

Oral History Excerpts for Teaching about Rocky Mount Mills (RMM) & Surrounding Areas

The following interviews, conducted by [Community Histories Workshop](#), deal with various topics and themes that provide first-person accounts of the history of RMM, the Mill Village, and surrounding areas. Interviewees also address additional historical issues, such as segregation, civil rights, and more, all from a local perspective. The following is a list of particular excerpts (with start and stop times) that teachers might find useful in bringing in local voices into the classroom. CHW's entire collection of interviews and excerpts can be browsed [here](#).

Lesson plans integrating some of these excerpts can be accessed [here](#).

Name & Summary	Excerpts and Topics Covered	Web link
Floyd Philip Batchelor shares Rocky Mount Civil War history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0:48–3:13 – great-great grandfather worked at the Mill during the Civil War and father before WWII 8:30–13:00 – Civil War history 	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utJcGU5s0Ro&t=792s
Kermit Paris's family worked in RMM for 5 generations, starting with his grandfather, then his father as a 10 year old in 1910, and he himself starting as a 15 year old in 1942. Mr. Paris discusses his family, mill work, and life in the mill village.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0:21-6: 50 – family history in mill work; description of “doffing;” father dying in mill fire and impact on his family 12:39-15:13 – Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor; entered service in 1946 for 19 months; end of War 20:44-23:00 – “short time;” kindness of Battles, such as not shutting down during 30s/Depression & providing wood & coal to families; rent in mill village 24:28-25:00 – thoughts on the mill village now post-closing of RMM 25:01-26:40 – what they ate 27:39–28:55 – community life (how no one locked doors, what they did for fun) 	https://library.digitalnc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/avoralhist/id/459/rec/1
Timothy Lee Paris (son of Kermit Paris, above) discusses his family's history working in RMM, the death of his grandfather at the mill, and life in the mill village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0:32–2:50 – his great-great grandfather left the farm to come work in RMM in the 1890s, his grandfather began work in the mills as a 10 year old, and his father began work at the mills as a 15 year old in 1942 after his grandfather was electrocuted at work (this was required for his family to stay in the mill house) 15:10–16:55 –details of his grandfather's electrocution at RMM 6:45–7:56 – life in mill village 12:52–14:55 – additional details about mill village life and community, including the stores on back porches 	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xo-TrTldCMY

<p>Lo Bowen discusses the difficulty of the work at Rocky Mount Mills and her family's work history there. She started working at RMM in 1942 as a 15-year-old.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0:09–2:50 – strenuous nature of mill work; as a 15 year old, attending school then working until 11 PM; quit school in 11th grade for full-time mill work; father started at Mills as an 8 year-old & mother as a 10 year-old • 4:31–7:20 – various jobs at mill, one of which tore her finger off; paid by work accomplished rather than hourly • 7:45–9:02 – father, as an 8 year-old, made 5 cents a day in the mill; her grandparents had given up farming for mill work for the promise of making money • 35:11–36:14 – working at the Mill during the war; hard but enjoyable work; a lot of materials created for army; older men and youth made up most of workforce • 37:34–39:37 – closing of Mill over Christmas; employees weren't paid but were given a turkey; Mill retirement (father collected \$1.00 a year and mother \$.60 a year!); as a 16 year old, having lost her finger in a Mill accident, she received no monetary compensation or medical care • 1:00:18–1:01:37 – Mill Village community as a wonderful place to live; Mr. Battle as someone who looked after employees 	<p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyYBdTPtoh4</p>
<p>Jan Bowen (1 of 2) talks about her family members who worked in the mill & what her home and life was like growing up in the mill village.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:04 – 1:40 – family moved from a farm in Pender County (around 1919) to work in RMM for a “better life” when an agent visited to recruit them; her father was 12 when they moved & started work in the mill at 14 • 3:22–3:56 – father, born in 1908, started working in RMM at 14 years old; worked there over 50 years and received \$1 per year in retirement (retired in early 70s) • 5:00–7:00 – Jan discusses the community aspect of growing up in the mill village, which she describes as “perfect;” notes that she was not exposed to people beyond the mill village, however • 11:02–12:30 – description of her home in the mill village (2 bedrooms, 1 bath, no hot water, 1 closet) for 8 family members • 14:25–16:23 – discusses changes in Rocky Mount & how it didn't recover after Floyd, and her opinion of why the mill went down hill 	<p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPFn13LwGew</p>
<p>Jan Bowen (2 of 2) shares memories of her parents & more about the culture of the mill village.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3:31–4:22 – discusses the mill village as a community where family ties were strong, people visited on front porches, and everyone knew their neighbors • 5:52 – 7:00 – shares how the smell of the mill still today reminds her of her father • 12:57 – 14:18 – discusses what the family ate and how her mother was a wonderful cook whose pot was “never empty” for anyone who came to eat on Sundays • 15:20–16:40 – memories of how her mother washed clothes in a wash pot and with a scrubbing board 	<p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZauTA7Mk1vE</p>

