspapers, however, reported that the Citizens’ Committee, lead by Medford Leake, a Tupelo lumber dealer, suggested the formation of the local unions to combat the ILGWU. The following day these “merchants” sent “parties” out to the branch plants of the Tupelo Garment Company for the same purpose. The Citizens’ Committee also printed handbills for circulation among the workers urging them to discuss their problems with neighbors and not with “outside help.” No organization or “Board” could help them if management closed the plants, they warned. The Committee tried to discredit the NLRB and paint the local factory owners as victims of a government bully. Additionally, if the plant owners were “forced” to close the garment plants, just as they had been “forced” to close the cotton mill, all of Tupelo would share in their economic misfortune.

The next day the company unions announced they had elected officers and bargaining committees. The unions also claimed 100% membership. Sledge fired back, declaring that the Wagner Act made company unions illegal and that management had coerced workers into joining. Mill employers had threatened to fire anyone who had not joined by noon the following day, she alleged. In addition, she announced that she was applying for a charter to establish a

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21 “Tupelo Workers Form Unions, Ida Sledge to Contest Move.”
local of the ILGWU – local 322. Stating that a number of girls acted as volunteer organizers within the plants, Sledge claimed they had enough signed members to obtain a charter. She also revealed that the union leveled another charge against Reed Brothers for the dismissal of a relative of Bessie Gann on July 6 after Gann testified at the NLRB hearing. As things heated up in the small town, Sledge chose to remain with “friends” in Mill Town where sympathetic workers protected her.

As promised, the Citizens’ Committee of Tupelo met with business leaders in Baldwyn, New Albany, Booneville, and Fulton, before forming local independent unions in the branch plants. In Baldwyn, the Committee spoke directly to the employees, who unanimously voted to form a home union and elected officers that day. The local newspaper reported that workers formed the “home union” to prevent the CIO from “forcing” the employees to join a national union. The editor had already laid the groundwork for anti-union sentiment among the garment workers there. On June 17, the paper reported the arrival of Sledge and Messer in Tupelo and their intent to form a union. The report ended with the following statement, “Whether the workers of the Garment plants will profit by the experience of the cotton mill workers is to be seen, but from reports the garment workers do not desire a union organization.” The writer followed this brazen threat with the assurance that local women were sensible enough to avoid such an evil association.

In New Albany, civic leaders, businessmen and garment company employees met and expressed “regret” over the “unsatisfactory labor conditions in Tupelo which resulted from CIO

agitation among the employees of garment plants.” With a view to insuring “industrial harmony,” this mixed group invited Medford Leake, leader of the Citizens’ Committee of Tupelo, to come to New Albany and assist the women in forming another independent union. By noon on July 14, the organization was complete, the local union elected officers and 392 of the 402 employees had signed up. The few signatures missing from the membership roll, the local newspaper explained, were due to absences from work that day. The assembled employees offered unanimous approval of the organization. Once again, the Commercial Appeal stated that no member of management played a role in the organization of the union and that the plant manager along with his wife, who was “employed in an official capacity,” left the building.

Frances Gardner, an employee at the New Albany plant, shared a different version. Gardner, who operated a felting machine, explained that everyone understood that management intended to “keep the outsiders out.” “Leonard Herrington was president of the company and he was the one that got [the union] up. He called us together and told us [what to do] and, of course, everybody was willing to join because we didn’t want somebody coming in and shutting the plant down.” Gardner bore no ill will toward plant management. The home union seemed to her a pragmatic move to prevent trouble from coming to New Albany. No one wanted the plant to close, so employees followed management’s lead for the sake of job security. Most working-class Northeast Mississippians held the opinion that any job, no matter how little it paid, was better than no job.

In Tupelo the struggle for the minds and hearts of the garment workers continued. Tupelo “merchants” distributed pamphlets urging them to be loyal to “home unions.” It warned

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28 “New Albany Workers Organize Own Union.”; “Workers Organize in Unexpected Move to Insure Harmony.”
29 Frances Gardner, interview by author, Ingomar, Mississippi, February 17, 2006.
http://www.outreach.olemiss.edu/media/documentary/women_history/gardner.html
that if labor trouble continued, the factories would close and that, if they trusted “outsiders,” they would not have jobs when the next depression came. Several pamphlets circulated among the workers over the next few days. One informed the workers that the NLRB could not “make a factory run if it chooses to liquidate, as the Tupelo Cotton Mill did.” It also reported that the Communist Party controlled labor unions. Pamphlets admonished employees to read carefully and trust the local people who “speak the same language.” Paid advertisements appeared in the *Tupelo Daily Journal* with similar information. The Citizens’ Committee had been “working for the past two weeks,” the ad reported, “trying to present facts to you that would, under the present disturbed conditions, enable you to think and act wisely and to preserve your individual rights and your job.” The three-column ad touted the local union as belonging to the employees and warned that, if they joined the ILGWU a branch of the CIO, the union would no longer be theirs. The CIO wanted control and money, the ad claimed, indicating that the union interests focused on the collection of dues. Workers would have to give them money and do what the union representatives, whom they did not know, instructed. Organizers, the Committee claimed, were salesmen paid to get employees to join the union. Workers could not depend upon them to tell the truth. The ad continued to link the CIO and John Lewis to communism. It also pointed out that the CIO had African American members, while the local union did not. The Citizens’ Committee of Tupelo followed lock step the Southern, anti-union program preying upon racial prejudices and fears of job loss and communism. ‘The Citizens’ Committee,” it said, “is a permanent organization, and stands ready to help you at all times. We are with you and for you.” The names of the Committee members, however, did not appear. Additional ads

32 Ibid; “Factions Hurl Statements in Labor Dispute.”
followed over the next week, charging that no one could account for union dues and that unions used the money to pay officials’ salaries and organizers’ expense accounts. The Citizens’ Committee charged that the ILGWU could take as much as $20,000 a year out of Tupelo in the form of union dues.34

Sledge fought back stating that the educational and organizational programs in Tupelo would continue and that they would be intensified. The ILGWU established a permanent headquarters and held regular meetings with garment workers. She tried to combat the propaganda of the Citizens’ Committee by explaining,

“The purpose of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in Tupelo as throughout the country in threefold: To benefit the workers through gaining better hours, wages and working conditions; to benefit the employers through the increased efficiency in production of union workers in a union shop; to benefit the community through larger payrolls and the development of more alert, efficient and responsible citizens.”35

By August, NLRB regional director, Charles Logan, was back in town regarding the charges filed against Reed Brothers for the eviction of Ida Sledge in June. The union withdrew these charges when the company indicated its willingness to abide by the Wagner Act. Mill officials posted a notice in the factory stating that management would not interfere with organization and that it would not attempt to dominate the administration of any labor organization of its employees. The notice and the promise not to interfere sufficed for union representatives to withdraw the charge.36 This decision played in the company’s favor. It looked as though the union backed down. The company merely stepped aside to let the Citizens’ Committee do the dirty work.

35 “Factions Hurl Statements in Labor Dispute.”
36 “Union Charges Against Reed Brothers Withdrawn.”
In the meantime, the Citizens’ Committee invited C. E. Hoffman to speak in Tupelo and encouraged all Lee County residents to assemble on the courthouse lawn where seats had been set up and a public address system installed. Hoffman was a US Representative from Michigan on a speaking tour sponsored by the Congressional Education League, a vehement anti-union organization. Introduced to the crowd as a friend of John Rankin and “a northerner who voted against the anti-lynching bill,” an irrelevant fact intended to curry favor with the Southern audience, Hoffman stepped to the microphone. The representative denounced the CIO as “shot through with communism.” Lewis, he claimed, was “the greatest foe of the American working man.” He charged that the purpose of the CIO was to ruin industry, though he did not indicate why the organization would seek such an end. The “why” was immaterial, of course. Anti-unionists designed speeches and pamphlets to link labor with communism in order to discredit them in the minds of working Americans with little education. The truth of the allegations mattered little to the Citizens’ Committee, who sought only to get the ILGWU out of Tupelo.

Despite Hoffman’s claims, organization efforts progressed as evidenced by the continuation of industrial propaganda. The Tupelo Daily Journal ran three articles outlining the history and success of each of the garment companies. The Tupelo Garment Company produced 4,800,000 shirts each year in its six plants, which employed 1500 people. The article noted that local men owned and operated the company and the factory had a reputation in other parts of the state for paying the best wages in its industry. The Reed Brothers article provided a glowing account of its employees: “The personnel of the plants live throughout the surrounding section and are among the best families, living at home, having their own garden, milk cows, hogs,

chickens, and other farm commodities and living under healthful and happy conditions.” In other words, the employees of Reeds were respectable, hard-working Americans who had no reason to complain and no reason to join a communist organization.

At the same time, Tupelo’s board of alderman took an official step to try to circumvent union efforts. It enacted a city ordinance on September 29 prohibiting the distribution of “circulars, printed matter or other forms of propaganda advocating or opposing any cause, movement, or enterprise or condemning any practice, conduct, or operation without the name of the author or authors appearing thereon and without the date of publication.” The ordinance targeted the “Tupelo Good News,” a labor pamphlet circulated by Ida Sledge and Jimmy Cox, who assisted Sledge in her effort to organize the garment workers. Sledge attempted to hand out the circular in front of the Tupelo Garment Company, when some of the women snatched them away and told her to leave. Cox tried to distribute them to Reed Brothers employees when an unnamed party took them from him and burned them in front of the plant.

The September ordinance also declared that

“no person shall attempt to use any, disorderly methods in soliciting members for such guilds, workmen’s crafts and unions, nor shall they use any threats or intimidations in the solicitations of members in such organization nor make false or fraudulent representations relative thereto and are prohibited from persisting in such solicitations or discussions of such matters after having been requested by the person solicited or with whom the discussion is being had to desist from further solicitation or discussion.”

Additionally, the Citizens’ Committee published another notice addressed “To the Employees of Our Factories.” This ad responded to a pamphlet circulated by the ILGWU. The main tenant of the ad disputed the authenticity of comments attributed to Rex Reed and Mayor

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41 Harry Rutherford to Louis Allwell, Tupelo, Mississippi, November 11, 1937, Kheel.
42 “City Moves to Check Organizing.”
Nanney. The mayor had reportedly stated that if Cotton Mill management had had a “responsible” union with which to deal, the mill would not have remained closed. Such a statement purposed to discredit Cox and blame him for the mill’s closure. Reed allegedly remarked that he could pay his workers sixteen dollars per week and still make a “good profit” but he would not do so until the government forced him. Both men denied making such statements and accused the unsigned pamphlet of lying. The ad then continued along the same lines as the previous notices, admonishing the workers to trust the Citizen’s Committee whom they knew and disregard the advice of “outsiders.” It continued to link the ILGWU and the CIO to communism and accused union leaders of being interested only in the collection of dues. The notice concluded with the following admonition, “The plants here in Tupelo were not made by making employers mad but by cooperation and good relationship between employees and employers … We think we can work with you in your relationship with your employers a whole lot better than the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.” This time, in accordance with the new city ordinance, the Citizens’ Committee signed their names: Medford Leake, chairman; J. V. Whiteside, George H. Booth, Charles Betts, J. M. Savery and P. K. Thomas.43

Direct appeals to the women did not have the result the Committee expected or wanted, so the Citizens’ Committee altered its tactics and addressed the male relatives of the garment workers. The following ran as a paid advertisement in the Tupelo Daily Journal.

TO THE FARMERS OF THIS TERRITORY

If your daughters or any of your relatives work in the Garment factories in Tupelo and the other nearby towns, PLEASE READ THIS CAREFULLY, because it contains some facts you should known.

Cotton and seed are selling mighty low. The market for this is not as high as it was a year ago. This probably means that you will not have as much money

this winter as you had last winter. This condition will not be helped any if our factories close down on account of labor troubles.

For ten years or more your daughters and relatives have been able to get along with and work cooperatively with the factory owners. The factories here carried them through the depression, and we believe that with the proper mutual cooperation they will carry on through another depression. There was always some income for the workers which is better than none at all.

At the present time an attempt is being made by outsiders to organize the workers and by their own assertion to throw anger and fear into the factory owners. This is not apt to do the workers any good and may cause the complete shutdown of the plants. We feel that these outsiders cannot help the workers any more than they can help themselves. The Government does not give these outsiders any more rights or protection than it gives the workers themselves. You do not know these outsiders and cannot tell how well they will back up any of their claims. What guarantee will they give that if they get control of the situation they will produce higher wages, etc.? Suppose they do not produce higher wages, and these girls lose their jobs – who will pay the girls and how long will they be paid?

