

The South Carolina Cotton Mill—A Manufacturer's View

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Cotton manufacturing began in South Carolina before the Revolution, but slavery prevented its growth, promoting agriculture to the neglect of all other industrial pursuits. Rightly to place the cotton mill of today as a social and economical factor, its surroundings and antecedents must be understood.

Few who have not suffered in the South know the depths of poverty and ignorance to which the masses of South Carolina, who constitute the cotton mill operatives, were reduced at the close of the "Reconstruction" period.* At the breaking out of the Civil War in 1860, South Carolina was third among the States in per capita wealth, and expended that year for education approximately \$700,000, an amount exceeded by few. When the State brought to a successful close her desperate struggle against the so-called "Reconstruction Forces" for the preservation of civilization itself, she had lost during the sixteen years since the commencement of the Civil War more than seventy-five per cent. of her property, a large proportion of her best citizens, and nearly all means of education. The last call for troops, February, 1865, took into the field every white male from sixteen to sixty years of age, so that while the States of the North, East, and West had for the most part suffered uninterrupted prosperity, South Carolina in 1876 domiciled her surviving citizens among graves and the ruin of her former civilization. Was it any wonder that the United States Census of 1880 records South Carolina's illiteracy (white and colored) at 55.4 per cent.?

Under new and tolerable political conditions, but with resources and capital almost exhausted, and without trained manufacturers or operatives, the South Carolina survivors resumed manufacturing, urged forward by necessity and the old Southern spirit to a successful issue; and in four years they had the new movement

*The twelve years during which the negroes, led by white adventurers, ruled the State.

well under way. Climatic reasons located the mills almost entirely in the western half of the State, but Charleston furnished capital and several prominent presidents and directors; while the far-seeing business methods and friendliness of New England cotton machinery manufacturers and New York sales agents provided what capital was necessary from without the State.

In 1880 South Carolina had eighteen mills with less than 2,000 looms, which were wonderfully increased by 1908 to over 150 mills, with approximately 93,000 looms; and the world was taking note that from insignificance in cotton manufacturing, South Carolina was ranking second in the United States, with mills costing over \$100,000,000, of which the citizens owned seventy-five per cent., and with a mill village population exceeding 150,000 persons.

The mill movement in South Carolina found several men waiting for each one man's job, no market for land anywhere, and starvation wages driving many from the State; the following figures and statements will give some indication of how it changed these conditions during the period 1876-1908. In 1876 there were about 1,000 cotton mill operatives with a yearly wage of about \$250,000. These were increased to nearly 50,000 operatives, with a wage approximately \$12,000,000. In 1876 the average day wage of the operative for thirteen hours was less than 60 cents. This was gradually increased to an average day wage of \$1.10 for ten hours. During this period one-fifth of the white population of the State were taken from the farms to the mills, and thereby changed from producers to consumers of farm products.*

By 1907 the mills purchased cotton to an amount exceeding \$34,000,000, equivalent to eighty per cent. of the State's cotton production. It was largely their influence on conditions in the State which enlarged the cotton crop from approximately 200,000 bales in 1870 to over 800,000 in 1900, and during the same period doubled the corn and rice crops, increased the hay crop twenty times, and the tobacco crop 570 times, producing agricultural prosperity for the first time since the war. By 1908 the pay rolls of the mills approximated \$12,000,000 per annum, and

*Some of this 150,000 people were attracted by South Carolina from the mountain regions of adjoining States.

their dividends approximated \$3,500,000, which rapidly built up the towns adjacent to the mills with their churches and institutions of learning.

During this period good new houses, with from four to six rooms, were built for the operatives (one-fifth of the total white population) in mill villages adjacent to the best towns of the State, and as this population has been drawn in large part from remote scattered homes inaccessible to civilizing influences, these people were profoundly influenced for good economically, religiously, and socially. The surplus population removed from the small farms and outlying districts was mostly the inefficient and uneducated portion, and this whole body of raw recruits was quickly transformed into a trained and disciplined army of well-to-do wealth producers, which is unconsciously using the present mill as a stepping stone to higher opportunities.

The immense amount of freight afforded by the mills and their large financial dealings have built up the railroads and banks. All these and other lesser causes have raised the general labor wage in South Carolina, including that on the farm, to approximate that of the prosperous sections of our country.

