

**Rearing, Recovery and Remembrance**

**Life after Textiles in Pacolet, South Carolina**

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The blue granite welcome sign at the intersection of Highways 176 and 9 invites you to embrace the small town of Pacolet, South Carolina, with all the genuine Southern hospitality it can muster. And in unwritten, but no less important letters, it also asks that you leave your sympathy behind. If you have come looking for a hopeless, dilapidated mill town bereft of its livelihood, then you have come to the wrong place. Beyond this modest, down-home greeting, you will find only hope, determination, and a prophetic vision of the future. Much like the mythical horse which was proudly stamped on its best work for a hundred years, Pacolet refuses to be tamed and reigned in. It is determined to grow and flourish, to empower its children with knowledge and to remain forever proud of where it came from.

We have all heard the story of the loss of the textile industry in the South to technological advancements and overseas competition. Many of us are also familiar with the subsequent rush for economic diversification to sustain the region. But in the frenzy of economic recovery, we may find it convenient to forget the people and places that made up this proud industry and the ways in which they have responded to their situation. It is here that we may learn from Pacolet, a small town a few miles outside of Spartanburg, which held an industrial base in textiles from roughly 1882 to 1983. The town is a wonderful example of recovery for several reasons. First, Pacolet experienced the loss of textile jobs long before mill closings became frequent elsewhere, in the fall of 1957. According to Mrs. Ola Kirby, a former employee in the personnel department of the mill, no one at that time had ever heard of a mill closing. While operations would continue there until 1983, this loss helped condition Pacolet to recovery decades before the mass exodus of the industry.<sup>1</sup>

Also, Pacolet has historically been a model for small textile towns. An article from *Nation's Health Magazine* in 1927 by a Spartanburg County Health Officer praises the mill area of Pacolet for the design of the community, as well as activities and services provided by the mill. He remarks that health officials "throughout the South" hope that Pacolet might "set a standard to which all cotton mills

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<sup>1</sup> "Looking Around the Old Mill," letter to the "Spartanburg Guide," Spartanburg, S.C., September 21, 1961, author unknown. Found in folder marked "Very little of historical value" in Pacolet Town Hall, November 7, 2006. This information coincides with estimates received from interviews with locals, who could not place the exact date; Ola Kirby, interview with author, September 30, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina.

might be raised.” Similarly, in the summer of 2006, an environmental landscape specialist from Clemson University commented that Pacolet’s plan for redevelopment could be a model for other small communities. This historical parallel demonstrates that Pacolet can be an historical model as well, with lessons to share for communities confronting a similar situation.<sup>2</sup>

I have discovered that the town has responded to the loss of the mill in three distinct ways, the first being better education. We will see that increased levels of education were initially a response to increased incomes, but so empowered the community that, in many ways, it began leaving the mill before the mill left the community. The second is community redevelopment, conducted most recently with the aid of Clemson University, in order to make Pacolet a more livable community. Lastly is the preservation of Pacolet’s culture and history through historical preservation projects and a genuine strength of fellowship and community.

In order to adequately understand the dynamics of “Pacolet,” we must first cover some basic facts. The Pacolet area was first devoted to agriculture and small-scale mining before the arrival of the mill in 1883 under Victor Montgomery as the Pacolet Manufacturing Company. In that year, a single mill building was constructed, and two more would follow, in 1888 and 1891.<sup>3</sup> The first two buildings were washed away in a devastating flood in 1903, and the third partially survived.<sup>4</sup> It was rebuilt, along with one building to make up for the loss of the other two. Before the decline of the mill, it is estimated that around 1,300 people were employed there, and it was known as one of the wealthiest and most well-kept mills in the state. The mill first began to scale down in 1957 with the close of building

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<sup>2</sup> “Pacolet Mills: A Southern Utopia,” *Textile Town: Spartanburg, South Carolina* (Hub City Writers Project: 2002) Betsy Wakefield Teter, Editor, pages 140-142, original article by Dr. R. G. Beachley, *Nation’s Health Magazine*, 1927; Janet S. Spencer, “City planner, landscape specialist praise Pacolet’s improvement plan,” *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, June 26, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Racine, “Boom Time in Textile Town,” *Textile Town: Spartanburg, South Carolina* (Hub City Writers Project: 2002) Betsy Wakefield Teter, Editor, page 40.

