

Primary Source: Juanita Hinson and the East Durham Mill Village ^[1]

Below is the transcript of the interview with Juanita Hinson from East Durham, N.C. Her interview was part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project started in 1935.

"You'd like for me to show you over the mill village? Well, it won't take long and Mama won't mind, I'm sure. I helped tag bulls for two hours after I got home from school, and I was taking a little time off to rest. What do I mean by tagging bulls? Putting the tag on the little tobacco sacks that they use for Bull Durham smoking tobacco. When my shoulders get tired bending over so long I always get up and walk a little. My name? Juanita Hinson.

"We are on Reservoir St. now and its really the beginning of the village. Those houses up on the hill to the left don't belong to the company but about half of the people living in them work in the mill. They do have a time trying to pay rent too. Most of them would move into the village if they could. Rent here is awful low, around 95cents a week. But these houses ain't worth much, are they? You notice how old they look from the outside? Well, they look worse on the inside. The floors are splintery and the walls are so awful dingy. I know two or three couples that don't have any children and they've bought paint and painted their houses inside themselves. Of course everybody's not able to do that. There are rough places in most of the houses that make them look like they've never been finished. You see all these along here have two rooms upstairs but the ceiling is so low that people can't use them in the summertime. There are not many houses along here but what leak as you can tell by looking at the rotten shingle tops.

"One thing I like about this street is these umbrella china trees. They've growed — I mean grown — a lot since I can remember. How old am I? I was fourteen last week though I guess I don't look big enough for my age. Mama says I'm stringy.

"Behind that house yonder there's ten or eleven fruit trees. Mr. Clinton planted them himself. He's lived in that same house for over twenty year. Everybody on this street planted a garden the past spring. They help out a sight, specially when nobody much gets full time in the mill.

"What do you reason Mr. Jones keeps in the shed? No, not a car though most of these sheds along here were built for cars. Every person has to build his own shed if he wants a shelter for his car. There are only four cars on our street now. About Mr. Jones? Why, he has a mule. It sounds like the country, don't it, though we are inside the city limits. The city trucks take up the garbage from them big open cans you see in everybody's back yard. When he caint get time in the mill Mr. Jones buys wood, cuts it up, and hauls it in his wagon to peddle out in Haiti, one of the Negro sections of town. There are several men in the village who help him cut the wood. In the spring and summer Mr. Jones hires his mule out to folks that want to plough their gardens.

"Everybody keeps their yard right clean, I think. They are white and sandy like this street. We have plenty of dust, particularly when the weather has been dry for a long time. That rose bush in Mr. Perry's yard is one pretty thing in the spring. It's all the flowers we've got on this street except a few box flowers and a few petunias here and there.

"That's Mama sitting on the porch of that house on the end of the street. She's still tagging bulls. 'I'll be back in a few minutes, Mama. The lady wants me to go with her over the rest of the village.'

"We are going around a little curve now that's got no name. I reckon it's because there's no houses on it. The street you can see from here is Middle St. Reservoir and Middle are connected by this curve and it makes it like a horseshoe. These houses on Middle are just about the same as the ones on Reservoir. The street's wide and sandy and the yards are sandy too, and don't have any grass. There ain't but two or three umbrella chinas but there's one crepe myrtle, a beech, and a big locust. The locust is awful pretty of a moonlight night, like gold lace spread out against the sky.

"You'll see about as many cars as you did on Reservoir. And as many sacks on front porches too. There's 10,000 bulls in each one of them and you get 75¢ a sack.

"Why are there so many folks sitting on the porches today? Well, the mills not giving them work to do. Papa just made sixteen hours last week. He's gone down now to see if they'll need him tonight. Oh, I hope they do. He'll have to get more time if the five of us stay in school. Besides the school children there's three more young ones at home to feed.

"The people in this street have got gardens too. There's a flower garden over there. Two couples live in that house and they've got a child apiece. The wives don't work in the mill and they've worked the flowers. It's been mostly zinnias and petunias they've had, but even two kinds of flowers can have all sorts of colors.

"The street you see down there running perpendicular to this one is Short St. It starts up at Reservoir but there are no houses on it until you get to the point where its perpendicular to Troy St. That's Troy, running parallel to Reservoir and Middle.

"We'll walk a little piece up here and you can see what Troy's like. These are all four-room houses and each one has a

little grass lawn and a low fence of hedge. The lawns are all mowed and the hedge has been clipped off nice. They've got a no trees though. This street was made some years after the others. The houses need paint awful bad but they don't look quite so old and shackly as those on Reservoir and Middle.

"Short runs on down into the valley a little piece but we'll go back on it toward Reservoir.

"This big hedge along both sides of this street was planted by the mill company. You see those big sweet gums to the left, and the octagon-shaped stand. That's what we call the park. The city sends a truck out about once a week during the summer, and it brings a screen and a moving picture machine. People come and sit around on the grass and watch the picture that's shown. Usually they are westerns and they are always free. Now and then a three or four piece band will stop and make music, and a crowd gathers without having had any special word of what's going on.

"Short runs on up there and ends in Reservoir. We've just about covered the whole village.

"We can walk along a little slow now because I want to watch and see whether Papa comes back. If he don't come in a little while that means he got work because he don't stay up there long when they turn him down.

"I told you school started today, didn't I? I've been trying to make up my mind whether to quit this year. I'm old enough that the law caint make me go, you know, but Christine says that she's going back. Christine's my sister and she's sixteen years old. She had to quit school two years ago to keep house when Mama was awful sick with heart trouble. Now after she's been out of school for two years she's startin' again in the ninth grade. Mama said she didn't see how on earth she could send her with four already to buy clothes and books for, but Christine cried and said she'd be willing to do on anything just to go back to school.

"But I don't know whether I'm going to be willing to stick it out this year or not. Christine says I'll regret it all my life if I quit. Maybe I would later on but there'd be nothing to regret right now. It's awful to have to sit in a room where most of the people have on good clothes and you are so ashamed of your own. It's awful to see your teacher get up with a list in her hand and to know that in a minute she'll be reading your name out as one that hasn't paid the book rent. I hated my teacher last year for doin' just that. She'd say, 'It's just 85¢ a term and I don't see why you caint pay.' Some folks don't know that when you haven't got it 85¢ is just as hard to pay as a hundred dollars. I've told mama that if I couldn't pay mine in two months from now I'm going to quit.

"Yes, the mill's runnin' some and the first shift is comin' off. But it always works a few on second shift. I can tell by the sound of it that all of it ain't runnin'. Oh Lord, you see that man walkin' along slow across yonder? That's Papa and the mill don't need him tonight. Well, I'd better be gettin' home so' I can help Mama tag bulls. That'll help to buy bread."

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