This Committee wants to see the workers paid just as much as they can be paid and just as much as any outsider wants them to be paid. It realizes that the price for which labor is paid is determined by what can be obtained for the finished product. If you, with cotton at eight cents, cannot pay as much for a shirt as you can with cotton at twelve cents, how is labor going to be paid the higher wages promised by outsiders.

Stick by the homefolks – they have already stuck by you in one depression. Advise your daughters and relatives to stick to their jobs and beware of outsiders’ counsel.

The Citizen’s Committee
Medford Leake, Chairman
J. M. Whiteside
George M. Booth
Charles Betts
J. M. Savery
P. K. Thomas

While the ad acknowledged men as the head of the household, it also highlighted the farmers’ inability to provide for their families and emphasized farmers’ dependence on the good will of local industrialists to offer employment to their womenfolk.

44 “To The Farmers of This Territory,” Tupelo Daily Journal, October 27, 1937.
In November, the city sought again to check labor organization by passing another ordinance in an effort to “ease the steadily mounting nervous tensions among Tupelo garment workers.” The ordinance made it illegal to solicit any worker employed in the city for union membership and to distribute among workers any circulars either for or against any labor movement during work hours, or the hour immediately proceeding or following work, or during lunchtime and all rest periods. The maximum fine for violation was $100 and thirty days in jail. Because so many of the employees of the garment companies lived outside of Tupelo, riding the buses to and from work, this ordinance undercut ILGWU efforts to organize the women. On November 10, union headquarters ordered Ida Sledge, the intended target of the ordinance, to leave Tupelo for Baltimore. The Roosevelt Recession hit hard the textile and garment industries, causing the Memphis firms of Kuhn and Nona Lee, which Sledge helped organize, to close up shop. The union transferred a number of organizers including Sledge to help hold its base in the North. Unaware of union strategy, many Tupelo garment workers felt abandoned by Sledge’s removal. Sarah Hunt Potter, a local woman, replaced Sledge and became the ILGWU’s official representative.

David Dubinsky, president of the ILGWU, sent a telegram to Mississippi’s Congressmen John Rankin and Senator Pat Harrison protesting the November 3 ordinance “abrogating the constitutional prerogative of citizens” to approach workers or distribute literature regarding trade unions. He further complained of the anti-union “vigilante” group identifying itself as the Citizens’ Committee. The local industrialists formed the group, Dubinsky claimed, and were responsible for “acts of violence” in which they forced union organizers to leave town and burned union literature “in Nazi fashion in the streets of Tupelo.” He pointed out that these

45 Honey, 91.
“law-defying” elements claimed that Rankin and Harrison supported them in their efforts to prevent the enforcement of the Wagner Act. The president of the ILGWU called on each of these men to repudiate the “flagrant” disregard of the law and informed them that “petty industrial tyrants in Tupelo” would not stop the ILGWU.47

The removal of Ida Sledge was a blow to the workers, some of whom appealed to John Lewis of the CIO, begging him to take action. W. A. Harrison explained the situation to Lewis. Ida Sledge, for whom “a big welcome was given,” he wrote, promised factory workers that, if they lost their jobs because of joining the union or attending a union meeting, the union would pay them five dollars a week and provide them with two meals per day. This inducement brought some success. Then, the company began to fire employees for attempting to organize. Sledge paid some of the women for a time but stopped for lack of funds. Others never received any assistance. Harrison claimed he knew ninety-five percent of the employees whom the company fired. They expected to receive what Sledge had promised. Reed Brothers fired Harrison’s wife, Maude, for union activity, despite the company’s promises to the Labor Board. Harrison explained that his wife had been sick a couple of years earlier and that he had gone to her boss to request time off. The boss refused because she was a valued operator. Yet, as soon as they discovered she had joined the union, they fired her. He reported that the “sweat shop” bosses had done everything possible to block the union and compared them to Henry Ford. Someone had to complete the work started in Tupelo, he declared. Maude had written Meyer Perlstein about the situation but Perlstein evaded her questions and did not pay Sledge’s successor. “If this is so I know you should know it,” Harrison wrote, expressing his faith that if

47 David Dubinsky to Congressman John Rankin and Senator Pat Harrison, New York, New York, November 11, 1937, Kheel.
Lewis knew about the situation in Tupelo, the revered labor leader would do something to remedy it.  

Reed Brothers also fired Mary Price for joining the ILGWU. She wrote to John Lewis as well, pleading for assistance. Mary explained that she had worked for the Tupelo Garment Company for seven years. She had quit twice, but each time the company sent for her to return – she did not have to ask to return to her job. She too joined the union believing Sledge’s promise that the union would take care of her until the workers and company signed a contract. Once management discovered she had joined the union, the foreladies would “bawl her out” for things that the rest of the operators did. “They make up things,” she said. The company fired other union members for things that “would not have been noticed” had they not belonged to the union. When the amount of work decreased, the company laid off union members first, regardless of seniority. Their union membership kept them from obtaining employment in other factories. Concerning the failure of the union to help those discharged, Price wrote, “We seem to be let down from some higher authority and we don’t want to lie left like this to starve.” She pleaded with Lewis – “We must have a union. If the CIO don’t want us, we will have to look for help some place else.”

A week after Harrison and Price appealed to Lewis for help, Patey and the other five women whom Tupelo Garment dismissed the previous April settled their case with the company. It remains undetermined what effect, if any, the settlement and the notice the company agreed to post had on the battle for union members in the garment plants. The propaganda war, however, continued in the local newspaper. Tupelo Garment and Reed Brothers purchased a full-page ad in February extolling the virtues of the needle industry and the benefits it presented the

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48 W. A. Harrison to John L. Lewis, Tupelo, Mississippi, January 1, 1937, Kheel.
49 Mary Price to John L. Lewis, Tupelo, Mississippi, January 6, 1938, Kheel.
community. Boasting about their economic contributions and likening the “problems” of management to those of the community at large, the ad listed several specific points as “worthy” of consideration: The needle industry provided jobs for people who otherwise would have none. Local business interests contributed “millions” of dollars to Tupelo’s economy. The national recognition they received for the quality of their products reflected well on Tupelo and North Mississippi. Further, these industries made it possible for many employees to own their own homes. In the same edition, the newspaper published an article entitled “Needle Industry Invaluable to Tupelo Area.” As the title suggests, the article praised the companies for their financial contributions to the community as well as the character of the workers and the pleasant working conditions.

Despite the propaganda and the loss of Ida Sledge, unionization efforts continued. Many locals continued to believe that Jimmy Cox was the root of the problem. He not only led the cotton mill strike but also worked diligently to organize the garment workers. As a result, he became the target of anti-union forces within Tupelo. As Cox walked along South Spring Street with Hollis Nichols at 11:20 am on Friday, April 15, two cars stopped alongside them. The men from the cars asked to speak to Cox. When Jimmy started backing away, they grabbed him by the arm and shoved him into one of the cars. Three of the men held Nichols until the car with Cox speed off. The men then released Nichols and jumped into another car, which followed the first. Nichols went to the police station but found no one there. Meanwhile the men took Cox to a desolate road about thirteen miles out of Tupelo, near Sherman. There they tied a rope to Cox’s neck and fastened the other end to the bumper of one of the cars. They told him they would kill him. Cox reported that he appealed to the more reasonable faction of his abductors,

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promising to leave the country if they released him. Rather than killing him, the group decided to beat him and allow him to leave. They took down Cox’s trousers and stretched him over a tree stump. Then they beat him with the buckle end of their belts. After the beating, they warned Cox never to return to Tupelo. On the same night, the local newspaper reported that someone had beaten Walter Patey in South Tupelo. Friends took him to the hospital with a gash over his eye and marks on his back. The newspaper conspicuously reported that he was not wearing a shirt when he arrived at the hospital. Walter, brother-in-law of Kathleen Patey, had been active in the cotton mill strike. The police reported that Walter Patey’s injuries resulted from a nightclub brawl.

The police made no arrests in either incident. Even though Cox identified some of the men involved, local authorities refused to arrest them until Jimmy signed a complaint. They informed him, however, that they could not guarantee his safety and advised him to leave town. Cox refused to file charges until he was “given adequate protection.” He reported to union officials and the NLRB that the men were employees of the Tupelo Garment Company and Reed Brothers, Inc. He named Wilburn Wade, a mechanic at Tupelo Garment, Leonard Bruce, a cutter at Tupelo Garment, and Tate Smith among his abductors. Another of the men he identified as a “supervisory employee” at Tupelo Garment but he did not know his name. Cox speculated that the entire incident resulted from companies’ concern about the upcoming NLRB hearings regarding charges filed by the ILGWU against all three garment plants for violations of the Wagner Act, including the dismissal of many union members. The beating attempted to

53 "Jimmy Cox Back in City After Ride."
intimidate garment workers and to prevent them from appearing before the Board as witnesses.\(^{56}\) According to John Ratekin, an ILGWU organizer who had recently come to Tupelo, the attempt succeeded in frightening the workers.\(^{57}\)

Immediately after the abduction, Sarah Hunt Potter, who replaced Ida Sledge as an organizer for the ILGWU, contacted Charles Logan at the regional headquarters of the NLRB. She asked him to send a representative to Tupelo to investigate the beating. Cox returned to Tupelo but remained “in hiding.” He told the local newspaper he intended to go to Washington and contact the NLRB about the incident.\(^{58}\) He believed that if the NLRB came to Tupelo to investigate the beating and included the incident in the union complaints against the garment companies, the move would intimidate company officials into offering a settlement.\(^{59}\) Cox based his assumption on the settlement obtained by Patey \textit{et.al.}, which suggested the Tupelo Garment Company did not want the NLRB to hand down a decision against them nor did they want to fight the NLRB in a court appeal.

Ratekin believed Cox was overconfident and did not agree with his strategy.\(^{60}\) The organizer reported to Jack Johannes, counsel for the ILGWU, that if the cutters from Tupelo Garment were responsible for the beating, as Cox claimed, the owners “had it done” and “were not anxious” to bring about a settlement.\(^{61}\) Ratekin understood that vigilante committees intended to keep the CIO out of Tupelo. The boldness of the daytime abduction and the openness with which the townspeople discussed the men involved alarmed Ratekin. A local waitress told him she overheard two men talking about the event. She did not reveal their names

\(^{56}\) Ibid.
\(^{57}\) John Ratekin to Jack Johannes, Tupelo, Mississippi, April 19, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
\(^{58}\) “Jimmy Cox is on Way to Washington.”
\(^{59}\) Jack Johannes to Charles Logan, Dallas, Texas, April 20, 1938, NLRB-C-240; Jimmy Cox to Charles Logan, Tupelo, Mississippi, April 20, 1938 NLRB-C-240; Charles Logan to Nathan Witt, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 21, 1938, NLRB-C-240; Allan R. Rosenberg, National Labor Relations Report, April 27, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
\(^{60}\) Allan R. Rosenberg, National Labor Relations Report, April 27, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
\(^{61}\) John Ratekin to Jack Johannes, Tupelo, Mississippi, April 19, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
but was surprised that both men, whom she knew, had anything to do with it. For whatever reason, ordinary citizens took extraordinary action. This fact likely upset Ratekin the most.

The ILGWU organizer was not the only person concerned about Cox’s behavior. After being told of the Cox abduction and conducting two phone interviews with Sarah Potter, Charles Logan phoned Jack Johannes to discuss the situation. Johannes informed Logan that the union sent Ratekin to Tupelo to take charge of all union activities. “The personal conduct of Cox and Mrs. Potter has been such that the ILGWU feels it can no longer permit them to remain established as the Union’s chief representatives in Tupelo,” Johannes revealed. He stated further that Cox and Potter had not cooperated with Ratekin and that they contacted the NLRB directly in an effort to circumvent the newly arrived union leader and grab the spotlight for themselves. Concerning Cox’s personal demeanor, Logan warned Nathan Witt, Secretary of the NLRB, that he should not give Cox “too much rope” while in Washington. Logan said,

“Jimmy has all the qualities of an awfully swell boy and he has done some fine work, but he is a trifle dangerous to play with, in that he loves the spotlight and his love for the spotlight makes him try to show himself as being right down in the first line of every move that is made. We happen to know that several people who wanted to help him with his original troubles in Tupelo and who actually did help him for a while, had to eventually pull away from him because he either was too ambitious or too thoughtless and inconsiderate to have any regard for their position. He has also had a bit of female trouble which has not done him any appreciable amount of good in Tupelo…”

Logan had worked with Cox and others in Tupelo since the cotton mill strike a year earlier, giving credence to his observations about the young man and the impact of his character upon unionization at Tupelo.