<sup>4</sup> William Branham, “The Flood of 1903: Terror Along the Pacolet River,” *Textile Town: Spartanburg, South Carolina* (Hub City Writers Project: 2002) Betsy Wakefield Teter, Ed, page 79.

number three, which had employed about 600 people.<sup>5</sup> The newer building, number five, would continue to operate until 1983, when the last 310 workers lost their jobs.<sup>6</sup>

It is also important to note that there are three distinct communities in the Pacolet area. The older part of the town, which has been associated with the railroad and various mining operations throughout its history, is referred to as simply “Pacolet” or “Pacolet Station.” The area directly associated with the mill and the surrounding mill village is referred to as “Pacolet Mills,” while “Central Pacolet” is the area between the other two. These three would remain separate municipalities until 1997. We will see that the fate of these small towns is inevitably intertwined, and over time, they begin to see themselves as one community.

Perhaps the most important factor in overcoming the loss of the textile mill in Pacolet was through better levels and systems of education. Rather than looking for new forms of industry to change the dynamics of the town, the people of Pacolet first chose to better themselves, and the education there now is the product of many years of development and encouragement. From the beginning of textile operations in Pacolet, President Victor Montgomery sought to provide the children of workers with some form of education. According to David L. Carlton in his book *Mill and Town in South Carolina*, Pacolet had mill-supported schools at least as early as 1885, the mill having begun operations in 1883. Community involvement in education was initially overwhelming. In 1885, a Mrs. Greenleaf alone taught 80-100 children there. By 1890, another teacher had been added, but attendance was then up to 130 students. In the fall of that year, there were 179 students at Pacolet, and the mill was asked to expand the faculty and facilities, only to have over four hundred students taught by four teachers by 1900.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ola Kirby, interview with author, November 7, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina. Mrs. Kirby, who was responsible for handwriting the paychecks, collaborated with her former coworkers to bring me these numbers. More accurate figures cannot be provided because the employment records were deliberately destroyed when the mill closed.

<sup>6</sup> Mike Livingston, “Pacolet Mills is Winding Down,” *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, January 30, 1983. Found in previously mentioned folder in Pacolet Town Hall, November 7, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina 1880-1920* (Louisiana State University Press: 1982) page 97.

While these numbers may seem astonishing, attendance was proportionately low, according to a mill pastor in 1983. The reason for this was that the children's first responsibility was to provide for their families, and school attendance was thus intermittent. In fact, this sort of off-and-on attendance was encouraged by the management at Pacolet, where workers were told to "alternate their children between mill and school 'when help is plentiful.'" From this information, we learn that the level of education received by children of mill workers in Pacolet was directly dependent upon financial ability, and children would begin learning more only when their parents could afford to have them do so.<sup>8</sup>

During the First World War, the mill decided to build separate facilities for its own community rather than aid the public school for the entire Pacolet area, and actually paid better teacher salaries than the public schools. Nevertheless, the Pacolet Station area was able to organize a high school which became accredited in 1921 and issued six high school diplomas in 1925.<sup>9</sup> But the degree to which the children of mill workers were able to attend this high school is uncertain. According to Mrs. Ola Kirby, the mill only provided schooling up to the seventh or eighth grade. Because of this, she says, most mill workers only had that much education, even up until its closing in 1983.<sup>10</sup> Former State Supreme Court Justice Bruce Littlejohn, a native of Pacolet and a graduate of Pacolet High School in 1930, says that among his classmates, about half were from Pacolet Mills and the other half from Pacolet Station. Of the students that graduated from Pacolet High School at this time, it is not certain how many returned to the mills for work, but according to Justice Littlejohn, the majority had no way of going to college and especially not during the Depression, when the mill might only operate for a few days out of the week. It would not be until after the Second World War that the mill-working people of Pacolet would obtain the resources to further educate themselves.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina 1880-1920* (Louisiana State University Press: 1982) pages 102 and 120.

<sup>9</sup> Marian Bishop, "Development of the Secondary Education Program in the Pacolet Area of Spartanburg County," masters thesis, University of South Carolina, 1954, pages 12 and 14. Found in South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina, October 28, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Ola Kirby, interview with author, September 30, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina.