A visit to an average mill and then to typical places from which its operatives came, including the barren sandhills and isolated mountain coves, would give most persons an entirely different understanding of the cotton mill's influence. Some large families who come to the mill have lived in cabins, which, with their surroundings, can be described as follows: One small room with a door, and possibly one window, both of which are kept closed during the winter and every night; an open fireplace for heat and cooking; a frying pan, coffee pot, and Dutch oven for cooking utensils; and for furniture, rough beds, chairs and a table. Not a book is in the house or even a newspaper, and the whole family uses tobacco and perhaps whiskey; ambition there is none, and only a bare subsistence is sought. From lack of occupation and mental interest the family spends a considerable part of its life in this room; the nearest neighbor is perhaps several miles distant, and the church and school during the short periods they are open are so remote as to be practically inaccessible. These conditions lead to dire poverty and disease, in extreme cases even causing clay eating.

Such a family brings all its belongings in one wagon with its members to the mill, and they often have to obtain a cash advance with which to purchase food upon their arrival, and sometimes with which to pay for their transportation to the mill. Changing to a mill and its village, with regular wages, intelligent interests, and contact with civilization, is a wonderful uplift for these people.

The class just described is the extreme, yet many such come to each mill, and there are all degrees between this and the small best class of mill comers.

An average observer, unconsciously comparing his family's occupations and home with those of South Carolina mill operatives, is really making a partial and misleading comparison. He should also contrast the past and present conditions of the operatives; and, if he does so, while he may still call attention to the mill's remediable defects, truthfulness will force him to give it credit for the great good it has done and is doing.

A factory village near a town is in a wholesome "lime light," and the living condition of its people can be easily observed, a thing impossible in their former isolated homes. Till causes have been studied, the conclusion is unwarranted that the evils observed are factory made. It is not denied that South Carolina mill managements who employ people of their own stock, and not infrequently kinsfolk of the oldest families, should follow the best twentieth century mill practices, and even lead in raising the working and living conditions of their operatives as far as is possible without jeopardizing or crippling their business, but blame not founded on fact delays improvement. And in South Carolina any statement assuming that operatives are injured by coming to the mill immediately loses force with the mill managements and the public, for they know the contrary to be true.

This new industry was not created at the expense of any values or of any other industry, but it is an embodied spirit of prosperity come to dwell in the State with gifts for all. Its achievements are those of a business effort, for cotton manufacturing in South Carolina has no claim to other purpose. But judged by the importance of its net results to the State, it will bear a favorable comparison even with the State's educational or philanthropic movements in their own field during the same period. Here is a

splendid opportunity for critics of South Carolina mills to furnish a statement concerning some other movement having their approval for comparison with the record of the mills, which in the magnitude of constructive work accomplished is phenomenal. Critics are usually ignorant of the magnificent scope of this movement, uplifting as it does a whole State, and occupy themselves with one or two of its details, which, however important, should not cause one to lose sight of the greater in the less.

Night labor in South Carolina cotton mills can be said to have nearly ceased, as there are only four of the smallest mills that continue this injurious practice.* Such child, married-woman, and night, labor as should not have existed in South Carolina were caused by extreme poverty and a lack of standards and traditions among the operatives, and are decreasing under more favorable conditions. It is not denied that at times such labor has been encouraged or winked at by some mill managements for their own profit, but a growing public opinion is constantly exercising greater influence in these matters. Already the percentage of women operatives in South Carolina is less than in Massachusetts; the United States Census of 1900 gives South Carolina a percentage of 37, and the Massachusetts State Bureau gives that State in 1906 a percentage of 43.

These people, even when extremely poor, are very independent in their attitude towards an employer, often too much so for their own good. Being familiar with mill and farm conditions, they do not hesitate when dissatisfied to move from mill to mill or back to farm work. This has been done frequently from mere restlessness, and is very annoying to the mills, but the ability to do so at any time with ease is a wholesome check on mill managements and has been of great benefit to the operative. Despite many statements to the contrary by uninformed persons,

*Persons unacquainted with factory hours are often misled by seeing mills illumined before or after daylight, thinking that this is all night labor, when it is not. A day shift works sixty hours per week, and operatives often prefer working eleven hours for five days and five hours on Saturday forenoon, so that they may have Saturday afternoon as well as Sunday free. This necessitates starting before daylight and closing after dark during the winter months, and in such cases the law allows this time to be made up, provided that under no circumstances a child below the age of twelve is worked later than 9 p. m.; and that not more than sixty hours of lost time are made up during any one year, and then only when such lost time has been caused by accident or other unavoidable cause.

they rarely permit their children to be abused by an overseer, and, being themselves untrained and undisciplined, as a rule badly spoil their children.