Meanwhile, Logan sought a settlement in the cases involving the ILGWU and the three garment companies in Tupelo. The Tupelo Garment Company closed on December 20, 1937,

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62 Charles Logan to Nathan Witt, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 21, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
citing a lack of business. The company announced its reopening on April 25 when it would reemploy 250 workers. The reopening influenced Logan’s decision to propose a settlement on April 26. In a letter to F. G. Thomas, attorney for all three companies, Logan explained that his office felt they should avoid formal procedures dealing with the issues in Tupelo. He noted the existence of “misunderstanding and confusion of totally unrelated issues among the factions involved.” It was not a matter of one or the other being right or wrong. The Board’s aim was to look beyond the details and to reestablish “harmonious relations” between employer and employee. To this end, Logan proposed that the companies dismantle the local unions, which had been a main point of contention. The companies, he advised, should no longer meet and/or bargain with them. Additionally, the companies should formally announce that they would not recognize any bargaining agent until one could be established which had received the approval of the NLRB. Logan requested that the mills once again post notices throughout their plants stating that they recognized the rights of their employees to join or assist any organization of their choosing and that the company would not interfere with their employees’ rights as guaranteed under section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act. He also suggested that it would be “wise” for the companies to state plainly that they would not discharge, discriminate against, or refuse employment to anyone who had joined or assisted any organization or union. Finally, he proposed the companies avoid a “complicated rangle” with the NLRB by re-hiring those employees named in the union’s charges.

On April 30, Logan reported to Nathan Witt, that Thomas had arranged a conference to discuss the proposed settlement. Johannes proposed a similar settlement and assured Logan the ILGWU was content with the terms. The union hoped to “wipe clean” its slate in Tupelo and

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64 Charles Logan to Frank G. Thomas, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 26, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
begin anew. Similarly, Logan believed the Tupelo manufacturers would accept the settlement. He noted, however, that the “whole matter … hinges upon the good faith of the companies in their effort to re-employ the individuals named in the charges, but we believe from our contacts that they are sincere in this effort to clear their record so that the Labor Board will no longer have to intervene in Tupelo.” Logan assessed this settlement as the best possible solution for the situation at Tupelo.65

Jack Johannes agreed with Logan’s assessment but Meyer Perlstein, regional director for the ILGWU, demanded a definite date for re-employment be set. If the companies refused to settle on a specific date for re-hiring the women named in the complaint, a date for a NLRB hearing should be set immediately.66 Despite Johannes’s recommendation that Logan accept the settlement and his assertion that Perlstein agreed with him, Logan received a rather hostile letter from Perlstein. He wrote,

“Under no circumstances will the Union consider settling the case on the basis suggested in your letter. The Tupelo Garment Manufacturers have discriminated against the members of our Union by depriving them of their livelihood. They have instigated the kidnapping, slugging, and almost murdering of the one who has tried to help our members establish their rights under the law, and after all that has happened you are suggesting a settlement that will allow these manufacturers to continue their old policy.”

He went on to say the union would obtain a settlement to its liking or it would proceed with the NLRB hearing. Perlstein added that he hoped Logan would not delay the case because he believed it “had been delayed long enough.” He concluded that he would consider no arrangement until the company re-hired the discharged workers and offered a guarantee that they would not discriminate against them.67

65 Charles Logan to Nathan Witt, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 30, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
66 Charles Logan to Nathan Witt, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 4, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
67 Meyer Perlstein to Charles Logan, St. Louis, Missouri, May 2, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
Logan was indignant at the tone of Perlstein’s letter. He defended his own actions and those of his office, noting that ILGWU representatives had been involved in the drafting of the April 26 letter to Thomas suggesting terms for a settlement. He informed Perlstein that he had tried to secure a guarantee of re-instatement and a pledge of non-discrimination for the individuals named in the charges. Logan acknowledged that Perlstein was “the representative of certain allegedly abused persons in Tupelo, Mississippi’s garment plants” and, as such, there could be no settlement without his consent. If Perlstein did not agree to the terms, however, Logan would have to refer the matter to the Board for its decision. He added, “In full truth, however, I must tell you that in cases of certain of these specific individuals whose names are before us, there is more than a reasonable doubt in our minds that we could ever successfully prosecute a discrimination complaint.” Logan reiterated his earlier claim that the proposed settlement remained the best possible outcome for the situation at Tupelo.

In addition to his response, Logan sent a copy of Perlstein’s letter and his reply to Nathan Witt, asking the secretary to bring the Board up-to-date on the situation, “so that if Perlstein goes into one of his dances, the Board will know what it is all about and will refer the matter to us.” He reported that he had no desire to quarrel with Perlstein but he was not going to allow him to throw “his Tupelo mistakes at our heads.” It seems the union made a mistake in removing Ida Sledge and replacing her with Potter. Her removal allowed Jimmy Cox free rein, which, based on Logan’s comments, proved detrimental to the union’s reputation in Tupelo. Cox’s hunger for attention and his “female trouble,” which may have, based on Johannes remarks, included Potter,

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69 Charles Logan to Nathan Witt, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 5, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
could not encourage faith and trust in the ILGWU. At the same, Cox’s behavior alienated him from ILGWU leaders. Perlstein warned that Cox was a “fanatic” and could not be trusted.\(^7\)

Secretary Witt informed Logan that Jimmy had arrived in Washington in late April and given a full account of his kidnapping. Witt suggested that the incident could be the basis for an amended charge and used as a bargaining point. Using both the amended charge and the possibility of a waiver of back pay in the discrimination cases might provide enough leverage to convince the companies to accept a more complete settlement. Witt encouraged Logan, however, to include the reinstatement of discharged workers as a specific clause in the settlement and not to depend upon the good faith of the companies. Because Thomas had agreed to a consent order of the Board and a consent decree of the Circuit Court of Appeals in Patey’s case against the Tupelo Garment Company, Witt believed it possible to gain similar terms in the other cases.\(^7\)

As May and June dragged on, no settlement occurred in any of the three cases pitting the ILGWU against Tupelo Garment, Reed Brothers, and Milam Manufacturing. Given the circumstances in the middle of June, Perlstein recommend that the ILGWU pull out of Tupelo until such time as the “political situation and the attitude of the workers toward unions there change.”\(^7\) A month later, Sarah Potter, who left Tupelo for St. Louis, wrote to Evie Brown, one of the workers discharged from Tupelo Garment for union activity. Potter revealed, “The more I know about the people who used to call themselves our friends the less I think of them.” She lamented that she could not find anyone in St. Louis, the regional headquarters of the ILGWU, who cared about the situation in Tupelo. The union discovered that it had spent more money in 1937 than it had taken in. It was for this reason, Potter speculated, that the union had “taken

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\(^7\) Meyer Perlstein, inter-office memo, June 14, 1938, Kheel.

\(^7\) Nathan Witt to Charles Logan, Washington, D. C., May 9, 1938, NLRB-C-240.

\(^7\) Meyer Perlstein, inter-office memo, June 14, 1938, Kheel.
everything away from Tupelo.” Dubinsky echoed Perlstein’s opinion when he told Cox in June that the union was through in Tupelo until business picked up. “You see,” she wrote, “there is no help for us anywhere unless we make it ourselves.”

On July 23, the Tupelo Garment Company made its next move by announcing that the company was selling all of its plants. “Due to conditions confronting the company the stockholders decided at their annual meeting held on July 21 to reduce its assets to cash with the view of liquidation, and authorized the sale of its properties. All of the plants of this concern will be closed in about two weeks, but would be compelled to close regardless of the action of the stockholders on account of business.” Although the Tupelo Garment Company claimed to be closing for lack of business, the company representative went on to say the plants would soon reopen under new ownership. The Irwin B. Schawbe Company of New York, an outlet for Tupelo Garment for years, purchased the New Albany plant. Leonard Herrington returned to New Albany as vice-president and plant manager. The newly formed Irwin Manufacturing Company purchased the entire property, machines and stocks of the Tupelo Garment Company and began accepting applications for employment on August 1 with a view to resuming production on August 8. Officials for the company assured the public they would operate at full capacity. W. B. Fields and Rex Reed bought the machinery of the other plants and reorganized them as three independent corporations.

In preparation for the pending NLRB battle, the companies’ employee associations hired prominent Ripley attorney, Fred Smith, to represent the local union at the August 8 hearing.

73 Sarah Potter to Mr. and Mrs. Brown, St. Louis, Missouri, July 13, 1938, Kheel.
Smith told the women the CIO filed complaints against the companies because it wanted to be
the sole bargaining agent for the workers. Local union officials declared, “All we are fighting
for is the right to work and to be let alone.” The workers wanted one thing – to keep their jobs.
Smith, who considered a gubernatorial run in 1939, drew up a petition for the workers to sign.
He would present it to the trial examiner on their behalf. 78

On August 5, Perlstein was in Tupelo. He reported to Dubinsky that Johannes and the
NLRB trial examiner had been in the city for a week, trying to settle the case without a hearing.
“It was impossible,” he said. The Tupelo Garment Company sold the business, believing that the
NLRB would be unable to proceed. They were wrong; the hearings began on Monday, August
8, 1938. Perlstein stated that the town had organized so well against unions and the NLRB that
the Board could not find a place to meet. A Tupelo judge refused to give them space in the
Court House and no one in the town would rent them a room. The Board, therefore, moved the
hearing to Aberdeen. 79

On August 8, 1938, the NLRB hearing came to order in the federal building of Aberdeen,
Mississippi. The trial examiner was I. N. Broadwin. The attorneys were Samuel Lang for the
NLRB and Jack Johannes for the ILGWU. J. M. Thomas and F. G. Thomas represented all three
garment companies. Max H. Zuckerman of New York provided additional counsel for Milam
Manufacturing and Fred B. Smith appeared for the Association of Employees of Reed Brothers.
Smith sought to file a petition for intervention that allowed members of the local union of Reed
Brothers to testify as to whether the company dominated the local union. The trial examiner
denied the motion but noted that Reed Brothers’ attorneys could call local union members to the

78 “Local Employees to Intervene in NLRB Hearing,” Tupelo Daily Journal, July 27, 1938; “Local Unions are Issue
79 Meyer Perlstein to David Dubinsky, Tupelo, Mississippi, August 5, 1938, Kheel.
stand, if they desired. More than 125 employees came into the courtroom. School buses brought them from Tupelo to Aberdeen. The attorneys, however, called neither the company loyalists nor the discharged workers represented by the ILGWU to testify.

During the noon recess, counsels for the NLRB, ILGWU and Milam Manufacturing discussed a stipulation that would settle the case. Zuckerman advised settling and L. G. Milam agreed saying, “I accepted this settlement when offered in the belief that the best interests of the community and my employees as well as my company, would thus be served. The terms of the settlement which my company entered into will be fully lived up to by us, and, as far as the company is concerned, the matter is a closed incident.” The next day the company lawyers offered stipulations to settle the cases against Tupelo Garment and Reed Brothers as well. Each garment company agreed to disband the local unions, including those established at the various branches of the Tupelo Garment Company. All three companies agreed to stop interfering with labor organization by discharging or discriminating against employees who joined or assisted in the formation of a union. Tupelo Garment and Reed Brothers agreed to pay back wages and to re-instate the discharged workers to their former positions. Milam agreed to full reinstatement of the two women his managers had fired for union activity.

The hearing, which most people expected to be a heated battle lasting three to four weeks, ended anti-climatically with the settlements. Tupelo welcomed the sudden calm.

George McLean, editor of the *Tupelo Daily Journal*, expressed relief that the turmoil was over and his hope that it would remain so. He wrote,

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81 Whitman, *God's Valley*, 160.
84 "Garment Company Cases Are Settled."
85 Ibid.
“We do not know the details as to whether or not one side or the other gave too much or too little. The big thing is that both sides to the controversy have amicably settled their troubles and that everyone can immediately get back to normal. If this trial had dragged on for weeks the community would have been torn up for at least that long and possibly other trouble would have developed that would have caused more misunderstanding in the future. … The settlement was not only sensible but it demonstrated that our people can get together and reason their way out of a difficult situation rather than fight their way into perpetual bitterness. … It is our sincerest hope that this settlement will mark the beginning of a new and a better day in the relations between the workers and the employees of this entire section.”

McLean tried to convince his readers that no one was at fault and that each side had offered equal compromise. He hoped that hostilities would end and the settlement would restore amicable relations both private and professional. The battle, however, was not over.