<sup>11</sup> Justice Bruce Littlejohn, interview with author, November 7, 2006, Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Perhaps the most illustrative example of the growth of education in Pacolet is the story of Olin Hodge. Mr. Hodge went to work in the machining shop of the mill in 1932, during the depths of the Depression. His father, who began working at the age of nine without learning how to read, told him that after he completed the eighth grade he would have to go to work in order to help support the family. In February of 1942, after working ten years in the mill, Mr. Hodge was asked to bring his expertise in machining to the naval yards at Charleston. America had a war to win. He estimates that when he left the mill, he was making about fifteen dollars a week. The Navy was willing to pay him a hundred dollars a week. Mr. Hodge helped to build ships until July of 1944, when he signed up for the Army and went off to fight in Europe. When he came back in December of 1945, he returned to the mill, where he estimates that he was making about fifty dollars a week.<sup>12</sup>

Olin Hodge believes that this post-war economic boom was instrumental in bringing about higher levels of education in Pacolet. He described how wages continued to rise between 1946 and 1950 and how this created the disposable income necessary for the mill workers to send their children to school. Mr. Hodge made sure that his son got an education, and he is now a director of human resources for Milliken and Company, the textile giant that eventually owned and operated the mills at Pacolet. These higher incomes and rising levels of education in many ways allowed the people of Pacolet to move past mill work long before the mill actually left. In fact, Mr. Hodge says that when his time at the mill was drawing to a close, mill supervisors would drive around to the homes of workers who had not shown up for work, in the hopes that they might be able to draw them in. This would not have happened in the old days, but the need for labor had become so serious that mill leadership was forced to change its tactics.<sup>12</sup>

Mrs. Velma Kirby tells a similar story. She worked as a seamstress in the mill for forty years, and confirms that children started getting better educations following the Second World War. She also notes a sense of obligation to have the children receive better educations when Pacolet's mill number

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<sup>12</sup> Olin Hodge, interview with author, November 6, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina.

three shut down in 1957. The sudden loss of jobs, she says, shook the trust that the people of Pacolet had for the mill and “They saw the writing on the wall.” Although the opening of a plumbing fixtures plant nearby was able to offset many of the lost jobs, the town became more resolved to give its children a more stable way of life, and became more committed to sending them to school. When Mrs. Kirby stopped working around 1977, she also said that the mill leadership had a hard time finding people to work. In fact, one of the most important reasons that caused her to find work elsewhere was the lengthening of hours and the development of “swing shifts” of irregular schedules to maximize productivity. One may see this as a technique to promote efficiency, of course, but the mill was certainly trying to get more work out of their current workers, which may very well indicate a dwindling labor supply.<sup>13</sup>

We might also say that rising levels of education were instrumental in debasing mill work as hereditary work. A wonderful example of this is Mrs. Velma Kirby’s son Tommy, who graduated from Pacolet High School in 1965 and attended what is now Spartanburg Methodist College on a scholarship to play baseball. When asked why he did not work in the mills, his reply was “It never entered my mind.” Tommy did not feel intimately tied to the work there, and besides that, he had a diploma. Most of the kids his age that went to work in the mills were high school drop-outs. He estimates that forty to fifty percent of his graduating class of forty students went to college. Some of those may have returned to work in management positions at the mill, but he says that for the most part, high school graduates at that time left Pacolet.<sup>14</sup>

A year after Tommy graduated, James Lambert became the Principal at Pacolet High School. He would retain that position until the school closed and consolidated with others in the area to form Broome High School in 1976. He agrees that higher levels of income helped mill workers to better educate their children, but he went on to discuss how the quality of education in Pacolet improved as well. During his tenure there, he saw the salaries for teachers increase. Increased payment means

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<sup>13</sup> Velma Kirby, interview with author, September 30, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Kirby, interview with author, November 6, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina.

increased standards for teachers, which is exactly what happened. He also says that the high school began preparing students for college through encouragement and college preparatory classes. Mr. Lambert pushed everyone to go to college, he said, because he knew that education would help to propel them past mill work. But the most important factor for bettering education in Pacolet came from the students' homes, according to Mr. Lambert. With the development and expansion of organizations like the Parent-Teacher Association, community involvement in the schools became more important. "I saw a change in parents' attitudes," said Mr. Lambert, which he believes is the most fundamental component in a child's education. It was a community effort, then, not just to send children to school but to make sure they were learning when they got there. This attitude is exactly what helped Pacolet overcome mill work, and all before the mill closed its doors.<sup>15</sup>

