

Moses, Athenia: Standing Up For The Things We Believed ^[1]

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Athenia Moses: Standing Up For The Things We Believed

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 12/9/2007. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Athenia Moses will soon be honored by the Goldsboro-Wayne County branch of the [NAACP](#) ^[3] for something that she did more than half a century ago. At a banquet on Feb. 11, the NAACP will recognize her and other veterans of Local 10, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers of America, for helping to bring the most basic workplace rights to Eastern North Carolina.

Local 10's organizing drive swept through Eastern North Carolina tobacco factories in the fall of 1946. Thousands of tobacco leaf workers, mostly black women, joined the labor union. It was a historic moment. Notorious for their anti-unionism, tobacco towns such as Goldsboro, Greenville and Lumberton had never seen anything like Local 10.

Now 92 years old, Mrs. Moses is spry and gracious and has a beautiful smile. We talked at her home in Goldsboro, 50 miles east of Raleigh.

In Athenia Moses's words:

My name is Athenia Moses. I live in Greenleaf, in Goldsboro's North End, and I am the oldest member of Greenleaf Christian Church. Reverend William Barber is my pastor. I was born October the 5th, 1915. I'm no young person.

At the time I was growing up, I worked on a farm. I left from there and went to J.P. Taylor's tobacco factory. That was in 1934.

There were three tobacco factories here along at that time. There was a Goldsboro Tobacco Company on Williams Street. J.P. Taylor's was on John Street and, across the railroad from J.P. Taylor's, was the Export Tobacco Company. They

My mother worked at Goldsboro Tobacco Company for a long time. When she passed away, my daddy's mother took care of us. My daddy, he was working out back then. Men used to go out ditching.

Weekends, why, he'd bring us a little bag of peanuts. We'd sit out there by the railroad and wait for him to come.

To J.P. Taylor's, we wore blue and white uniforms, a cap and dresses. That was a pretty sight. The only thing was that you couldn't tell me from you.

My husband, he worked there too. Every morning, he'd ride a bicycle and I'd be sitting on the back of the bicycle holding our dinner from here to J.P. Taylor's factory! It was cold sometimes, but that's how we made our living.

The union people were mostly up this way, in Greenleaf, the Field and Kadistown. We had meetings at different churches. And Mamie Baker, she would get up there and tell us what was going on. Seems like I remember that we met mostly t

We voted Mamie president because she was an open-mouthed talker. That's true! There weren't too many open-mouthed people up there that were talking for the workers. And she was a religious woman, like me.

They asked me if I would join the union and I said yes, because I felt like we had been mistreated in a lot of things. We were working hard. We were really working hard, and we were making these long hours, sometimes 11, 12 hours a day.

They were having people working overtime, but they weren't paying overtime. And we didn't know anything about taking breaks. We just didn't have any. And if some of us got sick, you couldn't stay away. You nearly had to crawl back on the

I had two or three miscarriages, going and working at Taylor's factory when I should have been home. I'd work that day, lifting heavy tobacco boxes and doing heavy work and all.

I'd come home and, overnight, I'd get sick and that's what would happen. They didn't have doctors, not like they do now. They had midwives. A midwife would come to me and, in a day or two, I'd go back to my job.

But it runs in my family. My mother was like that too. They said it came from overstrain.

The first thing I heard concerning the union was they were talking about it would help. So we were going to try that. A lot of us signed up for the union. We wanted some freedom.

We did find out that the union was the best thing that we could have got, because it helped us with our raise. We got a longer lunch break, a dining room, a first-aid room. They brought in a 15-minute break.

Why, when the union came in, we only made 8 hours a day. We even had some holidays.

They had their rules up there. Like, the people would sing a lot. Some of the women would get in the spirit. Some up there were fired for little old things like that. But when the union got in there, it was corrected. Some of it was corrected.

I encouraged others to join, because I felt like it was a good thing. At that time, I was walking around the factory sweeping. They'd ask, Athenia, you going to join the union? I'd say, yes. Well, they said, if we join, they said we won't have no m

I sit down and think about those days, how it was then up until now, because we have really been through something. We have really been through something. I got married in 1935 and, at that time, why, my husband and I, we were having it

My husband was just about like I was: came up kind of rough, you know. But he was about like Mamie, standing up for the things he believed.

I remember J.P. Taylor closing. November of 1974, I came on home like the rest. I worked long enough to give my children an education.

Honey, I have passed by J.P. Taylor's front steps many, many times and tears have run in my eyes. Happiness comes in my heart when I think about how far I have come from where I was that day up until today.

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