True to his word, L. G. Milam re-instated Mary L. Palmer and Mrs. Joe Wood, both of whom he had discharged for union activity. Although not awarded back pay, the women went back to work for Milam Manufacturing and worked there still in 1940. The women named in the charges against Reed Brothers were Hurma Cowan, Etoile Creely, Mildred Merchant Grissom, Maude Harrison, Lorene Johnson and Mary Price. Only one of these women appeared in the 1940 census for Lee County – Hurma Cowan worked in the sewing room of the WPA.

The situation with the Tupelo Garment Company proved much more complicated. The settlement awarded the women named in the charge back pay in the following amounts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evie Brown</td>
<td>$150.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bessie Clanton</td>
<td>130.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Alice Gambrell</td>
<td>135.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mildred Clayton Gillentine</td>
<td>35.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise Graves Repult</td>
<td>130.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faye Harries</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essie Kirkland</td>
<td>140.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

87 1940 Federal Census
Additionally, the company agreed to re-instate the women to their former positions. Because the Tupelo Garment Company sold its plants and machinery, however, the men involved in the reorganized companies refused to hire union members. They argued that the newly formed corporations were not successor companies of the Tupelo Garment Company and, therefore, neither the settlement nor the NLRB’s decision bound them to rehire the women. Tupelo industrialists paid the women their back pay but did not offer employment to any union members.88

The Tupelo Garment Company incorporated in the state of Delaware in 1927. A vote of the stockholders dissolved the business in the summer of 1938. The state filed the certificate of dissolution on October 15, 1938. Afterward, Irwin Manufacturing Company, which had no previous interest in the Tupelo Garment Company, purchased the New Albany plant. Rex Reed and W. B. Fields bought the other four plants as individuals. They then sold the machinery, equipment and property of the Baldwyn plant to Hunter-Thomas, Inc., a corporation formed by John Hunter, former secretary of Tupelo Garment, Frank Thomas, former attorney and stockholder of Tupelo Garment, and a third individual with no previous interest in Tupelo Garment. Hunter-Thomas, Inc. disposed of the machinery and equipment, purchased new machinery and began the manufacture of dress shirts in Tupelo. Reed and Fields sold the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Landers</td>
<td>110.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modene Speck</td>
<td>130.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenora Stevens</td>
<td>150.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annie Tackett</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudie Wheeler</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levie Lesley</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christene McGuff</td>
<td>100.00</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

88 Sworn statement Bessie Clanton, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Sworn statement Lucy Graves and Zula Putt, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240.
machinery, equipment, and property of the Tupelo Garment plants in Tupelo, Booneville and Fulton to the Mid-South Manufacturing Company, Booneville Manufacturing Company and Fulton Manufacturing Company.\textsuperscript{89}

The Tupelo Realty Company owned the buildings in which the Tupelo branches of the Tupelo Garment Company operated. The realty company leased them to Tupelo Garment. Mid-South Manufacturing leased the same buildings from the same company under the same terms. Likewise, the Booneville and Fulton plants of Tupelo Garment operated in leased facilities, which the Booneville Manufacturing and Fulton Manufacturing companies leased from the same owners on the same terms.\textsuperscript{90} The new companies produced the same products as Tupelo Garment, using the same raw materials and, substantially, the same personnel – managerial, supervisory, clerical and operational. The new companies continued to operate on the same system as the Tupelo Garment Company, that is, the material was cut at the Tupelo plant, taken to the Fulton and Booneville plants for assembly and then returned to Tupelo to be pressed, packed, and shipped.\textsuperscript{91} All of the stockholders in the new companies held stock in Tupelo Garment except for three individuals who together held only 135 shares of the 2,793 shares of stock in the new corporations. Further, the officers and directors of each of the three new corporations were the same.\textsuperscript{92} With the exception of J. H. Ledyard, J. P. Hunter, and L. L. Bethay, the officers and directors were the same as those of Tupelo Garment. Bethay had worked as the secretary of and held stock in the Tupelo Garment Company.

\textsuperscript{89} Sworn statement of C. Paul Barker, Orleans, Louisiana, December 1, 1940, NLRB-C-240.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{91} Sworn statement of Samuel Lumpkin, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Statement, Barker.
\textsuperscript{92} Statement, Barker.
A Comparison of the Boards of Directors

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Tupelo Garment Company</th>
<th>Mid-South Mfg, Booneville Mfg, Fulton Mfg.</th>
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<tr>
<td>R. F. “Rex” Reed, President</td>
<td>R. F. “Rex” Reed, President</td>
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<tr>
<td>W. B. Fields, Vice President</td>
<td>W. B. Fields, Vice President and Treasurer</td>
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<tr>
<td>J. P. Hunter, Secretary and Treasurer</td>
<td>L. L. Bethay, Secretary</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. A. Rogers, Chairman of the Board</td>
<td>B. A. Rogers</td>
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<td>R. W. Reed</td>
<td>R. W. Reed</td>
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<td>J. H. Ledyard</td>
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Despite the clear connection between the new corporations and the Tupelo Garment Company, mill officials refused to acknowledge they were successor companies. Therefore, they would not re-employ the fourteen women named in the NLRB settlement. In August 1940, two years after the Tupelo Garment Company entered a stipulation prompting the ILGWU to drop its charges, the fourteen women remained unemployed. By February 1939, the ILGWU declared Local 322 dead. An ILGWU representative came back to Tupelo, however, in 1940. Dorothy Needham arrived in the city in June 1940. In July, she began to inquire as to whether the company had rehired the fourteen women. Her investigation into the matter led her to believe that the Mid-South Manufacturing Company was the successor of Tupelo Garment, so she visited Fields and asked him to reinstate the women. Fields repeated that Mid-South Manufacturing was not a successor to Tupelo Garment and he felt no obligation to “assume the labor troubles” of the previous plant or to reinstate the “girls.”

Jack Johannes also contacted Fields about re-hiring the discharged women. The company still refused to re-hire them. In fact, they refused to hire any union members. As the NLRB prepared to petition the Fifth Circuit Court in the matter, seventeen union members submitted affidavits stating that no one would hire them. Several of the women had actively

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93 Sworn statement Dorothy Needham, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240.
94 Sworn statement Jack Johannes, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240.
sought employment but company officials consistently turned them away, citing no available positions. These women knew, however, that the companies hired non-union employees of Tupelo Garment after the union members’ requests. In one instance, Dolly Powell went to apply for work with a friend who had not joined the union. Management told her that there was no position for her but they told her friend they would call within the week. The next week the non-union worker was hired. An office worker identified Sudie Wheeler as “the one that sued the Tupelo Garment Company for back wages.” Bethay told her he “had no place” for her and would not accept her application.

Finally, on April 9, 1941, the NLRB petitioned the Fifth Circuit Court to adjudge the Tupelo Garment Company, Mid-South Manufacturing Company, Fulton Manufacturing Company, Booneville Manufacturing Company, R. F. Reed and W. B. Fields in contempt. The Board outlined the history of the companies, noted the directors and stockholders, and included the affidavits of the seventeen union members. Fields told Samuel Lumpkin, a Tupelo attorney retained by the ILGWU, that the companies never posted notices informing the employees they would not discriminate against union members. The investigation also revealed that the state

95 Sworn statement Evie Brown, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Statement, Clanton. Sworn statement Mary Alice Gambrell, Lee, Mississippi, November 15, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Sworn statement Mildred Clayton Gillentine, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Sworn statement Louise Graves Repult, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Sworn statement Fay Harris, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Sworn statement Essie Kirkland, Lee, Mississippi, November 14, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Sworn statement Virginia Landers, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Sworn statement Modene Speck, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Sworn statement Annie Tackett, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Sworn statement Lucy Graves, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Sworn statement Zula Putt, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940. Sworn statement Vera Carroll, Lee, Mississippi, November 15, 1940, NLRB-C-240. Sworn statement Tressie Miller, Orleans, Louisiana, November 22, 1940, NLRB-C-240.

96 Sworn statement Dolly Powell, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240.

97 Sworn statement Sudie Wheeler, Lee, Mississippi, November 8, 1940, NLRB-C-240.

98 Statement, Lumpkin.
of Mississippi had originally charted the Tupelo Garment Company in 1923. Despite the dissolution in Delaware, company officials had not returned the Mississippi charter.99

On September 9, 1941, the Court ruled that because the Tupelo Garment Company had paid the back wages stipulated in the decree, it had fulfilled its obligation in that instance. The dissolution of the company afterwards rendered the other points moot. A non-existent company cannot post notices nor re-hire employees. The court concluded,

“… with its dissolution the Tupelo Garment Company ceased to exist. The incorporation of the other three companies was not a reorganization of Tupelo Garment Company. They were separate and independent of Tupelo Garment Company and not in any sense its successors. Extended argument and citation of authorities are unnecessary to support these conclusions. … The petition is dismissed.”100

The court denied a rehearing on October 13, 1941. The Tupelo industrialists had won.

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99 Sworn statement Bryon Long, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240.
100 NLRB v. Tupelo Garment Company, Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, 122 F. (2d) 603, September 9, 1941.
CHAPTER VI

“BOSS LOVE”: PATERNALISM AND CLASS-CONSCIOUSNESS

Jimmy Cox declared that “Boss-love” existed among Tupelo workers to the extent that they applauded speeches that told of wage reductions and contributed money to purchase expensive gifts for company executives. “They felt that even though their wage scale was low, they were indebted to the bosses for provision of employment.” Management, he said, cultivated this attitude through “frequent paternalist speeches.” Cox’s description of worker-mentality in Tupelo fits the Southern paternalistic model. This account, however, came from a speech Cox delivered at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee during the winter term of 1938. Before accepting his description as absolute truth, one must bear in mind two important facts. Cox had a penchant for attention and a flare for the dramatic. These characteristics in combination with his “woman troubles” caused Meyer Perlstein to distrust the young man and Charles Logan to warn his colleagues in Washington to keep a wary eye on him. Further, Cox had attended a number of union meetings between the fall 1937 and winter 1938, the date of the speech. He no doubt knew the reputation of Southern mill bosses among union organizers, as indicated by his use of the term “paternalistic” to describe the factory speeches. About the use of paternalistic language in shop floor speeches, there is no question, as ample evidence exists in newspapers and the NLRB testimony. Cox could not know, however, the individual feelings of

1 Cox: 40.
2 Charles Logan to Nathan Witt, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 21, 1938, NLRB-C-240.
all industrial workers in Tupelo. Did they really feel gratitude or did they conform to management’s assertions in silence? Did they contribute to executive gifts willingly or did they give grudgingly under the watchful eye of the supervisor or tale-telling neighbor?

Historians and sociologists over the past half century have revealed the multi-faceted character of paternalism, a complex concept consisting of benevolence, power, deference and resistance. These traits came together in a language spoken by mill owners and operatives, each with his or her individualized understanding of the bonds and boundaries of their relationship. Not limited to the economic realm, the rapport included political and social life, which further complicates attempts to define the term. As scholars have based their understanding of paternalism on Gramscian theory, the word hegemony as defined by Antonio Gramsci represents the authority, both real and conceived, of Tupelo industrialists. Hegemony, he wrote, is “the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group [their ideology]; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.”

Once the dominant group achieves hegemony, members must maintain it through continuous efforts to win consent from the subordinate groups. If hegemony breaks down, the dominant group will use force to protect its interests. Thus, the combination of consent and force vary in degrees as necessity dictates. A small group of Tupelo’s elite businessmen, including the local industrialists, comprised the dominant group. The subordinate groups within the city included not only workers but also smaller businessmen and professionals. The labor struggles from 1937-1941 challenged the hegemony of the dominant group and threatened to replace their ideology – a definition of

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4 Lears: 568-569, 579.
community which dictated their superior position based on material success and personal worth. Tupelo’s dominant group fought both to win and force the continued consent of the subordinate groups.\(^5\)

An elite planter class never existed in Northeast Mississippi. Yeoman farmers settled the area. Over time, some of these farmers became more successful than others. Wealth, however, did not create obvious class distinctions. While success earned esteem for some, this respect did not translate into socially recognized superiority. If deference existed in the early history of Northeast Mississippi, it derived from the need of poor whites to obtain work. Deference in this setting resembled a humility based on the lack of economic alternatives rather than a caste based mentality. The settlement patterns and history of the region deny the existence of traditional authority and deference as a component of Tupelo’s hegemony.\(^6\) This absence forced Tupelo’s leaders, civic and later industrial, to construct an ideology in which their perceived subordinates would recognize and submit to their dominance. Because of the yeoman heritage and instilled racism of the region, the majority of white men believed themselves to share a rough equality. Thus, several factors emerged by which local residents evaluated a man’s character and determined his aptitude for leadership. These features included personal honesty, economic success, charity (both social and religious), and service to the community which occasionally called for personal sacrifice in the sense that one gave time and attention to community needs rather than pursuing personal interests.