All this hard work and community-driven push for better education did not go unrewarded. In 1925, there were six graduates from Pacolet High School. In 1930, that number was 21. Then there were 39 graduates in 1940 and 60 in 1954.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the 1970 Census shows that almost 24 percent of the population of Pacolet Mills had graduated from high school at that time.<sup>17</sup> By 1990, that number was 42.2 percent, and the 2000 figure for the combined Pacolet-Pacolet Mills area was 68.4 percent.<sup>18</sup> So while many high school graduates left Pacolet, others certainly found their way in, especially in recent years, thus improving the overall level of education in Pacolet. But these improvements in education also correspond with decreasing levels of population in Pacolet Mills. In 1950, there were 2,170 inhabitants, about 1,500 between 1960 and 1970, 1,000 in 1980 and 700 in 1990.<sup>19</sup> Of course, it is difficult to tell how many of these individuals left due to better opportunities through education and

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<sup>15</sup> James Lambert, interview with author, November 6, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina.

<sup>16</sup> Howard T. Blackwell, "A Study and Proposed Plan for Improving Public Relations in the Pacolet White High School, Pacolet, South Carolina," masters thesis, University of South Carolina, 1954, page 15. Found in South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina, October 28, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Spartanburg County Planning and Development Commission, "Pacolet Mills Housing Element," (The Commission, Spartanburg, South Carolina: 1979), page 11. Source of information is cited as "1970 U.S. Bureau of the Census 'Unpublished Data'".

<sup>18</sup> Bureau of the Census, Decennial Census, 1990 and 2000, respectively. Accessed online at: <http://factfinder.census.gov/>.

<sup>19</sup> Bureau of the Census, Decennial Census, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990. This information was typically drawn from the "General Population Characteristics" section and found under the table entitled "General Characteristics of Persons for Places of 1,000 to 2,500."



how many due to decreasing availability of jobs, but the trend is an important one to note. Mayor Elaine Harris, who has been in office since 2001, said that in examining the town for its current redevelopment projects, she and her colleagues found that Pacolet's graduates were indeed leaving the town. Thus, having supplied its children with the tools necessary to make better lives for themselves, Pacolet had to figure out how to make those better lives in Pacolet.<sup>20</sup>

As we shall see in the pages that follow, the people of Pacolet and especially Pacolet Mills certainly had the will to better their communities. What they lacked were the resources needed to get it done. The most obvious solution to this dilemma was the consolidation of the three municipalities in the area, and the combining of their resources. This was considered immediately after the mill announced its closing, but historical tensions between the communities slowed the process. According to the *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, the tensions go back to "one group calling the other 'lintheads' and then retribution and counter-retribution." Then-Mayor of Pacolet Mills Jimmy Henson said of the different groups, "I've seen lynch mobs with better tempers," though he admitted tensions were beginning to ease.<sup>21</sup> But it would in fact be another ten years before such a merger would take place, and during that time, not much progress was made in terms of community redevelopment.<sup>22</sup>

In 1994, the "TriPacolet Community Partnership" began to take hold. According to current Mayor of Pacolet Elaine Harris, the initiative was a local grassroots movement aimed at consolidating resources specifically for infrastructure, health services and local government in the Pacolet area. Harris, the chairperson of the partnership, saw this as the natural step to take. "Even though we are three separate towns," she says, "we have always been one community in spirit." After a series of meetings between local leaders and citizens, a straw poll was held. There was some resistance from unnamed portions of the local government, and one of the town halls was locked in defiance of the poll.

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<sup>20</sup> Elaine Harris, interview with author, September 30, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina.

<sup>21</sup> Mike Livingston, "Pacolet Mills is Winding Down," *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, January 30, 1983. Found in previously mentioned folder in Pacolet Town Hall, November 7, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Ola Kirby, interview with author, November 7, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina. This is the consensus I received from the locals, but explicitly stated by Mrs. Kirby.

