

Introduction, Background, and Method

Donna O'Kelly is my maternal grandmother. When deciding on who was best to interview I knew that either one of my remaining grandparents would be great candidates. I finally chose to interview my grandmother since I had previously not heard any stories from her childhood. Upon finding out that she had grown up in a mill village I instantly wanted to know more. Although I seriously considered interviewing my paternal grandfather after finding that he as well grew up in a mill village, I felt that trying to conduct two interviews and make connections would prove to be a project for a more detailed analysis. I do however plan at a later date to interview my grandfather in order to make sure that many of his stories can be passed on.

My grandmother is from Rockmart, Georgia and was born in 1948 while segregation was prevalent. She grew up in a home under her two parents who both worked in a mill village and her father was also a pastor. The interview was conducted in my grandmother's home where I felt she would feel most comfortable. She can be seen sitting on her couch and her dog, PJ, makes her presence known early on in the interview joining my grandmother on the couch.

Results

Donna speaks of Christmas time in the mill village she grew up in and details her experiences. She explains that children who were thirteen and under would receive a ticket if their parent worked for the mill. This ticket she says could be used to make a selection for any toy that the child wanted. She details how before Christmas the children would ride out to a union hall that would be lined with gifts. Donna speaks of how one year she chose a cowboy hat, guns and holster because that was the gift she desired to have. She also mentions how after choosing their main gift the children would go to a Christmas tree and that sometimes a Santa would be there. At this point the children would be given a brown bag filled with fruit and candy.

She also details what Christmas was like at home, discussing how toys were limited with each of the children possibly receiving one item they asked for and some smaller items (9.08-10.40).

Literature Review Analysis/Interpretation

Ron Rash's *Serena*, displays a scene in which Christmas time is detailed in a mill village. The scene opens by mentioning how the previous Christmas gifts for the workers had been suggested and that this year one of the men in charge, Campbell, takes it upon himself to purchase gifts for the workers and their families. The gifts it is explained were purchased from a variety of places with many different tastes in mind. The workers with children are allowed to enter the area with gifts first. The workers use their allowance to make their choices of which gifts to get. The gifts ranged from toys, moonshine, to perfume. The scene mentions what the workers think of the good deed, detailing how they feel Campbell was a good man. A line continues to form as more workers are coming from off a train (Rash 155-157).

The similarities between Donna's experience and that of the fictional workers in *Serena* are striking and their differences are interesting. In Donna's experience only children thirteen and under would receive gifts from the company. In *Serena* the workers with children go first showing that both put an emphasis on the children at Christmas time. The differences are that Donna's gifts were presumably free and therefore actually more like gifts whereas in *Serena* the workers had to use their allowance in order to receive gifts. This difference shows how one mill was possibly more giving than another. The fact that gifts in *Serena* were bought for all of the workers including their children and wives is interesting. This could show that although the gifts had to be purchased through the workers' allowance, the company showed more generosity than simply giving gifts to a certain age group. Donna mentions how the gifts were expensive and in *Serena* the range and amount of gifts show how a mill could be generous. Both seem to exhibit that mills would work to try and make the holiday a happier one.

The function of Donna's story could be classified as escape. Although she may not have known her family was poor, her parents would have known and for them Christmas would be a time to escape the harsh realities they likely faced. Being able to see your child happy during a holiday mainly marketed as a giving holiday may have brightened the parents' spirits. Social control could be the function for the mill since this would have likely made the workers feel better about working for a place that would provide a decent Christmas for their families. It could have acted as a way for the mill to appease workers who, if never seeing a good side of a mill, would leave. The function for Donna is education; as she tells her story she is educating the viewer about what life would have been like for a child growing up in a mill village. Her story helps to give a better understanding of what mill villages were like and how she viewed the village growing up. It also serves as an education for her family as it would give them more information concerning where they came from. The story also allows her family to learn about their roots, giving them a look at how hard people worked to get them where they are today. This also creates a sense of communal feelings since the story is about a family member's past and their experiences as a child. Being able to learn about my grandmother's past and make connections that I have learned about in history courses has caused this story to create a sense of community between myself and my grandmother.

The function of the *Serena* story is social control and a release of tension. The text states that it was suggested that gifts be given to workers because it would help boost morale. This is a form of social control. The mill wants its workers to continue working for them and be in a good state of mind in order to continue producing for the company. By using Christmas gifts as an incentive the mill effectively makes the workers feel better about their situations, giving the mill a social control over the workers. The book also mentions how the gifts were needed after the deaths of two workers because the millworkers needed a boost. This also acted as a release of

tension since it was meant to help, following the deaths. It is a way for the mill to cut the tension that the workers may be feeling and keep the workers happy (Rash 155-157).

Reflection

When first starting this project I knew nothing about my grandmother's childhood other than the fact that her father had been a pastor. After the interview I felt as if my grandmother and I grew closer. I wanted to hear more stories and my grandmother has been more than willing to share. Being a history major I have learned about mill villages and hearing the perspective from someone who grew up in a mill village was exciting. I found that I had more questions than the time allotted. I would love to know more about the party-line and how that worked. Although my paper does not touch on the topic, I found it most interesting. I also want to know more about the mill itself. I would love to visit sometime in the future and see where my grandmother grew up. I feel that by sharing her stories with me she has given me a piece of history that cannot be replicated. It is her own story and although there are similarities to other stories, hers is all her own. I feel that her experiences in the mill village will help my family to see where they have come from and learn about their past.

I found the interviewing to be unnerving at first. I should have prepared more questions and felt like I was freezing up for too long. I think that I should try to have more conversations with an interviewee before I start the interview process. I learned that my grandmother has an incredibly interesting childhood. I found that she is very good at being interviewed even though I was fumbling at times. Doing this interview showed me that I would like to learn more about my family's history and make a record of it that can be preserved for future generations.