



POE COMMUNITY

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POE MILL AND ITS VILLAGE

by Judith Bainbridge

"Governor's Hill" on the Buncombe Road lay south of former Governor Benjamin Perry's summer home, Sans Souci. When Francis Winslow Poe purchased the sixty-acre knoll immediately outside Greenville in 1895, he was buying, for \$10,000, one of the most desirable industrial sites adjacent to the city's limits. The main line of the Southern Railroad ran conveniently nearby; the well-traveled Buncombe Road, for nearly a hundred years Greenville's route to the mountains, bordered the property; the White Oak branch of the Reedy River flowed just beyond the railroad tracks. Established to manufacture fine quality goods, Poe Mill was regarded as a "foolish experiment" by some, but it soon proved to be one of the most profitable mills in the South.

F.W. Poe was the oldest of three brothers who were long-time Greenville merchants. He had been the traveling Southern representative for a New York clothing company when he resigned in 1890 and began F.W. Poe & Co., a dry goods store, at the corner of Main and McBee Streets in Greenville. His friends and associates in the North and in Charleston encouraged him to begin a textile mill and provided much of the early capital for the "manufacturing company" he announced in January 1894. The Board of Directors of the F.W. Poe Manufacturing Company consisted of Poe, who served as president and treasurer, W.C. Beacham, the secretary; Frank Hammond, N.C. Poe, Lewis Parker, W.M. Hagood, E.T. Smith, and J.B.E. Sloan.

The site for Poe Mill and its surrounding village was laid out by twenty-five-year-old J.E. Serrine, his first assignment for Lockwood, Greene and Company, of Providence, R.I., an architectural and engineering firm which had built many New England mills. (They charged \$1800 plus ten cents a spindle to design textile mills; the cost for Poe was \$2800). The substantial 432,000-square-foot brick mill was "built for posterity" by local contractor Jacob O. Cagle, with decking, sub-flooring, and a layer of handsome hard-wood covering each of its four floors, and with fourteen-foot ceilings, large windows, and a capacity of 10,000 spindles. It had a work force of 400 "operatives." Steam powered and equipped with electric lights, from the time of its first production in March 1896, F.W. Poe Manufacturing Company employed both day and night shifts of workers who labored under ceiling humidifiers, which kept the atmosphere damp enough to handle the fibers.

The men, women, and children (no "infants" were employed, but seven- and eight-year-olds sometimes helped older brothers and sisters, anticipating the time when they were twelve and could be regularly employed) who worked in the mill lived "in rows of plain but neat buildings, arranged on a town plan of their own with the boundary fence just over against the Greenville limits." Laid out in a grid, the new mill village attracted farm families from the Carolinas and Tennessee mountains, where, as operative Martin Lowe put it, "Times was hard." Mill work allowed families to stay together and work together, and the many duplex houses provided by the mill were popular with the extended families who arrived together. None of the early mill houses had indoor plumbing (privies were built along the back lines of lots); coal was provided by the mill at a discount to heat the tall four- or six-room "saltbox-style" dwellings reminiscent of Massachusetts mill villages; wood was used for cooking. There was no insulation in the mill houses, and villagers resorted to tacking newspapers to walls to avoid winter drafts and summer heat.

Many, perhaps most, of the "operatives" (the term used by management for at least thirty years) were farm people; they wanted and needed to keep their agricultural roots. As a result, the mill provided garden plots, a cow pasture, and a hog pen for their use. Curtis Enlow, for example, conducted a small scale farm within sight of the mill, growing corn and potatoes, and always had a cow and two Berkshire hogs, "one for meat and one for lard." The Hargett family had a large garden, but Mr. Hargett couldn't afford a mule for plowing, so he harnessed himself and had his children guide the plow. From the hives on his property, he supplied the village with honey. Some operatives even returned to their former homes in the summer; in 1900, for example, the Greenville *Observer*, published by owners for workers, noted that A.W. Cathey of Poe Mill had "moved to Jackson County, N.C. last week. He goes to take a rest and engage in truck farming. He expects to return here in the fall."

The large company store, built before 1900, provided staples and did a "rushing" business in sugar, flour, and coffee, as well as clothing and furniture. The store, which also housed the mill's office, was a natural center of community life before the church and school were built, for the Poe Mill village was isolated from the activity of Greenville's busy Main Street. That isolation lessened in January 1901, when Greenville's first electric trolley began operation.

Seven miles of track were laid, linking Poe Mill to Main Street and then extending out Pendleton Street to a terminus at the new Brandon Mill. Another line followed Augusta Street to the corner of Grove Road. The Greenville Traction Company had purchased four "bright beige" open-air trolleys, trimmed in brown, to run at 15 minute intervals and provide inexpensive public transportation to the city's rapidly expanding suburbs. When the trolley made its first run, Greenville's lined the route from Broad Street to Poe Mill, but the trolley slowed to a stop several yards from the terminus at the company store. The track was covered by an inch of dirt. Removing their derby hats and dark coats, the mayor, the traction company's chief engineer, and the chief of police got out and shoveled the dirt away. The trolley made it safely to its final stop, to the general applause of Poe workers.