Mill departments pay for the same work the same wage to men, women, and children, though, until recently, the spinning department wages have not been on a parity with those of the other departments. It is difficult to compare the mill wages of Massachusetts and South Carolina, owing to different methods of paying, but wages in Massachusetts are only about ten to fifteen per cent. higher according to locality, and living expenses there are fully as much higher.

The mills of South Carolina as a whole are more modern than those of any New England State; they lead in improvement, and have the highest type of construction, equipments, and sanitary arrangements, including abundant lighting, high ceilings, forced ventilation, and heating. A publication by the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor in 1905 states:

“A large proportion of the mills (Southern) built and started between 1890 and 1900 are thoroughly up-to-date in all respects; in fact some improvements in mill construction are to be found in that section which are not yet introduced in the manufacturing regions of the North.”

“Nearly all the Southern mills are equipped with the Northrop loom, which is considered the most improved, and supplied with the latest inventions.”

Operatives work long hours indoors, which is not desirable, but the writer after inquiry has learned of no nervous, pulmonary, or other diseases caused by dust, or cotton particles, or other conditions peculiar to cotton manufacturing in the South. A careful record kept for over a year in his village has also failed to disclose any such complaints. When the people have not brought diseases to the mill they are healthy, and their physical condition is improved from various causes by the change.

Dr. C. W. Stiles, Chief of the Division of Zoölogy of the Public Health and Marine Hospital Service, Washington D. C., writes as follows:

“I described the unsanitary conditions under which the tenant whites of the rural districts were living and the vastly improved, though not perfect, sanitary conditions they enjoy when they

come to the cotton mills. I said that I looked upon the cotton mills as the greatest and almost the only real friends that the poor whites of the South have and that I could not concur in the popular condemnation to which the cotton mills are constantly subjected. I took the position that there is another side to the child-labor question, a side not generally understood; that I considered these children infinitely better off in the cotton mills than on the soil-polluted, disease-breeding, one-horse, privyless farms. This does not mean that I am an exponent of child-labor as an abstract proposition, but rather that I look upon child-labor in the South as the less of the two evils and, given the present medieval conditions existing on the one-horse tenant farms, I view child-labor as an actual blessing when compared with the child misery which is found more particularly in the sand lands and in the Appalachian region."

There are very few accidents in the mills, certainly no more than with an equal number of people on farms.* Lawyers are not scarce, and yet court records show very little mill accident indemnity litigation.†

Factory legislation has made good progress, and is well adapted to local conditions. It has refrained from inviting catastrophe through sumptuary or rashly experimental laws. The great social, religious, educational, and other changes taking place in the State require time for development and to be understood. Apart from all other considerations, laws much in advance of a strong public opinion are of little use, and experience and educational forces must precede wise and lasting legislation.

Legislation has gradually reduced mill hours to sixty per week; child labor under twelve years is forbidden; a Department of Commerce and Labor has been established with regular factory inspection and the collection of mill statistics; a State Board of Health is actively interested in the study and improvement of

*Photographs may not lie, but explanations of photographs do, when children made wretched outside of the factory, are photographed and called factory products; or when mills running sixty hours per week are photographed brilliantly lighted after dark as a proof that they run all night.

†The largest mill company in the State, the Pelzer Manufacturing Company, has had only one accident indemnity suit in its experience of thirty years. Its mill village population is 5,000. Its fiscal year, ending August 31, 1909, has the following record: 239 births, 19 deaths (12 of these infants).

mill conditions. Children under twelve without any other means of support, with a certificate to this effect, from a magistrate, are allowed to work, as are also during the summer those who have gone to school during the regular term and have a certificate from a public school teacher. These exceptions are subject to abuse, and the Governor and the Department of Commerce and Labor are making earnest efforts to see that the spirit of the law is complied with. However, the present development of the State, in the general opinion, makes these provisions advisable for the time being.