\(^5\) Bryant Simon demonstrated the fluctuations between consent and force used by the mill owners of the Cone Cotton Mills in Greensboro, South Carolina. Simon, “The Ham and the Union.”

\(^6\) The following authors claimed that paternalism was the result of traditional patterns of deference. Escott; McLaurin; Howard Newby, “The Deferential Dialectic,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 17, no. 2 (1975); I. A. Newby, Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Cultural Persistence, 1880-1915 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Rhonda Zingraff and Michael D. Schulman, “Social Bases of Class Consciousness: A Study of Southern Textile Workers with a Comparison by Race,” Social Forces 63, no. 1 (1984); Tullos.
Tupelo’s oligarchy used the word “community” in the same manner that mill owners in the Piedmont used “family.” The language of community had great importance in the hills of Mississippi. National sectionalism and the regional divide in state politics fostered a strong sense of local identity. Given the political losses yeoman farmers suffered at the hands of the Natchez planters and wealthy merchants, Northeast Mississippians bore something like a political chip on their shoulders. Local leaders understood the relationship between wealth and political power. Economic development became the tool by which these men gained personal wealth and pulled the hill country out of the embarrassing poverty that blanketed the region. Success brought prestige, as the rest of the state looked to them for economic guidance. Such status translated into political power. Economic growth through agricultural diversity and the introduction of industry became the aim of Tupelo leaders at the beginning of the twentieth century. This made them prime candidates for New South boosterism. They adopted the cause and the language as they sought to mimic the publicized benevolence of Southern mill owners.

The booster philosophy applied the concept of American individualism to community life. Boosters argued that the fate of the town lay with its citizens.7 Appealing to local pride, boosters described cotton mills as homegrown industries, the product of local men with local capital who combined their resources for the betterment of all members of the community.8 The mills brought the benefit of industrial life to the region and provided a market for local cotton farmers suffering from declining prices.9 The men who constructed the Tupelo Cotton Mills subscribed to this point of view entirely. Local merchants put aside petty rivalries to organize the company. These men established themselves as the board of directors, but they traveled

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8 Ibid., 13, 48-49; Hodges, 10; Irons, 14.
throughout Lee County seeking investors.\(^\text{10}\) Their effort to include area farmers not only limited personal liability in the business venture but also broadened the perception of community, linking town and country.

Booster language with its emphasis on local identity and community welfare fostered consent among Tupelo citizens to the dominant ideology of the town’s financial leaders. The personal economic success of those leaders along with their presence in local government and civic activities also promoted consent rooted in local notions of ability and worthiness. For example, the main proponent of cotton mill construction was L. D. Hines. Hines’s personal business accomplishments and resulting wealth placed him in a leadership role not only within the community at large but also within the ranks of area businessmen. His professional acumen went unchallenged. At the same time, his willingness to relocate from his native Ripley in Tippah County to Tupelo in order to oversee personally the construction of the mill illustrated his commitment to the community.\(^\text{11}\) Townspeople believed that he relaxed his commitment to other business interests so that he could offer selflessly his expertise to the town. This perceived sacrifice ensured the cultural hegemony of Hines and his business partners.

The success of the cotton mill undergirded the initial consent offered to early industrial leaders. Likewise, mill prosperity strengthened management’s view of themselves and their place within the community. Because rhetoric bound mill building to community development, mill owners believed that their own interests paralleled community interests. Their position as successful entrepreneurs validated their right to lead and make economic decisions on behalf of the community.\(^\text{12}\) Although convinced of the truth of their dominant ideology, mill management

\(^{10}\) *Tupelo Journal* June 1, 1900.


\(^{12}\) Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 9; Goldfield, 99; Grisham, 46; McLaurin, 44.
had to secure consent from their subordinates continuously. Using the familiar image of other Southern industrialists, Tupelo factory owners styled themselves as benevolent economic saviors.¹³ The Fourth of July picnic for the employees of the cotton mill promoted community consent and encouraged worker admiration. The company supplied the food and drinks for workers and their families to demonstrate corporate benevolence, while activities such as baseball games and parades cultivated a sense of inclusion within the workers. Similarly, the Tupelo Garment Company and Reed Brothers Manufacturing sponsored an annual “Outing” complete with food, drinks, ice cream, beauty contests and plays. Company officials touted these festivities as acts of appreciation for their workers hoping that such displays would strengthen employee loyalty.¹⁴ The presence of mill management and its familiar interaction with employees embodied a significant aspect of the exchange. Community language and imagery meant little if the dominant group stood aloof.

Public descriptions of mill owners and officials encouraged consent on a different level. Catalogues of individuals’ business position, civic affiliations, and church membership targeted not only employees but also small merchants and professionals who had no direct tie to the mill. Economic success coupled with civic responsibility and religious devotion represented mill management’s suitability for cultural hegemony beyond the factory. For instance, the program for the garment companies’ annual outing included pictures of mill officials accompanied by brief biographies. The managerial positions within the garment company, cotton mill, local banks or other businesses demonstrated professional ability. The inclusion of church membership and special recognition for R. W. Reed’s role as elder and Sunday school

¹³ “Reed Brothers Helps Build Tupelo Area.”; "The Truth About Tupelo Needle Industry."; "The Needle Industry's Part in the Progressive Development of Northeast Mississippi."; "Needle Industry Invaluable to Tupelo Area."
¹⁴ “Souvenir Booklet”; "3,000 Will Attend Garment Co. Picnic," Tupelo Daily Journal, July 3, 1937; "Tupelo Garment Company and Reed Brothers, Inc. Employees Celebrating Their Fourth Annual Outing and Barbecue."
superintendent stressed their adherence to local religious sensibilities. Memberships in the Tupelo Country Club, Masonic Lodge, the Rotary Club, and Boy Scouts of America indicated generosity and commitment to civic duty.\textsuperscript{15}

To mill management, the 1937 cotton mill strike, the attempted strike at the Tupelo Garment Company and the effort to organize employees of all three apparel factories represented a direct challenge to their hegemony and the dominant ideology of community.\textsuperscript{16} Public support for the strikers offered credibility to an alternate ideology and legitimized resistance to the dominant group. Both mill officials and strike leader, Jimmy Cox, sought to sway public opinion as each blamed the other for the unrest and claimed the status of victim. To shore up their reputation as benevolent employers, mill officials revealed that the company had not earned a profit or paid dividends in years. They promised that if the company made a profit for the present year, it planned to compensate its employees with a Christmas bonus.\textsuperscript{17} Such statements implied that the company kept the mill open simply to provide jobs for the employees and paychecks that would benefit local businesses. Thus, their sacrifice of operating a business at a loss for the sake of community reinforced their dominant position. The promise of a Christmas bonus made mill employees appear greedy by demanding higher wages when the company struggled to survive. From this perspective, the employees pushed management to the wall with their unreasonable demands. Since the mill could not pay higher wages and the employees refused to work otherwise, officials had no choice but to close the plant. They laid the blame for the city’s loss of industry and the resultant economic downturn for local businesses squarely at the feet of the operatives.

\textsuperscript{15} Souvenir Booklet.
\textsuperscript{16} Grisham, 106.
\textsuperscript{17} "Sitters Hold Tupelo Plant."
One cannot measure the impact of management’s public discourse on the community at large. Shortly after the strike began, the board of directors voted to close the mill indefinitely. This decision displayed the dominant group’s economic power and represented the use of force to maintain hegemony when the subordinate group did not willingly consent. Over four hundred workers lost their jobs. The small, local businesses that supported the strikers suffered the most because smaller merchants could not sustain the loss of business. These proprietors made up the core of public support for the strikers, and their loss resulted from challenging the dominant ideology.\textsuperscript{18} The dominant group also used violence. Although the cotton mill strike essentially ended with the closing of the mill, Jimmy Cox continued as a local labor leader assisting in the organization of the garment workers. A group of men abducted Cox, beat him, and warned him to leave the city and never return.\textsuperscript{19} Tupelo’s industrialists bore no legal responsibility for the crime. Their influence in the matter is undoubted. Still, the use of violence did not compare with that experienced in earlier Southern strikes. Tupelo mill owners did not have the same level of control as did the Piedmont owners they wished to emulate. Because of the location of the mill village within the city limits, Tupelo management lacked the ability to limit operatives’ access to resources. They had little political power in the larger state, so they could not call on state law enforcement to remove strikers. The single attempt to use local guardsmen to intimidate the workers backfired.\textsuperscript{20}

The women of the garment companies posed the greatest threat to the hegemony of Tupelo’s industrialists. The profitability of the clothing factories ensured the continued financial superiority of their owners. The use of the local newspaper to reinforce the role of company owners as the economic saviors of the community became almost desperate. Company officials

\textsuperscript{18} Hall, "Disorderly Women," 369.
\textsuperscript{19} "Jimmy Cox Back in City After Ride."; "Charges Are Expected in Cox Seizure."
\textsuperscript{20} Grisham, 105-106.
recruited other local businessmen to aid in the propaganda war. Local proprietors donated money and food for a celebratory dinner, which championed the Reed employees who escorted union organizers out of town. Civic leaders praised the women for their patriotism and loyalty to company and community. The address of a local minister provided religious justification for their actions and reaffirmed their moral character. When this display failed to discourage organization, Tupelo’s elite formed a Citizens’ Committee intended to represent the entire community rather than mill management alone, who became conspicuously silent. Through paid advertisements, the Committee sought to perpetuate consent to the dominant ideology by using the language of community. The committee encouraged employees to “stick by the homefolks” and seek advice from ministers and local leaders who cared about them as neighbors and friends. They labeled organizers as outsiders and communists, who admitted African-Americans to their organizations, underscoring the point that affiliation with such figures threatened the fabric of community. The Committee invited C. E. Hoffman of the Congressional Education League to speak to the citizens of Tupelo and convince them that communists controlled unions and sought to destroy industry in America. Controlling public discourse in this way, the dominant group sought to label any oppositional view as deviant. In the case of the garment workers, one can see that the dominant group gained control of the newspaper and managed the public dialogue in a way that validated its ideology. It established the boundaries of acceptable discussion by refusal to acknowledge workers’ grievances and cemented their prestige and cultural leadership

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21 “Merchants to Give Huge Banquet for Reed Girls.”; "Reed Employees Praised Highly for Americanism."
23 "C. E. Hoffman to Speak Here."
24 Lears: 572.
through a propaganda campaign designed to remind the public of the economic contributions of its members.\textsuperscript{25}

The Southern press often cooperated in the maintenance of cultural hegemony.\textsuperscript{26} The *Tupelo Daily Journal* and its handling of local labor strife, however, exhibited some exceptional characteristics. The newspaper demonstrated extraordinary fairness in its reports of the cotton mill strike. It printed the statements of both mill management and the striking operatives without passing judgment on either group. The willingness of George McLean, the publisher, to provide a public medium through which the strikers could express their grievances prompted accusations of strike support. Given the newspaper’s coverage of strikes and union victories in Mississippi and nearby Memphis as well as the editor’s invective against the low-wage industries entering the state, the allegations merited attention. In fact, some local businessmen blamed McLean personally for the strike.\textsuperscript{27}

The tone of the daily’s treatment of the organization efforts of the garment workers changed, however. The firing of Kathleen Patey and her cohorts for attempting a strike at the Tupelo Garment Company went unreported. The newspaper remained silent on the firing until the opening of the National Labor Relations Board hearings. The settlement in which the women received back pay and the assurance of employment received no public recognition. In the meantime, the garment companies dismissed another twenty-two women for union activity, also unacknowledged by the local press. The newspaper did not publish the grievances of the garment women nor did it recognize their suffering as it had the cotton mill strikers. Although, it initially printed statements from union organizer Ida Sledge, the paper gave no coverage to union efforts after her departure. Conversely, stories about the economic contributions of the factories

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.: 570-589.
\textsuperscript{26} Beatty: 488; Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 32-34.
\textsuperscript{27} Grisham, 105-106.
and their owners abounded. This shift in the tenor of the paper and its publisher toward unionization and collective bargaining offers a unique perspective on the position of middle-class businessmen and professionals within the hegemonic hierarchy of a small Southern town.