<p>Allison Kea Sikes & Miriam Sykes Pridgen discuss their grandmother and life in the mill village</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 1:09–2:10 – growing up in the Depression years, their grandmother was married at age 13 and had 5 kids; she worked at RMM for 40 years and was an entrepreneur who sold bait ● 13:55–14:53 – life in the mill village as a “fun, safe time”; garden and fruit trees ● 19:04–20:14 – discuss impression of mill village by others outside the community as a place where poor people lived (“rat road” & “mill hill” were derogatory terms) ● 21:13–21:54 – discuss the encouragement provided to them 	<p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VO8cXDY_2Ok&t=62s</p>
<p>Reverend Tolokun Omokunde discusses various experiences in the 50s as an African American growing up during segregation in Rocky Mount, including the visit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1952.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 0:15 – 2:03/2:45 – 2:56 – Dr. King’s speech & how it gave the black community hope ● 11:51 – 12:30 – segregation of Braswell Library, where Dr. King’s speech was later found ● 15:41 – 16:02 – spit on at Ivory Room restaurant where he still can’t go today because of the association ● 16:38 – 18:18 – hopeful Rocky Mount “spirit;” claims that his community kept him from feeling he was “missing anything” ● 20:31 – 21:48 – separate & unequal, but teachers went overboard to assist students & ensure they knew black writers ● 21:48 – 24:29 – experiences with the KKK 	<p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1fb-wskVs&t=2724s</p> <p>EDITED:</p>
<p>Herbert Tillman discusses race in Rocky Mount, specifically segregation and integration, Dr. King’s speech in 1962 Rocky Mount and its impact, as well as his experiences working at Burlington Mills.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 25:15–38:25 – segregation & prejudice experienced when blacks stepped out of “color lines;” Dr. King’s 1962 visit, civil rights activity in Rocky Mount, & the risks of participating; experiences being called the “n-word,” including as a newly enlisted soldier ● 55:46–1:05:22 – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks at Booker T. Washington HS; why Dr. King came to Rocky Mount; the reaction of the crowd; the similarity to his March in Washington Speech; & the hope he gave blacks in Rocky Mount ● 1:05:23–1:06:25 – experiencing “white sympathy” for being a “poor project boy,” but not feeling that way ● 1:09:27–1:13:28 – what happened after the MLK speech & its influence on Rocky Mount; memory of MLK’s assassination; the difference in the 60s & today ● 1:13:44–1:21:35 - Rocky Mount’s lack of city officials in positions of power and unjust treatment on the job (such as his uncle, who was the first black policeman and was not allowed to arrest whites); experiences working at Burlington Mills, his role as becoming the first black weaver there, & how whites reacted negatively (going as far as sabotaging black workers’ machines) ● 1:23:00–1:28:11 - How Dr. King’s speech influenced him to “speak up and speak out;” how this gave him the courage to challenge the lack of black supervisors at Burlington Mills 	<p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6avq5tAzyg&t=9665s</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:52:48–1:55:37 – history of Rocky Mount during segregation; effects of integration (such as black principals made into assistants & the desire to tear Booker T. HS down); how the inspiration from Dr. King’s speech led to blacks getting more opportunities (i.e., black captain, police chiefs, & city council members) • 2:12:28–2:15:00 – impact of Greensboro’s Woolworth’s sit-in in Rocky Mount and how blacks pushed for integration • 2:41:03–2:41:46 – Tillman’s message to children regarding civil rights & the importance for them to remember those who paved the way 	
<p>Annette Tyson Xavier didn't work in the mill, but her parents and uncle did. She discusses memories of attending “Family Day” and her family’s experiences in mill work. She also talks about issues of race within the mill, what Rocky Mount was like when the mill shut down, and her hopes for the new renovation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2:01–4:43 – “Family Day” at Rocky Mount Mills (a segregated event) • 5:36–6:32 – no complaints about mill work, rather employees were just happy to have a job • 8:26–10:32 – the closing of the Mill as devastating; hope that Mill renovation will bring new jobs • 11:05– 12:45 – Mill was a way to provide and survive and should be appreciated for what it was; there were issues such as segregation & unequal treatment, but families could provide • 13:04 – 14:34 – sense of community and purpose among mill employees; important to show the “pride of the black community and not just the depression” • 14:47–15:19 – issues of race have gone backwards today 	<p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6OFGlBwSoQ</p>
<p>Helen Austin & Linda Daniels worked at Rocky Mount Mills during the 1970s through its closing. They discuss their love of working at the Mill due to the fellowship and community among the workers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:00 –2:10 – earned \$2.00 an hour in 1974; hard work but you could still get by; mill workers pulled together as a family • 7:52–9:00 – devastated over closing of the mill and the loss of the tight knit community 	<p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUI4V5Pptrs</p>

<p>Tommy Moss, former Rocky Mount Mills employee, on October 29, 2016. He talks about health and respiratory issues workers have faced in the mill, the close-knit mill village, and his childhood memories there.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0:51-1:42 – discusses his starting work in the mill as a junior in high school (1969) after his father died so that his family could remain in their mill house; as a senior, he went to school all day then worked from 3 – 11 PM; his father was a dolfer and he did roping • 4:49-5:37 – discusses the respiratory problems from mill work • 5:51-6:40 – discussed the close knit community of the mill village • 8:32-9:25 – discusses satisfaction with mill work and cost of rent 	<p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZ2UaHzcmiM</p>
<p>Closing Stories This 8 minute video takes a closer look at Rocky Mount Mills of the 20th century, from pre-integration to post-Civil Rights Movement, up through the closing of the Mills.</p>		<p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVtaCpH6Y5E</p>