In response, a tent was set up outside the building, and locals came out to vote, despite the rain. After a favorable response, the measure was set to a referendum in November of 1996, when Pacolet and Pacolet Mills decided to combine their municipalities and become simply “Pacolet,” while Central Pacolet opted to remain independent. Such is the present political landscape. The results of these actions put Pacolet on the road to redevelopment. The new town was able to accomplish several goals, including the formation of a business directory and a map of the area, which have become useful for both local law enforcement and potential tourists. The Livability Committee of the partnership obtained a grant for a free/low-cost health clinic, while other leaders obtained a grant to revamp local water and sewer systems. But perhaps more importantly, Pacolet gained a leader. Elaine Harris would eventually become the town’s mayor in 2001 and lead Pacolet to its current stage of redevelopment. According to Justice Littlejohn, she “gets half-time pay for full-time work” and then gives it back to the community. She works for free, and is obviously proud to do so.<sup>23</sup>

More recently, under the direction of Mayor Harris, Pacolet has taken part in the Pilgrimage of Place program of the Clemson University Institute for Economic and Community Development. According to Ellen Vincent, a landscape specialist from Clemson University who works closely with Pacolet, the program draws on the expertise of redevelopment specialists to make small towns like Pacolet more livable and attractive to potential newcomers. The first step was a trip in 2003 to a community in Ireland that had successfully made use of “community networking and rural revitalization.” From there, the program worked with the Pacolet leadership to develop a master plan, which focused on making the town a more attractive place to live through landscaping, the development of community parks and infrastructure, the protection of its historic mill-associated sites, and new housing.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Elaine Harris, interview with author, September 30, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina; Fred D. Baldwin, “Vision and Involvement: Empowered Communities,” *Appalachia Magazine* (Appalachian Regional Commission) January-April 1997 edition; Justice Bruce Littlejohn, interview with author, November 7, 2006, Spartanburg, South Carolina.

<sup>24</sup> Ellen Vincent, interview with author, November 1, 2006, Clemson, South Carolina; Tripp Muldrow, “It Can Happen Here: Pacolet Plans for Post-Textile Success,” *Upstate Living*, Winter 2005 edition, pages 8-10.

A great example of this proposed redevelopment is Pacolet's current project to connect the community through sidewalks. A *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* article explains that Pacolet has procured some \$80,000 in mostly federal money and is ready to become the first entirely "walkable community" in the county, something that Mayor Harris believes will help attract people. Interestingly enough, the remnants of the mill are aiding the process. The mill community, dating back to the era before personal vehicles, had to be a walking community so that mill workers could get to work. Mayor Harris explains that Victor Montgomery built a sidewalk system for the mill community in the early nineteen-hundreds, and while those sidewalks have since fallen into disrepair, Mayor Harris sees them as a "blueprint" upon which a new network can be built. Thus, Pacolet's history lives on, providing practical answers to important questions.<sup>25</sup>

One important aspect of Pilgrimage of Place is that it is a new and original approach to community redevelopment. In fact, Pacolet is one of the first two communities participating in the program, and according to Ellen Vincent, it is the "bright shining star." She says that the community and its leaders are adamantly devoted to growth and redevelopment, something that she finds uncharacteristic among former mill towns, which seem to be "waiting for the mill to come back." But Pacolet is optimistic and is willing to work cooperatively to make the community vibrant once more. It is this attitude that has come to define Pacolet historically, and it will no doubt carry it proudly into the future.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, education and resources alone do not mean instant recovery. It takes hard work and cooperation, and Pacolet is no stranger to these. It is the atmosphere and attitude of Pacolet which define and sustain the town, and a hundred years of working together have made this possible. When I asked the people of Pacolet what defined their town, the response was almost unanimous. It is the people, they said, genuinely good people who look out for each other that make Pacolet a "tight-knit

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander Morrison, "Pacolet takes steps to be a walkable community," *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, April 4, 2006. Accessed online at: <http://www.goupstate.com/>.