In 1897 Poe Mill added 300 workers and 5,000 additional spindles, and in 1900 expanded again. Lockwood Greene designed both additions at the rear (toward Hammett Street) of the original building, almost doubling its size. By 1911, Poe Manufacturing Company had 70,352 spindles, 1,700 looms, employed 800 workers, and was capitalized at one million dollars. In addition to the 650' x 104' main building, with its large central smoke stack, the mill included warehouses fronting on Buncombe Road, a brick waste house, a reservoir, and a two-story "opening room." It produced more than four million pounds of "one unvarying quality of brown sheeting" annually.



In the decade or so that followed the mill's opening, its village expanded dramatically, with added facilities to make life more attractive to the workers it sought to recruit. In 1902, Edwards and Walter of Columbia, soon to be the most important school architects in the state, designed both a graded school and a "union" church (one used on alternate Sundays by different denominations) for the Poe village. The school, costing \$6,000, was constructed by the company, which also paid the salaries of its four teachers. The principal, Miss Ellen Perry, later became one of the most beloved librarians in the Greenville Library System. The handsome non-denominational church, located at the corner of Second and C Streets, cost \$8,000. A thousand dollars for its construction came from members' contributions, but the remainder and a portion of the minister's salary as well as his home were supplied by the mill. Baptists, who had been meeting at a house on First Avenue for several years, later built their own church, and the Methodists took over the "union" church. By 1907, mill management had developed a "society hall," where Masons and other community groups could meet on the second floor above the mill store, and established a public library and auditorium in the school building. The Greenville *Observer* approvingly quoted one operative who said, "I'd as soon work in the Poe Mill as any mill around here. The work runs as easy, the superintendent is just as kind, the overseers as forbearing, the President and Mr. Maxwell as courteous and polite as at any mill I have worked at."

While Poe Mill, American Spinning Company, and Mills Mill (all built in 1895) added the "whirl of machinery" to Greenville in the late 1890s, life in the villages was not always pleasant. Salaries were low and hours long — newly employed men made ten cents an hour for a sixty hour work week in 1910; women and children made less. Mills were subject to economic cycles and sudden depressions. The stock market panic of 1907 led some Northern firms to cancel orders and to the firing of Southern mill workers. At Poe, however, when the Northern mercantile house of

Chutt and Peabody tried to cancel a large order, Frank Poe refused. "Nothing doing," he is reported to have said. "I must protect my own by refusing to cancel a bona fide order." His refusal gained national attention.

Mostly, however, life in the Poe community followed a local and regular routine. Days were regulated by the mill whistle: a "wake up" blast at 5:30 a.m., a five-minute blare between 5:55 and 6:00, dinnertime at noon, return to work at one, and shift's end at 6 p.m. The whistle was also used as a fire alarm, with a code to indicate whether the fire was in the mill or the village. The Poe Mill whistle was so loud, Agnes Norris Vaughn recalls, that it could be heard at her home on Paris Mountain Road. Because of the noise made by the machines, workers inside the mills could not hear the whistle, so lights flashed to indicate starting and stopping times.

Each season brought its special activities. In the spring, workers eagerly awaited the beginning of the baseball season and Saturday afternoon games with other "Textile Crescent" teams; they planted their gardens; "aired out" their houses; gave unlucky children doses of tonic and castor oil. In summer, peddlers selling fruits and berries from the surrounding countryside plodded through the cinder-paved streets (the coal which powered the mill left a residue of cinders which were laid down to make the red mud streets more navigable, but the cinder-paved roads led to painful skinned knees and dirty children), and farmers-turned-mill-workers cultivated their gardens. In September, children returned to school, often with "store-bought" new clothes. In November, Textile Basketball League play began, introduced by Pete Hollis at the Monaghan Mill in 1905. Thanksgiving and Christmas, the year's only holidays, were eagerly awaited. After Christmas, with bicycles and coasters bought on credit (\$1.00 down, and a dollar a month until summer), families retreated indoors and social life focused around the churches and their annual revivals.

By the mid 1920s, "mill hill" life at Poe included a full-time athletic director and a baseball field, park and swimming pool on mill property across

the Buncombe Road, and a school music supervisor, Elizabeth Bell, who lived at the community house and directed the popular Poe Harmonica Band. Workers in these years could look forward to a vacation during the first week of July, when mills throughout the South shut down for maintenance and workers were given an annual holiday. (Independence Day was not celebrated in the South until after World War I, when memories of the Civil War had dimmed and patriotism had been rekindled.) Children had the opportunity to go on to Parker High School, and a few highly motivated ones, like Nigel League, whose father was a supervisor, might even go on to college.

But difficult times lay ahead. F.W. Poe died in 1926, and his brother, Nelson Poe, replaced him as president. Southern mills, Poe among them, instituted the "stretch-out" in the late 1920s, forcing fewer workers to work more looms in order to boost falling profits. Many mill hands felt that the new methods of industrial engineering were inhumane, and early in 1929, even before the stock market crash, strikes and rumors of strikes brought unrest to mill villages and difficult times to management and workers alike. Evidently Preacher Anderson at Poe Baptist sided with the workers; management, which paid his salary, locked him out of his church. He preached instead from the porch of his home, but his house, too, was supplied by the mill, and he was evicted and a new minister, who preached a message more favorable to owners, was hired in his place.

