

# The paternal nature of perks for mill workers

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■ Benefits included access to schools, dance hall.

In 1907, when a special census was taken, York County had 13 cotton mills with 2,760 employees. Highland Park and Manchester, both in Rock Hill, were the largest, followed by Clover Mills, Aragon in Rock Hill and Fort Mill



**Nearby history**

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Cotton Mill. The smallest was Tavora Mill in York with only 70 employees.

The term "welfare work" had only recently been coined. In 1907 the term was used to cover all employee benefits that were beyond cash wages. Using this definition, welfare work could and did include swimming pools, bowling alleys, kindergartens, school buildings, electricity, literacy classes, low rents on mill housing, baseball teams, band instruments, first aid rooms and health clinics.

The employer sometimes furnished everything needed to grow a garden. The seeds, tools, fertilizer and even a hired hand to break up the soil were all free. The Victoria Cotton Mills in Rock Hill owned a large cow barn and

stables. The company leased several good pastures and charged no rent to operatives who used them.

Victoria and Arcade Mills both boasted that more than 90% of the mill village families planted their own gardens. Mill operatives were, at most, only one generation away from rural environments.

Company housing accompanied every York County mill at the turn of the century. The houses were small, rented by the room. Col. Leroy Springs charged 20 cents a room for his Fort Mill houses.

Looking back, it is easy to conclude that the mill owners were, after all, smart enough to realize that contented employees were likely to work long hours and produce more. High production is the surest route to high profits.

And in paternal fashion, the owners selected particular benefits that their workers would enjoy. As a result, from mill village to mill village there was a great variety in the extra benefits.

A good example of mill welfare work can be found in the case of Neely Manufacturing Co. of York. The small mill opened in 1905 with \$60,000 capital stock and 70 employees, eight of whom were younger than 16. It was a yarn mill with 3,500 spindles; there were no looms. The mill consumed about 1,800 bales of cotton annually.

Maj. Walter B. Moore, president and manager of Neely, was a great believer in dance as exercise. In his early years with the company, Moore hired a dance hall in Yorkville and gave the employees a dance. Moore was so pleased with his workers' deportment and enjoyment that he converted an old farmhouse into a dance hall.

Moore told a Columbia newspaper reporter, "The operative has nothing in his work in the mill to require him to exercise his body, and I believe that dance is the thing to develop the operatives socially and physically."

A piano and a stage for amateur theater were at the center of the community hall, but it also had a well-stocked library, magazines, rooms for teaching sewing and cooking classes and a classroom for adults in night school. The night school had 40 or 50 regular pupils.

Like other York County mills, most of the cotton used at Neely Mill was bought from local farmers — even when it could be hauled in cheaper from elsewhere. Local farmers also furnished the mill houses with a variety of farm products. Eggs, butter, milk, live chickens, sausage, livermush and apples were peddled up and down the mill streets. Stove wood from the country was preferred over the store-bought coal. Thus mill wages flowed over the countryside.

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