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Bill Easterling

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## Mill Villages

### *A Memoir of the Dallas Mill village*

Bill Easterling

In their absence, the principal buildings of my boyhood, the Dallas Mill and Rison School, stand out like a mole on the face of a pretty girl.

What happened to them was tragic.

The school where so many children of mill workers learned their ABCs was torn down to make room for an interstate highway spur; not even the stately old oak trees, which provided shade for many a sack lunch at noon were spared.

The mill became a shoe factory before it became a derelict, and then one night it became a heap of bricks when a raging fire burned it to the ground. Now most of the bricks are gone. I went and got one myself before the pile was depleted. Those that remain are consigned to memory and covered by weeds, unseen by occupants of cars and trucks rushing past on I-565.

I wasn't born in the Dallas Mill village, but I lived there, played there, and grew to young manhood there in a time when being called a "lint head" was a salute rather than an insult. Well, a salute to those living on streets named for such prominent Huntsvillians as Pratt, O'Shaughnessy, McCullough, Halsey, Stevens, and Humes. They were only names when I was a boy. Later I learned how the owners and stockholders of the Dallas Mill built houses for their workers to live in, formed the Rison School for their children to study in and opened a company store for all of the mill families to buy food and dry goods in.

Huntsville was a mill town from way back. Yards and yards of cloth spun on the looms of the Dallas, Lincoln, and Merrimack mills were shipped across the country. Each of the mills had its own village, and each village had its own special look and flavor. Dallas villages houses were one-story and wooden. Lincoln village looked like a fortress with its stucco houses.

Merrimack village houses were two-story and had colored roofs. There was a school in each village: Rison, Lincoln, and Joe Bradley. Each village had its own company store when the mills were at their height.

Many workers bought the village houses they lived in after the mills closed. Some of the original owners or their children or their children's children live in them now. I often drive down Humes Avenue just to make sure the house where we lived is still there.

Each of the mill villages of Huntsville should be registered as historical districts and properly recognized for the roles they played in the story of this town. But, in fact, not much is left nationwide in the way of a remembrance to the textile industry. The display at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington is basic at best. At one point in America's past, textiles were as important to our economy as computers are today.

If I close my eyes and concentrate really hard, I can still smell the coal being burned in stoves up and down Dallas Avenue on cold winter days, and I can still hear the cheers on a hot summer day when a Dallas batter smacked a base hit against one of the other mill village baseball teams at Optimist Park.

If I turn my memory loose, I can still see Cecil Fain, the great educator who taught dignity and discipline as the same package, strolling the halls at Rison School, principal's paddle in hand, and I can see tired workers leaving the Dallas Mill with lint in their hair headed for home at shift-changing time.

The mill workers lived simple but hard lives. As a community, they were good people. I feel privileged to have spent my formative years in the company of them and their children.

Author and *Huntsville Times* columnist Bill Easterling lived on Halsey Avenue and attended Rison School when he was a boy. He was graduated from Huntsville High School.