In the 1930s, hours of employment were cut to fifty-five; South Carolina passed a child labor law; and salaries fell as America felt the full force of economic crisis. The General Textile Strike of 1934 did not close Poe, but National Guard troops with machine guns were stationed on the rooftop to protect the property from the "Flying Squadrons" of United Textile Workers who attempted to shut the mill down. Married women were laid off, as the mill attempted to maintain jobs for heads of households. Workers were paid in chits that could be used only at the mill store to buy the necessities of life. Yet even in the thirties the Poe Mill store provided other workers with reasonably priced groceries (a 1934 study by the state revealed that its prices were only slightly higher than chain stores) and even the Poe family regularly bought their meat at its counters.

But in spite of increasingly difficult times, mill residents managed some pleasures. The great event of the year was the Thanksgiving football game between Parker and Greenville High Schools; a week later, everyone lined the streets of Greenville for the annual Christmas parade, attended in 1935 by 65,000 people. Early in March, both young and old crowded into Textile Hall for the Textile Basketball League Tournament. (Hooky-playing students brought a sandwich for lunch and spend the day watching games.) Every evening families gathered around their radios listening to "Amos and Andy," "Jack Benny," and especially the new "country music," songs which reflected both their mountain heritage and their feelings. Gladys Greer, who moved into Poe Village in 1934, remembers the difficult times — she felt fortunate to earn \$9.90 for a fifty-hour week — but also the convenience of having a church and school within walking distance and easy access by bus and trolley (no one had cars) to "uptown" Greenville. Conditions worsened for the mill in 1936; Poe

Manufacturing Company went into receivership and Earle Stall, who had been chief textile engineer with J.E. Serrine and Company and later worked for selling agents Woodward and Baldwin, was appointed president. At about the same time he became responsible for American Spinning Company. Members of the Poe family remained on the board of directors, but management changed and the mill once more became profitable.

During World War II, when Poe produced duck cloth used for tents by the armed forces, hours were lengthened and pay increased to \$12 or \$13 a week for the women who replaced the men who enlisted or were drafted. (At the same time, most Greenville teachers made \$20 to \$24 a week.) The mill, now powered by electricity, employed three shifts, but air conditioning was far in the future, and in the summer the heat and humidity within the plant were enervating. After the war, production shifted to tobacco cloth.

In 1947, the mill and 238 village houses were sold to Ely and Walker, a St. Louis mercantile firm with brokerage offices in New York. (According to Carter Poe, the Walker in the company's name was George Herbert Walker Bush's maternal grandfather.) The selling price was \$5,725,600. Three years later, Ely and Walker sold off the houses in the mill village, giving workers the opportunity to be homeowners, but also ridding themselves of the expense of upkeep, street repair, security, and recreation. Gladys Greer remembers going to the school house after work one evening in September 1950 with a small group of other workers; title papers had been prepared. She signed her name, and the home on "B" Street, where she had lived for sixteen years, was hers.

New technology and new products came to Poe after the war. By 1955, when Ely and Walker sold the mill to Burlington Industries, Poe Workers were manufacturing polyester-combed cotton fabrics for the apparel market, including voiles, broadcloth, sateen, oxford cloth, and poplin. At the time of the sale to the textile giant, the board consisted of Summerfield Baldwin, Jr., of Baltimore; B.F. Hagood of Easley; and Greenville's Sidney Bruce, N.C. Poe, Jr., Carter Poe, F.W. Symmes, and E.R. Stall. Burlington operated Poe Mill successfully until the early seventies, when lessened demand and lower-cost foreign competition made the seventy-five-year old building inefficient and costly to operate. When the company announced that it would close the mill in May 1977, seven hundred workers were employed and its annual payroll was seven million dollars. The Poe "mill hill" was no longer a desirable place to live; workers with automobiles had long since moved away, and the sense of community, of shared attitudes and experiences, had vanished.

In the years that followed, conditions did not improve. But in 1990, the Greenville County Redevelopment Authority targeted the Poe community for major improvements and, to date, have spent \$2,860,000.

The agency found a transient community with 82 percent of its houses deteriorated and only 35 percent with central heat. Between 1990 and 1993, 75 percent of the homes in Poe Community were brought up to code. Old houses now gleam with new siding outside and new fixtures inside. Also, all streets were upgraded and a new underground drainage system was installed throughout the neighborhood. The Cities and Schools program and new recreational services were offered to residents and a neighborhood organization was formed. Lastly, once vacant lots now reflect new houses affordable for residents, built by the Neighborhood Housing Corporation, Inc., a non-profit organization created by GCRA.

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Greenville County Redevelopment Authority Board Members During 1990 Poe Mill Renovations

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Greenville County Redevelopment Authority

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