

McDowell, Adell: A Frightful Time ^[1]

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ADELL MCDOWELL: A FRIGHTFUL TIME

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 8/13/2000. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

They called it "[Operation Dixie](#) ^[3]." From 1946 to 1953, a labor union movement swept through the state's tobacco fields, lumber mills and textile factories. It was part of the largest labor organizing drive in the history of the South.

Ten thousand tobacco packinghouse workers in Eastern North Carolina joined unions. Lumbermen here voted in more than 20 unions. Even shrimpers and menhaden fishermen organized in Beaufort, Southport and Harkers Island.

The Greene Brothers Lumber Co., in Elizabethtown, was the state's key battleground. Then the largest lumber mill in the South, the company paid less than \$8 a day. When the loggers and sawmill employees organized in 1947, the company refused to negotiate with their union, leading to a yearlong strike watched nationwide.

Urged on by the same "red scare" that inspired the McCarthy hearings, company supporters lashed out at the striking workers, even though many were World War II veterans. Union workers were fired, arrested, blacklisted, often beaten, sometimes evicted. A car was dynamited, and shots fired into bedroom windows.

The Elizabethtown workers outlasted the company, but it was a pyrrhic victory: Like most of Operation Dixie, their union never recovered from the violence and intimidation. To get free of their dependence on Greene Brothers, many of the strikers later organized to buy land and build homes and to develop a women's sewing cooperative.

Adell McDowell, now 80, remembers the Elizabethtown strike well. Her husband, Thomas, was a local union officer. A warm, sweet-natured woman who visits her husband nearly every day at a nursing home, she talked to me while we sat on her front porch.

In Adell McDowell's words:

You have to understand the way of life in Elizabethtown back then. Most all of the black men worked at the lumber mill, which was Greene Brothers. That was the only thing to do other than farming, and a lot of the local men would rather work in the

The Greene brothers came here from Alabama in the early 1930s. They brought quite a few of the men who worked in the mill with them. They picked them up along the way, between here and Alabama. They had a mill in Cedar Creek, out from Fa

They sawed logs in Collie Swamp and brought them up to the mill. There was a group of men that went to the logwoods, sawing the trees and loading them onto trucks.

The mill was a big building. It was noisy - they did all that sawing in there. My husband was in the lumber yard. He stacked lumber. It was hard work. They would leave 6 in the morning, come back 6 in the evening. He was a strong man, but oh yes,

So many of the workers, they didn't have their own homes. They lived in the houses that Greene Brothers had built. They called it the Quarters.

The Quarters was a wooded area, right off from the mill. It was all black, but I think a few whites lived off a distance. Some of those mill houses were small, others large. You walk in the front, they'd have a potbelly stove in the corner, a cooking stov

They had a store called the Commissary. It was right near the mill. That was where they bought their groceries, and they were charged week to week. It came out of their paycheck. Even if you paid out more than your wages, they would always let y

We had some union workers come in to help the workers. They wanted better wages, better security: more freedom, I guess you would say. They organized a strike, and my husband was one of the main men to help get this organized. They trusted

They went on the picket line every day, a string of men did. They had banners saying "Better Wages" and things like that. The company men always had big Cadillacs, and they would try to run over the men in the picket line. One of my friends who

The company men would try to block the roads where the union organizers were going with a log. They trailed them a lot, too, when they went to meetings. A lot of times, some of the tires were shot.

I was always wondering what would happen next. I was worried that Thomas might get hurt. He had some protection, a shotgun, but the policemen were all on the side of Greene Brothers. They weren't going to guard you. I would be listening all nig

Jimmy and Minnie, the union leaders, lived right here with me. They slept right in that room. I liked them. They were sharing people, just good people. It was rough though. I remember Mr. Compton - Jimmy - getting hurt one night. Somebody broke

That was a long time ago - what, 50, 60 years ago? I wish somebody who remembered it better than me was still around to tell the story. I wish you could have talked with Thomas before he got sick. Oh, he could have told you so many things. I am

Audio Recording: ^[4] Interview with Adell McDowell and her son, William T. McDowell; part of the project *Southern Communities: Listening for a Change* at the Southern Oral History Program: McDowell, Adell. May 25, 1999. Interview number K-0262 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/sohp/id/15256> ^[4].

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28 April 2016 | Cecelski, David S.

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