South Carolina is fortunate in having a legislature sound at the core, which does its own thinking, and is neither controlled by, or antagonistic to, corporations; such factory laws as it has passed are generally recognized as needed and of great benefit to the State. Additional general legislation affecting operatives will be constantly called for with the development of the State. Some measures urgently needed at present are: A general marriage license and registration law, as its absence promotes a disregard for this bond, and desertion of wives and families is too frequent in the State; a law raising the age at which persons can marry, for at present too many children do so; a law requiring the compulsory keeping of vital statistics, which are almost neglected in this State and are of the greatest importance; a general moderate compulsory education law, contemplating gradual but steady growth. South Carolina manufacturers are on record as not objecting to having the age limit for labor in this State raised to fourteen years, when a good compulsory education law is in effect. And, perhaps, the most important of all, there is needed an employee's accident indemnity law modeled on the German law, providing a fund for accidents made by compulsory contributions from corporations and employees, to be distributed by rule, and not, as at present, by litigation.

There is nothing in connection with manufacturing of more importance to the State than the mill's influence for good or evil on the one-fifth of the State's white children who are under its influence; for the State will have to reckon with these people in the future, and its welfare makes imperative the thorough and wise handling of this matter. It is an interesting fact that South Carolina mills are a most important factor in a rapid and com-

plex State-wide evolution now taking place, which constantly makes new requirements of mill managements themselves.

Here is where the manufacturer and the reformer sometimes part company; the former affirming that he has on the whole greatly benefited his operatives, including the children, and that he has therefore more than discharged his responsibility to the State, which should not interfere with his business by investigation and legislation. The latter, on the other hand, does not concern himself with a past condition, but with present and future conditions, and asserts that all remediable evils should be rectified progressively as soon as improving circumstances will permit.

It is undeniable that operatives who get their entire support from a manufacturer, and live in his houses, can be greatly influenced by him for good or evil, and responsibility always accompanies the power of such an employer. Every man knows this to be true. However, what is needed instead of the cheap criticism of the manufacturer which one often hears, is an accurate knowledge of mill and mill-village conditions and influences as they really exist, and an intelligent discussion of these by the public at large; for the manufacturer is not alone responsible for their wise settlement.

As it is, some so-called reformers have spread abroad many misstatements, and there has been little expert study of the situation. Publications of the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, Commerce and Industries, show that from 1870 to 1905 the percentage of operatives under sixteen, compared with the total number of all operatives in the cotton mills of the State, instead of increasing as is often stated, actually decreased from 29 per cent. to 23.7 per cent. In 1909 a careful count by State officials of children under fourteen years of age showed 5,019 such children. Of these 1,148 were under twelve years, as follows: 596 were children of totally disabled parents, and 552 had school certificates and only worked for the summer months during school vacations. The conditions under which these children worked have also been grossly misrepresented.

Passing over what the mill has done for a child in moving it with the entire family many miles from hopeless isolation and poverty into close touch with the best civilization of the State,

let us consider what educational influences a child, as now found in a mill village, is most in need of. Considering his antecedents and environment, should they not include his family and neighbors, and could these be given other than an industrial education? Should this not be accompanied by discipline, stimulating examples, and immediate and adequate reward of effort in money and promotion? This is what the mill furnishes; and a combination of an ordinary day school for the child and of night classes for adults, with the industrial training alternating with the other, makes a practical self-supporting system of education of much merit.

The child is thus surrounded by a genuine atmosphere of work with the economic forces at play. He acquires the habits of industry and with them a desire for the good things of life which he sees others securing by their own exertions. The mill has set such a child's feet on the ladder of a rapid, beneficial, evolution, and results show that in most cases he climbs; for many mill operatives of South Carolina with unpromising antecedents are now earning a wage nearly equal to that of store clerks and school teachers who had many advantages at the start.*

The fact is that many operatives will gradually climb out of and above the mills into other employments, unless fabrics are constantly improving and the mills can thereby continue to offer a higher and higher grade of work. Indications are not lacking that, in spite of the latest machinery and increasing efficiency, the labor demand of the State may before long outstrip its supply, and that South Carolina, with its great diversity of natural resources and its hostility to inferior foreign immigrants, may have high priced instead of cheap labor. Already, with its developing labor conditions, South Carolina's dependence for future extensive expansion in cotton manufacturing is in advanced business methods and a constant progress in the fineness and the quality of the goods manufactured.

*The average wage of store clerks in South Carolina is for men \$50 per month, for women \$35; and that of teachers, men and women, for actual time employed is about \$42 per month. The average mill operative (including men, women and children) now makes \$28 per month, and the best make about \$45.