<sup>26</sup> Ellen Vincent, interview with author, November 1, 2006, Clemson, South Carolina.

community,” a phrase which was often repeated to me in my visits there. The people of the town are proud of this environment, so much so that the vast majority of them refuse to call any other place home.<sup>27</sup> Mayor Harris illustrates this strong sense of community with a popular saying: “We can talk about each other, but nobody else can.”<sup>28</sup> Of course, one might argue that those who live in a town the better part of their lives tend to think fondly of it regardless of the circumstances. But Ellen Vincent, the aforementioned specialist from Clemson University, confirms this atmosphere. She describes how, her being a northerner with obvious cultural differences, it would be easy for the people of Pacolet to be less than hospitable to her. Despite this, she says, “I am so welcomed there.” She explained how she brings people from all over the world to Pacolet to view its progress in development, and these people never fail to express their interest in living there and to ask about available housing.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the Pilgrimage of Place committee, after spending several days there, decided that the characteristics which define the town are “Faith, Family and Fellowship.”<sup>30</sup>

The origins of this utopian sense of community, according to the inhabitants, find their roots in living and working together daily at the mill. Mrs. Doris Hogan explained that the mill workers would not hesitate to take care of each other in hard times, and Mrs. Ola Kirby described how mill workers were very much like one big family, its members depending on each other for support. Mrs. Kirby believes that when the mill closed in 1983, some of that culture was indeed lost, as the workers were no longer working together. Despite this, she believes that Pacolet has been able to retain much of its culture, and is still “one big bunch of happy people” who are not ashamed of being friendly. She explained this to me as she fed me fried apple pies. She speculates that this atmosphere is what helps

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<sup>27</sup> This information comes from a number of personal interviews, but especially those conducted at the T.W. Edwards Center in Pacolet on November 6, 2006. Interviewees, mostly long-time inhabitants of the town and former mill workers, included but are not limited to Doris Hogan, Francis Smith, Aletha Crawford, Shirley Biggerstaff, Sheila Wilson, Ellen Reeves, and “Worry” Kirby.

<sup>28</sup> Elaine Harris, interview with author, September 30, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina.

<sup>29</sup> Ellen Vincent, interview with author, November 1, 2006, Clemson, South Carolina. While this information was given to me in a personal interview, one may also find the comment in the previously cited Winter 2005 edition of *Upstate Living*, page 8.

<sup>30</sup> Elaine Harris, interview with author, September 30, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina.

hold the people of Pacolet together, and though their jobs may be spread out, she says, “They come home.”<sup>31</sup>

These attitudes mentioned by Mrs. Kirby have historical precedent. In an article entitled “Cotton Mill People: Work, Community, and Protest in the Textile South,” there is discussion of “Communal values” which “distanced mill folk from the acquisitiveness that characterized middle-class life in New South towns.” Without destroying individuality, the mill community “conferred status and dignity that the workplace could seldom afford,” and thus produced individuals that were proud to be part of such a community. This was certainly the case in Pacolet Mills, where the workers had few reservations about working together. In his book *Southern Workers and the Search for Community*, G. C. Waldrep explains that the workers at Pacolet Mills were “solidly organized” during the Depression and were active participants in the General Textile Strike of 1934. Thus, mill work allowed the people of Pacolet to live, work, and cooperate as a community and gave the town a distinct culture that is present even today.<sup>32</sup>

But as Pacolet becomes a more attractive place to live, new people with different values and attitudes have the potential to alter the atmosphere of the town. Ellen Vincent explains that Pacolet has to decide who it attracts through planning if it is to preserve its culture. But in talking with the people of the town, they believe that their community spirit is so strong that the newcomers will become just as much a part of it. Mrs. Kirby explained that new people have been coming to Pacolet for years and no matter their origins, “they melt right in.” She believes that newcomers will continue to become a part of the cultural melting pot of Pacolet because that is what they have always done.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Doris Hogan, interview with author, November 6, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina; Ola Kirby, interview with author, September 30, 2006 Pacolet, South Carolina.

<sup>32</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Robert Korstad, James Leloudis, “Cotton Mill People: Work, Community, and Protest in the Textile South, 1880-1940,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2, April 1986, page 253; G. C. Waldrep, III, *Southern Workers and the Search for Community: Spartanburg County, South Carolina* (University of Illinois Press: 2000) page 65.

<sup>33</sup> Ellen Vincent, interview with author, November 1, 2006, Clemson, South Carolina; Ola Kirby, interview with author, November 7, 2006, Pacolet, South Carolina.