George McLean was a native Mississippian but not a native of Tupelo. He grew up in Winona, some 100 miles to the southwest. The son of a wealthy family, McLean intended to become a Presbyterian minister but the church felt his social views too progressive. He turned to academia studying psychology, philosophy, and religion, ultimately focusing on sociology at the University of Chicago. After a short teaching stint in Michigan, he settled in Memphis as an instructor at Southwestern College (now Rhodes College).28 There McLean alienated the city boss, Edward Crump, with his efforts to organize tenant farmers and day laborers. In 1934, the thirty-year-old McLean moved to Tupelo and, using his wife’s money, bought the bankrupt Daily Journal.29 For the next few years, McLean worked to make a success of his new business. His outspoken editorials about the plight of Mississippi workers and the exposé of the Columbia garment factory written by managing editor, Harry Rutherford, offended many area businessmen who led a boycott against the paper.30

This economic sanction and the closing of the mill may have undermined McLean’s support of labor organization, not in theory but in practice. McLean took an active interest in economic development. “He didn’t want a bigger slice of the pie for himself, he said; he wanted a bigger pie for all.”31 The mill closure dealt a heavy blow to industry in Tupelo and the labor unrest caused local merchants to cast a wary eye toward discussion of attracting other industries.

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28 Ibid., 85.
30 Grisham, 86.
31 Blade.
McLean and Rutherford found themselves caught in the middle. They wanted better paying jobs for workers, but knew Tupelo could not survive the closing of the garment plants. Nor could the community long stand the strain of bitter division. Going silent on the organizational efforts at the garment plants and running stories of the economic contributions of these factories was the newspaper’s attempt at fence mending. For economic development, McLean would need the support of businessmen. At this point in the game, the men must have considered a move away from “progressive” views and toward consent of the dominant ideology a practical matter – a necessity for the future. As McLean’s son-in-law later stated, “his Christian socialism evolved into a Christian capitalism.”32 In this instance, the appearance of acquiescence and consent proved to be no more that economic expediency. Given the deep and bitter division within the community, it is unlikely that McLean was the only Tupelo resident to choose this course.

A grasp of workers’ self-perceptions – their understanding of community and their place within it – vitally determines whether consent to the dominant ideology was real or perceived. While scholars have debunked the docility of Southern mill hands, ideas of worker deference persist. Howard Newby described deference as ingratiating behavior and noted two manifestations. The first form described outward behavior. Determining whether behavior is “real” or pretended can be problematic. The second form exists in a set of attitudes. These attitudes represent “real” deference, the endorsement of a “moral order that legitimizes its own subordination.” Deference, he continues, does not mean total subordination or powerlessness. Holders of deferential attitudes perceive a moral economy in which they form a partnership with the dominant group.33 Based on this description, worker consent to a dominant ideology can be

32 Ibid.
33 Newby, "Dialectic," 140-145.
both calculated and actual. E. P. Thompson noted that deference could also contain both self-interest and concealment of one’s true feeling.34

All expressions of deference embrace a moral economy. Within this economy exists the principle of reciprocity, which is “based on the simple idea that … a gift or service received creates a reciprocal obligation to return a gift or service of at least comparable value.”35 Historians have documented attitudes of mutual obligation amongst Southern white workers as consistent with the language of paternalism. Mill workers who believed their employer failed to uphold his responsibilities within the moral economy resisted his control either within the paternalist system or by joining a union.36 The key component within a system of mutual reciprocity rests on an exchange of comparable value. Antebellum Southern society exhibited this notion of reciprocity within the “servant ideal,” which endorsed rewarding and promoting service.37 When workers felt management had failed to compensate them equivalent to the amount of work expended, they challenged the validity of the boss’s position within the dominant ideology. When workers have no tradition of deference from which to draw, the idea of mutual reciprocity becomes more powerful, and the concept of comparable value takes on greater significance.

Tupelo employees believed they had invested in the company as much as the mill owners had, though not financially nor speculatively. Having invested their time and energy in the company, should not they reap the benefits of success? They did not expect to gain as much

36 Beatty; Irons; McLaurin; Simon, "The Ham and the Union," ; Wingerd; Frankel, "Women".
37 Joyce Broussard discusses the servant ideal as it relates to married women, who claimed the right to seek divorce from men who did not honor their service. The message of duty, service, and reward can easily be applied to labor’s expectations of just compensation. Joyce L. Broussard, "Naked Before the Law: Married Women and the Servant Ideal in Antebellum Natchez," in *Mississippi Women: Their Histories, Their Lives*, ed. Elizabeth Anne Payne, Martha H. Swain, and Marjorie Julian Spruill (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2010),57-76.
economic advantage as the owners. They expected, however, to earn wages commensurate with their perceived contribution. The failure of management to provide a living wage failed to meet their obligations. This breakdown of reciprocity freed the workers from their obligation of loyalty and allowed them the right to censure owners through resistance, either subtle or formal, thereby forcing management to meet its responsibility. Joining a union was not, therefore, a breach in relations but a necessity for workers to obtain their rights derived from the mutual obligation of community as defined by the dominant ideology.

In Tupelo, the paternalistic claims of factory management and the Citizens’ Committee prompted workers to respond in similar language to reveal mill officials’ failure to embody the ideology they professed. For instance, when Ledyard came before the workers to inform them they would have to suffer a pay reduction to allow the company to maintain a competitive edge, workers perceived their importance to the company and their involvement in important decisions. While employees understood that they had no real power of decision, the meeting fostered a sense of inclusion.38 The persistent claims of the Citizens’ Committee that they were the workers’ friends and neighbors contrasted with their refusal to acknowledge the financial plight of the women. Cotton mill officials publically proclaimed the existence of friendly and open relations between owners and operatives, insinuating that the workers had violated this arrangement by striking without previous warning. Mill operatives countered this claim by casting doubt upon the integrity of mill management when they refused to negotiate with the Cox committee after promising to do so.

Tupelo employees took advantage of the paternalistic and community-oriented language of management to validate their grievances within the context of the moral economy. The choice of the cotton mill operatives and some garment workers to challenge the dominant ideology

38 W. B. Fields, Testimony, NLRB-TE.
came from a sense of genuine betrayal. Their consent to the hegemony of Tupelo’s elite, whether given freely or grudgingly, did not provide the expected benefits. This breakdown of comparable reciprocity undermined their confidence in the community structure. Through their actions—striking and joining a union—these workers offered an alternate ideology based on their identity as the social and moral equals of the Tupelo elite. In their view, only economic position distinguished owners from operatives. Thus, the relationship they wanted to create was a partnership, not subordination. Given the yeoman heritage of Northeast Mississippian and the continuation of many garment women to live on farms, the mutuality of a moral economy came not from a peasant or dependent perspective but from a financial agreement among social equals.

Cultural hegemony and its propagation through public discourse, however, did not represent paternalism. Paternalism, as it existed in the Piedmont, consisted of benevolence, deference, control, and repression. Though many have questioned the reality of owner benevolence, clearly mill hands enjoyed some benefits early in the history of the industry. At least, the perception of benevolence persisted for some operatives. Within the relationship and closely connected to the notion of beneficence existed an attitude of deference. Piedmont operatives expressed gratitude to their employers and acknowledged an economic dependence upon them. The isolation of the mill villages, which contained housing, churches, commissaries, and recreational facilities, gave mill owners social control as well. Through a combination of economic and social control within the village and political influence on the state level, mill owners often repressed expressions of discontent, such as union membership or strikes. Violence both ignored and sanctioned by state and local officials undermined union solidarity and discouraged future demands for collective bargaining.
In Tupelo, industrialists practiced limited benevolence. The company maintained the condition and use of a mill village with houses and recreational facilities only so long as doing so did not interfere with their profits. By 1937, visitors described mill housing as “wretched,” having unsodded yards with “sagging picket and wire fences.”

Deference born of a traditional caste system did not exist in Northeast Mississippi. Calculated submission to authority to keep one’s job did not represent “real” deference. Control also was limited. Rather than living in an isolated village, Tupelo operatives roamed about the city at will and conducted business with merchants of their choosing. Furthermore, the company built no church upon its property.

Support from a significant portion of the city’s residents, including the newspaper editor, limited not only control but also the amount of repression that local leaders could impose without inviting public scrutiny. Tupelo industrialists held a tenuous grasp on hegemony. While their language sounded like paternalism and they believed themselves to be paternalists, others did not view them that way. Politically, Northeastern Mississippians did not have the wealth to command the resources of the state. In fact, when Governor White visited the city during the cotton mill strike, he had little impact on the situation. His only official act sent relief to the strikers.

Even on the local level, the industrialists could not claim political control, as county elections were often highly contested affairs. These men possessed economic power only. Thus, scholars should not apply paternalism to Southern labor across the spectrum. Neither should they suggest that paternalism alone explains the lack of Southern unionization.

Why did unions fail in Tupelo? One could argue that unionization among the cotton mill workers did not fail. Two-thirds of the employees joined the strike and remained with their independent union even as the owners decided to close the plant. The workers’ failure resulted

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39 Mason, 52; Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration (Miss.), 262.
40 "White Provides Relief Funds for Striking Mill Employees."
from simple economics; the mill did not earn sustained profits. After the owners’ initial rejection of the workers’ demands and an effort to demonstrate the strikers’ determination by officially electing Cox as their representative, mill hands sought membership in a national union. The CIO, however, had no interest in them. With liquidation plans underway, offering membership to unemployed hands seemed pointless. Union leaders thought it best to spend limited funds organizing employed workers at larger mills rather than taking on the burden of relief for those who struck at a closed facility.

The struggle to organize workers in Tupelo fell next to Ida Sledge and the ILGWU, as she attempted to organize the employees of the local garment companies. Having some success, Sledge established a chapter of the ILGWU in July 1937.\textsuperscript{41} Several factors contributed to the decline of Local 322. The closing of the cotton mill shocked the local workforce, as it demonstrated the economic power of Tupelo industrialists and their willingness to use financial coercion to maintain hegemony. Some employees as well as local businesses feared that organization of the garment workers would cause factory owners to close these plants as well. Some residents who initially supported the strikers and unionization, like George McLean, reconsidered their position in view of the larger picture. The garment companies operated three plants in Tupelo; four if one differentiated between Plant Number One and Plant Number Two of the Tupelo Garment Company. These clothing factories employed over three times as many people locally as had the cotton mill.\textsuperscript{42} The closure or relocation of these industries would mean economic disaster for the small town.\textsuperscript{43} This harsh economic reality undermined public support among the middle-class for unionization.

\textsuperscript{41} "Mills Organize Company Union to Combat CIO."
\textsuperscript{42} "White's Arrival Raises Strike Settlement Hopes."; "Needle Industry Invaluable to Tupelo Area."
\textsuperscript{43} Caldwell, "Politics."
The limited commitment of the ILGWU proved one of the most significant obstacles to organization. When Ida Sledge, a union organizer, came to Tupelo, a number of Reed Brothers employees forced her to leave town. The union filed charges against the company with the NLRB for violating the Wagner Act, but it dropped the charges when management agreed not to interfere with organization. It appeared that the union was backing down. Additionally, Sledge had assured garment workers that the ILGWU would provide members relief if fired for joining. Headquarters did not provide the funds Sledge needed to fulfill her promise. Still, the Memphis native made progress. She had earned the respect of the workers by returning to Tupelo after her eviction by the Reed employees and a second expulsion at the hands of the Citizens’ Committee. Sledge had demonstrated her commitment by standing firm against the intimidation of the town’s oligarchy. The decision of union leaders to move Sledge out of Tupelo devastated local organizers. Her replacement, a local woman named Sarah Potter, could not garner the respect of local leaders or the confidence of garment workers. Although Cox continued to aid in organizing the women, his personal demeanor had alienated previous allies. Allegations of a relationship between Potter and the married Cox further undermined their credibility and consequently that of the union they represented.

Even though ILGWU officials replaced Potter with another organizer, it was too late to repair the damage. Union members felt abandoned. W. A. Harrison appealed directly to John Lewis, asking the CIO to complete the work that Sledge had started. His wife, whom Reed Brothers had fired, wrote to Meyer Perlstein but felt his response was evasive. They had lost

44 W. A. Harrison to John Lewis, Tupelo, January 1, 1938, Kheel.
45 "Organizers Escorted From City but Return."; "Evicted Twice; Back to Tupelo."; "Ida Sledge Escorted Out of Tupelo Again."; "Reed Workers Ask Union to Cease Activities Here."
46 W. A. Harrison to John Lewis, Tupelo, January 1, 1938, Kheel.
faith in the ILGWU and they wanted the CIO to assume direct control of their movement. Mary Price, who also lost her job at Reed Brothers, appealed to Lewis as well:

“Now the CIO seems to be the choice of most members. But we must have a union. If the CIO don’t want us. Well we will have to look for help some place else. We don’t want our critics to laugh and say I told you so. That they would only cause you to lose your job. Then leave you which they did. … If the work is quit before it is finished it won’t be very good advertisement at other places. Where the CIO might want to organize. And those promises not being kept those that lost their jobs were depending on their work for their living and now they have nothing to look forward too.”