But the culture of Pacolet is more than just an idea. It is also about the places that have made up its history, places that the town has found it necessary to preserve. These projects are often representative of the town's willingness to work toward a common goal, while the sites themselves give the community pride. The first evidence of this comes from the week following the announcement of the mill closing in January of 1983. According to the *Spartanburg Herald Journal*, then-Mayor of Pacolet Mills Jimmy Henson expressed his desire to "get rid of that old vindictive feeling" and revitalize the town. The plan focused on restoring the old amphitheater which the mill built as a gathering place around 1924. By the time of the mill closing, it had fallen into disrepair, something the town decided to remedy. Mayor Henson noted the town's willingness to take on this project by saying that he had "volunteers running out of our ears."<sup>34</sup> Not surprisingly, the town had successfully restored the old amphitheater by the time of Pacolet Mills' centennial celebration in July. Mrs. Pat Tate told the *Herald-Journal* that the project had "rekindle[d] the community spirit," involved many hours of labor, included a request to have the amphitheater declared an historical site by the South Carolina Historical Society, and was funded entirely by donations.<sup>35</sup> This series of articles tells us that the community of Pacolet Mills was ready to work together in order to overcome the loss of the mill even before it had been lost. The town folk were immediately ready to pitch in and restore an historical site which they felt represented an important piece of their past, and were thus emboldened to revitalize their community.

In the following year, the leadership of Pacolet Mills, and later the combined Pacolet municipality, took residence at the old mill office building. A *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* article describes how the office building, built in 1905, was to be the new home of the Pacolet Mills Town Hall, and with the aid of \$30,000 from the South Carolina Rural Improvements Funds, the building was to be renovated. Roger Milliken, the owner of the mill in its final years, had the structure painted as

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<sup>34</sup> Mike Livingston, "Pacolet Mills is Winding Down," *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, January 30, 1983. Found in previously mentioned folder in Pacolet Town Hall, November 7, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Candy Thomas, "Happy Birthday Pacolet!" *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, July 31, 1983. Found in microfilm archives of Spartanburg County Public Library.

part of a “thorough sprucing-up” before giving the building to the town, and the locals landscaped the property before the future of it had even been decided. Then-Mayor Jimmy Henson commented that “That just shows the kind of community spirit these people have.” Once again, the people of Pacolet, given the resources they needed, were able to work together and improve their surroundings while preserving an important piece of their history.<sup>36</sup>

Since that time, Pacolet has continued to revitalize local historical sites, largely under the direction of Mayor Elaine Harris. With the town’s Community Covenant in 2004, she explains, “We promised the town that they would not lose their identity.” In that year, Pacolet created its own registry of historical places, so that the town could focus on restoring selected sites as part of its redevelopment. Pacolet has also requested that its town hall be put on the National Register of Historical Places, along with the old cloth room from the mill and the Marysville School, which was the first private school for African-Americans in the state. The town is also obtaining a consultant to have the mill village area registered as an historic district. If this were to occur, home owners there could get low interest loans and tax credits for their homes, which would make the area more suited for redevelopment and more appealing to prospective buyers.<sup>37</sup>

The preservation of Pacolet’s history and culture is also represented by activities which involve the community. The town routinely gives historical tours to both children and adults that focus on Pacolet’s cultural heritage and natural resources. Activities may include a presentation of the town’s Catawba Indian heritage, a discussion of its role in the Revolutionary War battle at Cowpens, or a tour of the old granite mine. Perhaps one of the most important historical projects the town had undertaken is the creation of a museum, which will be located in the bottom floor of the town hall. State Representative Lanny Littlejohn helped obtain some \$50,000 for this project, which will include exhibits on everything from the town’s Native American roots to its history in education and textiles.

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<sup>36</sup> Mary Capers Heaton, “New Lease on Life: Old Pacolet Mills Post Office to be Converted to Town Hall” *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, 1984. The exact date of this article is unknown, but it refers to the phasing out and closing of the mill as “last year.” Article found in previously mentioned folder in Pacolet Town Hall, November 7, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Elaine Harris, telephone conversation with author, November 9, 2006.

Mrs. Ola Kirby is excited to be a part of the preservation effort and is organizing numerous artifacts. Mayor Harris believes this project will be instrumental in drawing people to Pacolet to celebrate its rich cultural heritage.<sup>38</sup>

As we have seen, Pacolet's emphasis on its history runs much deeper than "Visit historic downtown Pacolet." It is part of a comprehensive community redevelopment plan to revitalize the area and attract new residents. These projects are practical, such as making the homes in the mill village more financially accessible, and are also sources of inspiration to the town, which has shown its willingness to work cooperatively toward a larger goal. From the earliest efforts just a week after the announcement of the closing of the mill to today's resourceful projects, historical and cultural preservation is something that has emboldened the town to take pride in its community and to work together in order to preserve what Pacolet has been and develop what Pacolet can become.