Price revealed the initial distrust garment workers felt toward the union and the validation of that caution when members lost their jobs and received no support from the organization they trusted. Price even tried to pressure Lewis into action by reminding him that broken promises damaged the reputation of the union. If the CIO did not work to remedy the situation, she argued, Southern workers would be even less likely to join a union in the future.

After her replacement arrived, Potter left Tupelo for St. Louis where she worked as a stenographer in the main office of the ILGWU. In July 1938, she wrote to Evie Brown, another union member whom Reed Brothers had dismissed, explaining her perspective on the situation at Tupelo.

“The more I know about the people who used to call themselves our friends the less I think of them. …I hate to say so but I can’t find anyone else who cares one thing about the situation there; it is more or less going to be left up to the people there. …You see, there is no help for us anywhere unless we make it ourselves. The union checked up and found that it had spent more money last year than it had taken it, and so they took everything away from Tupelo that they could, because you see Tupelo was not bringing them in any money. …the union was ready to pull out of Tupelo until times were better. Dubinsky told Jimmy in New York that the union was through in Tupelo. Of course they mean to come back

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47 Mary Price to John Lewis, Tupelo, January 6, 1938, Kheel.
when business picks up, but we can’t afford to be pleased or satisfied with just that much. So we fight right ahead with what we have.”

Clearly, the sense of betrayal and disappointment prevailed. Union leadership made serious mistakes in handling the organization drive in Tupelo. Whether miscalculation or insufficient finances, Local 322 of the ILGWU died in February 1939. Dorothy Needham arrived in Tupelo in June the following year to revive the union. When she learned that fourteen union members remained unemployed, she knew the only hope of reorganizing the workers lay with the NLRB. The union reported that Tupelo Garment had not abided by the terms of the settlement and encouraged the NLRB to force mill management to comply.

The fourteen women, whom the Tupelo Garment Company had discharged, had no jobs. The company officials had paid their back wages but refused to rehire them. The NLRB filed an enforcement act with the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, hoping to compel Tupelo industrialists to honor the settlement. Company officials, however, had reorganized the Tupelo Garment Company. By selling one plant, dissolving the corporation and reestablishing it as three separate companies, management effectively removed its responsibility to rehire the women. Even though these companies belonged to the same men, the court declared that they were not successor companies and were under no obligation to offer work to the women named in the charges against Tupelo Garment. The effective blacklisting of these workers and the failure of the union and federal government to stand successfully against the Tupelo oligarchy demoralized union members and prevented further organization efforts. Unionization offered no practical benefit. One can attribute the demise of Local 322 to the harsh economic realities of a national depression as it affected an already impoverished region.

48 Sarah Potter to Evie Brown, St. Louis, July 13, 1938, Kheel.
49 Sworn statement Dorothy Needham, Lee, Mississippi, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240.
As scholars have sought to understand why unions failed in the South, many have pointed to the lack of class-consciousness formation. Arguments concerning paternalism and the absence of class-consciousness depend on each other. Paternalism prevents the development of class-consciousness, while the failure to arrive at class-consciousness ensures the continuation of paternalism. Scholars might benefit by stepping away from circular arguments and reconsidering their view of class. Heretofore, historians have adhered to the Marxist idea that class-consciousness requires the proletarianization of mill operatives.\(^{50}\) Workers must identify themselves as a group whose only asset is their labor, the selling of which provides their only means of subsistence. Yet, according to E. P. Thompson, class-consciousness requires only the recognition of oneself and one’s interests as opposed to the interests of another group. Class, according to him, is neither a structure nor a category but “something that happens in human relationships.”\(^{51}\) The English historian realizes that “class” does not necessarily conform to Marxist definitions.\(^{52}\) Therefore, rather than decry the lack of class-consciousness among Southern workers, historians ought to consider the possibility of an alternative consciousness that does not require proletarianization.

In Tupelo, cotton mill employees obtained the class-consciousness for which Southern labor historians have sought. They identified themselves as workers whose interests opposed those of the mill owners. They became the city’s proletariat. In typical Marxist fashion, they rose against the owners to seek compensation for their labor – their perceived contribution to production. The capitalists ignored their protests and ended their rebellion by eliminating the mill and with it the productive capacity necessary for the existence of a wage-earning class. Of course, one should not overlook the role of gender in class formation. Although the mill

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\(^{50}\) Zieger.  
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 10.
employed a significant number of women, male employees outnumbered female workers by 1920. Male operatives organized and initiated the cotton mill strike. Traditional values identified men as the head of the household and ascribed to them responsibility for the survival of the family. Thus, men often connected their identity to their occupation. When men entered the mill, they left the farm entirely, giving up any alternative means of subsistence. They relied on their labor alone. Once they realized their position as wageworkers and understood that their interest of selling labor for the highest possible price opposed management’s desire to purchase labor for the lowest possible price, class-consciousness occurred.

Some historians believe unions had a difficult time organizing women. Because of their place within the family, scholars believe women exercised a conservative pull against class cohesion. Other factors said to limit Southern women’s activism include an abundant biracial workforce, rural based industries far from urban centers, manufacturing plants controlled from outside the region, a repressive political system, and the more practical matter of time, most of which was occupied by the double day. These factors could explain the difference between the cotton mill employees’ ability to sustain a strike and the failure to organize the garment workers. In the case of Tupelo, however, some of these aspects do not apply. The garment companies did not employ black women. While the plants existed in a rural area, local men owned and operated each of them. The political system in Northeast Mississippi was not repressive for most whites. The demands of family required a good deal of time. In Tupelo, however, the distance between home and factory served as more of a restraint. Union members found alternatives to

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53 1920 Federal Census of Tupelo.
the geographical problem by recruiting within the plant.\textsuperscript{56} This solution solved the time constraint as well.

With the above factors dismissed, the question arises as to whether gender affects proletarianization. Some sociologists think that it does not. While women’s positions as secondary earners might make them uninterested in changing working conditions, female workers are subject to occupational and economic insecurity, which can be “a potential basis for the development and expression of worker consciousness … Their work experiences are as real and as potent a force in their lives as are those of men.”\textsuperscript{57} While studying women’s labor activism in France, Louise A. Tilly has found several specific circumstances under which women were more likely to act collectively. The association with women of similar interests and the ability to translate these interests into a structured association form two important conditions, which the garment women satisfied. Even before the ILGWU arrived, Kathleen Patey and five of her coworkers identified common complaints and established an ordered system for determining commitment among their coworkers. Unfortunately, the garment workers did not have resources they could mobilize nor did they enjoy a favorable economic climate. Additionally, their positions were vulnerable because there was no shortage of workers. Based on Tilly’s model, Tupelo garment workers had the potential for collective action but the environment was not conducive for success.

Gender may have been another factor that adversely affected public support for the ILGWU. The dominant ideology supposed women’s income to be supplemental rather than a necessity, legitimizing low wages for women because they did not head households. For the garment workers, their income provided food for their families, helped pay farm mortgages, and

\textsuperscript{56} Kathleen Patey, Testimony, 39-43, NLRB-ET.  
\textsuperscript{57} Zingraff: 102.
generally raised the household’s standard of living. Some even managed to paint their houses.\textsuperscript{58} The fundamental difference between garment workers’ self-perception and the role of women within the dominant ideology resided in the dissimilar versions of female identity that existed in urban and rural settings.

Ninety-five percent of them lived on farms and commuted to work by carpooling or riding school buses. They did not sever their tie to the land by moving into the city or the mill village. Selling their labor was not the only means of subsistence open to them. Wage work appealed to them and seemed necessary for acquiring cash to improve their and their families’ condition, but it was not the sole means of survival. Neither was factory work the only criteria in determining their identity. Although they stepped away from the farm to earn wages, they continued to be involved in home production, such as raising chickens, gardening and food preservation. Because of their continued presence and involvement with farm life, the majority of garment workers in Tupelo did not embrace a proletarian identity. This does not mean, however, that they had no class-consciousness. Rather, it suggests the existence of a self-perception that preceded and superseded an identity based on wage work.

Whether working in the field, raising livestock or growing produce, farmwomen made crucial contributions to the household. Aside from their labor in the maintenance and harvesting of a cash crop, farmwomen provided nearly all of the food consumed by the family. Although scholars have come to realize the significance of their contributions only in the last ten years, the women and their husbands understood the economic necessity of their role.\textsuperscript{59} The demanding nature and crucial function of farmwomen’s labor shaped their identity and fostered their self-

\textsuperscript{58} Jack Herrington, interview. \url{http://www.outreach.olemiss.edu/media/documentary/women_history/herrington.html}

\textsuperscript{59} Jones, \textit{Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South}; Sharpless and Walker; Melissa Walker, \textit{All We Knew was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941}; Revisiting rural America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Walker, ”The Changing Character of Farm Life: Rural Southern Women,”
esteem as vital partners in the struggle for survival. For yeoman farmers, women’s work contributed to their ability to pay mortgages and maintain their position as a landowner. Entering the factory, then, did not reshape the identity or self-perception of these women. The location of work changed, and the type of contribution they made to the household shifted from produce to cash. Their place within the family or household unit did not change. The most significant alteration that factory work brought to these women was the introduction of the double day – a day’s work for an employer and a day’s work tending to household duties.60

If mill employment did not proletarianize farmwomen, did they lack class-consciousness? Here, historians must move away from Marx’s view of class and embrace Thompson. Class is the identification of one’s self and one’s interests as opposed to the interests of another group. On this premise, one can argue that the yeoman farmers of Lee County constituted a class. Small farmers, who joined politically to oppose the interests of Tupelo industrialists, did not represent a proletariat but they recognized themselves as a group whose interested conflicted with Tupelo elites. Mill owners were also merchants and large farmers. Oppositional interests already existed between small farmers and large merchant farmers. The juxtaposition of small farmers’ wives working for political rivals exacerbated differences but did not alter the identity of anyone within the previously defined group. Farmwomen continued to think of themselves as farmers’ wives.

Political differences between small farmers and area businessmen began with the rise of the merchant landholding elite after the Civil War. Tupelo leaders achieved prominence as part of this new wealthy class. As local creditors, they became the targets for farmer discontent in the late nineteenth century. Hostilities arose during the Greenback movement when farmers

challenged the leadership of the local Democratic Party. Deeper divisions occurred with the rise of the Populists. Bitter campaigns, election fraud, and intimidation fueled resentment that would last for years.

One political dispute between area farmers and businessmen significantly affected the labor situation in 1937. The dispute arose from a proposed sales tax in 1933. The state government faced a huge budget deficit and sought to increase revenues via an ad valorem. Farmers favored the sales tax rather than an increase in property taxes. Rex Reed and other Tupelo businessmen, like most Mississippi merchants, opposed the tax believing it would deter consumer spending. When the local representative to the state legislature, Sam Lumpkin, voted in favor of the sales tax, Reed and the Tupelo oligarchy swore to prevent his reelection two years later. Grateful farmers, however, after a bitter campaign, succeeded in sending him back to Jackson in 1935. The next spring a devastating tornado ripped through Tupelo and Lee County, killing over 200 people. The American Red Cross offered $500,000 to repair storm-damaged homes. Area farmers felt too much of the money stayed in the city and not enough reached rural families. Nell Reed, wife of Rex Reed, chaired the local chapter of the Red Cross, which the farmers assumed gave Reed control over the distribution of funds. The tax, the hostile campaign, the seemingly unfair distribution of storm relief reinforced animosity between area farmers and Tupelo businessmen.

Additionally, Congressman John Rankin appeared to have shifted his alliance. City leaders initially opposed Rankin’s bid for a congressional seat. The farmers elected him to his first two terms in spite of the town’s opposition. By 1937, however, Rex Reed had grown in both economic and political power. A Nashville reporter claimed that Reed, by extending his influence from Tupelo into the four towns that were home to the garment company’s branch

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61 Caldwell, "Politics."
plants, created a political machine akin to Ed Crump in Memphis. The appointment of Rankin’s brother as postmaster at Tupelo and of Reed’s sister as postmistress of a nearby town provoked the belief that the two had formed a political alliance.\(^\text{62}\) Rankin’s vitriolic rants against the NLRB and the CIO during the labor unrest revealed the depth of his willingness to curry favor with Tupelo businessmen.

Nat Caldwell, a journalist from Nashville, believed that the political division and general resentment of Tupelo businessmen prompted many farmwomen to join the ILGWU. While wages and hours were legitimate concerns, revenge, both political and economic, motivated some women to join the union. Local farmers must have laughed at the Citizens’ Committee ad telling them to “advise” their daughters to “stick by the homefolks – they have already stuck by you …”\(^\text{63}\) The divide between the farmers and Tupelo businessmen illustrates two important points. First, the women working in the garment factories did not develop a proletariat identity. If they had, they would have joined the cotton mill workers in a unified strike per the original plan. The action of the mill workers demonstrated that Tupelo’s workforce did not suffer the constraints of paternalism and severe repression. They had the capacity to form a class-consciousness based on their identification as industrial laborers and did so. Second, farmwomen did not form a proletariat identity because they were class-conscious already. Farmers’ wives and daughters perceived of themselves as farmwomen. Whether yeomen or tenants, farmers were not individual men; they were families dependent upon the work of all members. For many of these women factory work was temporary. Farmwomen did not see themselves as a permanent industrial force. Even the women who sought organization spoke of leaving the plant for a time and returning later. Factory work was something they did; it was not

\(^{62}\) Ibid.
\(^{63}\) “To The Farmers of This Territory.”
who they were. They were farmers and as such, they were part of a specific class within Lee County. Farmers identified themselves and their interests as being opposed to Tupelo businessmen and company interests. According to Thompson, this demonstrates class-consciousness. The development of class-consciousness was not impossible for Southern workers. Historians have failed to see their class-consciousness because it does not fit the proletarian model.

It is impossible to know just how many women signed union cards. The threat of termination and the actual firing of almost thirty women from the three companies combined inspired discretion. The amount of propaganda indicates union activity was sufficient to cause Tupelo leaders a great deal of concern. Yet, the number of union members remained too few to affect a strike or convince the ILGWU to stay in Tupelo beyond the August 1938 NLRB hearing. Worker motivation for joining the union or standing against it has caused consternation for historians. The reasons may vary as much as the workers themselves. If resentment prompted some to join, what caused others to refuse membership and even discourage it among their fellows? Documentation for the NLRB proceedings allows one to hear the voices of the union members, but voices of the non-union members remain silent for the most part. Their participation in escorting Sledge out of town, attending the dinner given them by local businessmen and trying to prevent the distribution of union materials looks like ‘real’ consent. Some workers may indeed have been grateful for their jobs. While evidence shows that the majority of garment workers lived on farms, the percentage of those who owned or rented the land remains difficult to determine. If they rented land from one of Tupelo’s merchant landholders, they had good reason to remain firmly within the non-union camp. For people who live close to the margin of subsistence, the stabilization of real income exerts more influence
than achieving a higher average income.\textsuperscript{64} Earning two or three dollars more a week would not have offset the reality of suddenly being without a home or having an unemployed husband.

Similarly, if the women’s income marked the difference between starvation and subsistence, she would more likely to cleave to security than to risk failure.

Despite the profitability of the garment factories, many employees feared the owners would close them. Two instances illustrate the reality of employee fears. Lucy Graves, a union member who lost her job, asked her forelady, Mary Long, why she treated the union members so badly. The supervisor responded, “Well, I know if the Union gets in here Mr. Fields will shut the plant down and put us out of work.”\textsuperscript{65} Long stood to lose not only her income but also her status as a member of management. Given the economic importance of the garment factories to the small town, supervisory positions elevated one’s status within the community. Maintenance of the status quo benefited even the lowest levels of plant management. In the fall of 1937, Tupelo Garment Company stopped production. Mill officials claimed that business had declined, which could be true given the Roosevelt Recession. Rumors circulated, however, that W. B. Fields, the plant manager, closed the plant and would reopen it the first of April “when that old sorry union would be died down.”\textsuperscript{66} A recently hired employee blamed the union for the loss of new jobs and feared that continued organization would prevent owners from ever reopening the plant.\textsuperscript{67} Economic fears within the community provoked social sanctions of union members as employees blamed them for the union’s continued presence.

Even though the union and the garment companies settled their dispute, the Tupelo Garment Company had stopped operations until it reorganized as three independent corporations.

\textsuperscript{64} Scott, 34.
\textsuperscript{65} Sworn statement of Lucy Graves, November 9, 1940, NLRB-C-240.
\textsuperscript{66} Whitman, \textit{God’s Valley}, 159.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
The company paid the back wages owed to the women named in the charges. They did not rehire them, however. Interest in the union had been waning since the middle of 1938. The work stoppage and blacklisting eroded interest even more. If farmwomen’s interest had been primarily one of retribution, the lack of satisfaction drained their motivation. By the beginning of 1939, union membership no longer offered real benefits. Women who wanted to work in the garment factories had to offer consent to the mill owners’ ideology. Whether real or pretended, mill owners cared about visible submission.

The turmoil of Tupelo’s industrial relations in the late 1930s proves that historians should not apply Piedmont style paternalism throughout the South because of similarities in the language of public discourse. Similarly, to understand the class-consciousness of Southern workers, particularly those who did not relocate to urban areas, scholars need to broaden their view of class formation beyond the proletariat of Marxism. Worker conflict, often seen as the result of paternalism, needs further research. The Tupelo experience illustrates a variety of factors that shaped Southern employees’ choices. For many the economic reality of survival proved the most powerful stimulus. Had the union and the federal government been successful in forcing compliance on the Tupelo industrials, many more women would have joined the union to secure economic benefits. The inability of these institutions to overcome the hegemony of local leaders forced the majority of workers to accept the status quo. People living at the margin of economic viability make pragmatic choices and show less concern for community-altering ideologies.
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APPENDIX
“Part of the force at Tupelo (Miss.) Cotton Mills. All work. Smallest ones not in photo. Among youngest here are: Coleman Miller, has been working one year, cannot write name, said twelve years old but doesn't appear to be. Zamie Scott, one year working. Guy Sanders, and Luceon Kendreck.” Location: Tupelo, Mississippi. Date Created/Published: 1911 May. LOC original medium: 1 photographic print. Child labor photo by Lewis Wickes Hine.*

“Sula Bedford, nine years old. Lives in Tupelo, Miss. Mother said, "Just as soon as she's 12, her father wants her to learn to weave. She could spin now, (heaps of 'em smaller'n she is does) but he can't earn 'nuff spinnin'," Location: Tupelo, Mississippi. Date Created/Published: 1911 May. LOC original medium: 1 photographic print. Child labor pic by Lewis Wickes Hine.”

“Deserted mill home, Tupelo Miss. Many like this one in Tupelo.” Tupelo, Mississippi. Date Created/Published: 1911 May. LOC original medium: 1 photographic print. Photos of child labor by Lewis Wickes Hine.”

* http://www.lewishinephotographs.com/content/sula-bedford-nine-years-old-lives-tupelo-miss
** http://www.lewishinephotographs.com/content/deserted-mill-home-tupelo-miss-many-one-tupelo-tupelo-mississippi
Carl Harden, doffer in Tupelo (Miss.) Cotton Mills. Said he was fourteen, but I doubt it. Couldn't write his own name. Been working in different mills about one year. Location: Tupelo, Mississippi. Date Created/Published: 1911 May. LOC original medium: 1 photographic print. Child labor pic by Lewis Hine.

“These boys help in Tupelo (Miss.) Cotton Mills.” Location: Tupelo, Mississippi. Date Created/Published: 1911 May. LOC original medium: 1 photographic print. Child labor photo by Lewis Hine.

* [http://www.lewishinephotographs.com/content/carl-harden-doffer-tupelo-miss-cotton-mills-said-he-was-fourteen-i-doubt-it-couldnt-write-hi](http://www.lewishinephotographs.com/content/carl-harden-doffer-tupelo-miss-cotton-mills-said-he-was-fourteen-i-doubt-it-couldnt-write-hi)
[http://www.lewishinephotographs.com/content/these-boys-help-tupelo-miss-cotton-mills-location-tupelo-mississippi](http://www.lewishinephotographs.com/content/these-boys-help-tupelo-miss-cotton-mills-location-tupelo-mississippi)
“Inez Johnson (9 years old) and Lily, her cousin (7 years old). Both were helping Mrs. Johnson, a spooler in Tupelo (Miss.) Cotton Mills. Inez said she works regularly.” Location: Tupelo, Mississippi. Date Created/Published: 1911 May. LOC original medium: 1 photographic print. Pic of child labor by Lewis Wickes Hine.

Date Created/Published: 1911 May. LOC original medium: 1 photographic print. Photos of child labor by Lewis Wickes Hine.

* http://www.lewishinephotographs.com/content/inez-johnson-9-years-old-and-lily-her-cousin-7-years-old-both-were-helping-mrs-johnson-spool
** http://www.lewishinephotographs.com/content/inez-johnson-nine-years-old-and-lily-her-cousin-seven-years-old-both-were-helping-mrs-johnso
“Doffer boys going to dinner.” Tupelo (Miss.) Cotton Mills. Location: Tupelo, Mississippi. Date Created/Published: 1911 May. LOC original medium: 1 photographic print. Pic of child labor by Lewis Wickes Hine.

“Father taking it easy at home while his two girls work in the cotton mill.” Location: Tupelo, Mississippi. Date Created/Published: 1911 May. LOC original medium: 1 photographic print. Picture of child labor by Lewis Hine.

* http://www.lewishinephotographs.com/content/doffer-boys-going-dinner-tupelo-miss-cotton-mills-location-tupelo-mississippi

** http://www.lewishinephotographs.com/content/father-taking-it-easy-home-while-his-two-girls-work-cotton-mill-location-tupelo-mississippi
VITA

Wendy D. Smith

EDUCATION

Itawamba Community College, 1995-1998
BA, Classical Civilizations, University of Mississippi, 2000 *Summa Cum Laude*
MA, Classical Civilizations, University of Mississippi, May 2002
BA, History, University of Mississippi, May 2003 *Summa Cum Laude*
MA, History, University of Mississippi, May 2005

PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

Blackboard Adaptive Release, Itawamba Community College, Tupelo, MS Spring 2012
Blackboard Turnitin 2 Workshop, Itawamba Community College, Tupelo, MS Spring 2011
Blackboard 9.1 Workshop, Itawamba Community College, Tupelo, MS Fall 2010
Blackboard Wimba Pronto Workshop, Itawamba Community College, Tupelo, MS Fall 2010
Blackboard Early Warning System Workshop, Itawamba Community College, Tupelo, MS Fall 2010
Blackboard Grade Center Workshop, Itawamba Community College, Tupelo, MS Spring 2010
Turnitin Workshop, Itawamba Community College, Tupelo, MS Fall 2009
Blackboard 9.0 Workshop, Itawamba Community College Tupelo, MS Spring 2009
Blackboard Training Seminar, Itawamba Community College, Tupelo, MS Fall 2007
Advanced Oral History Summer Institute, University of California, Berkeley 2005
American School of Classical Studies, Athens, Summer 2001
Archaeological Field Session, University of Arkansas, Summer 1999

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Instructor, History Dept., University of Mississippi, summer 2008 - 2012
Adjunct, Online Instructor, Social Sciences, Itawamba Community College 2007-2012
Teaching Assistant, History Dept., University of Mississippi, 2003-2008
Assistant Director, North Mississippi Women’s History Project, 2005-2006
Website Development assistant, North Mississippi Women’s History Project, 2006
Research Assistant, History Dept., University of Mississippi, 2004-2006
Teacher, Summer School, Lafayette High School, June 2003
Instructor, Classics Dept., University of Mississippi, 2001-2002

AWARDS AND HONORS

Research Fellowship, Graduate School UM, Fall 2008
Summer Research Assistantship, Graduate School UM 2001
Graduate Honors Fellowship, Graduate School UM 2000-2002
Lipsey Rubright Scholarship, Classics Dept., UM 2000-2002
Class Marshall, School of Liberal Arts, UM 2000
CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

“Makin’ Do: Mississippi Women’s Voices from Depression-Era America,” Reading Women Back Into History, The Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies “30 Years and Forward,” University, MS, March 2011

“. . . And Cut! What Comes after the Interviews,” Oral History Association 42nd Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, PN, October 2008