The lessons learned in Pacolet can have a lasting meaning for similar communities and for the nation as well, the most important being recovery through education. In today's atmosphere of job deportation and specialization, the nation must learn how to cope with the loss of jobs, and Pacolet has shown that the most appropriate response is higher levels and better systems of education to make Americans more competitive in the job market. Besides, good education is the best investment a community can make. In the case of former mill towns, Pacolet suggests using the resources once provided by the mill for recovery, as it is using its old sidewalk system and restoring old mill buildings for public use and preservation. If possible, such towns can combine their resources with nearby communities to develop infrastructure and public services. Otherwise, they might obtain grants for redevelopment or seek the assistance of higher learning institutions looking to give back to the community. Pacolet has shown that recovery through means such as these is not only possible, given the determination of the inhabitants, but effective as well.

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<sup>38</sup> Elaine Harris, telephone conversation with author, November 9, 2006; Janet S. Spencer, "Pacolet building museum to preserve history," *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, January 16, 2006; "Retired textile mill employee enjoys working on museum," *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, June 24, 2006, author unknown. Both articles accessed online at: <http://www.goupstate.com/>.



In an historical analysis such as this, it is not only important to ask how Pacolet recovered from the loss of the textile industry, but if it actually recovered. Certainly, we can point to developments in levels of education and infrastructure as previously discussed, but what about the town's overall demographic and economic status? In 1980, the combined Pacolet/Pacolet Mills area had a population of 2,607. After the mill closed, in 1990, that number was 2,432. In 2000, the area boasted a population of 2,690, years before its most ambitious redevelopment projects had even begun. So the town is not only sustaining its population, but is actually growing. Moreover, the people of Pacolet are not having problems finding work. Unemployment in the town was reported in 2000 to be around five percent, with South Carolina's statewide average at about six percent. The average annual income in Pacolet was \$42,191, while the state average was \$41,818. So the area can hardly be seen as economically depressed when those individuals who are in the workforce are considered.<sup>39</sup> One point of difficulty is that only fifty-five percent of Pacolet's population is in the workforce, as opposed to sixty-three percent in the rest of the state. This figure can be attributed largely to the town's aging population of former mill workers. According to Justice Bruce Littlejohn, the mill village is somewhat of a "retirement village" where many of the inhabitants are dependent upon social security. In fact, about nineteen percent of Pacolet's population is over the age of 65, as opposed to about twelve percent statewide. What this means for the town is a generally lower property value, with \$61,800 being the median housing value as opposed to \$113,100 for the state. Ellen Vincent believes that this is a major area for improvement in Pacolet, as potential new inhabitants require available, desirable housing. She says that the leaders of the town know this, and that is exactly what they are trying to remedy.<sup>40</sup>

With that said, Pacolet still has pages left to write in its story of recovery. It has, over the years, responded optimistically and proactively to the loss of the textile industry, and in doing so, has

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<sup>39</sup> Bureau of the Census, Decennial Census, 1980, 1990 and 2000. The 1990 and 2000 numbers can be accessed online through the Census website at: "<http://factfinder.census.gov>". For 1980, the population of Pacolet is located in Volume 1: Characteristics of the Population, Chapter B: General Population Characteristics, Part 42: South Carolina, Table 42, page 116.

<sup>40</sup> Justice Bruce Littlejohn, interview with author, November 7, 2006, Spartanburg, South Carolina; Bureau of the Census, Decennial Census, 2000, accessed online at "<http://factfinder.census.gov>"; Ellen Vincent, interview with author, November 1, 2006, Clemson, South Carolina.

displayed the same sort of perseverance that is so characteristic of its people. Their recovery has not happened overnight, and when the people of Pacolet wake up tomorrow, they will still have work to do. But that doesn't bother them. They know all about hard work. Hard work is what separates those who almost make a better life for themselves from those who do. It's what makes success worth having and what makes Pacolet, well, Pacolet. So they will go to work, go to school, make a living, get an education, and at some point during the day, they will think about where they came from and where they are going. When you leave, they'll ask you to come back again. They'll mean it, and you'll want to.