

LOCAL

Library's textile mill exhibit offers window to the past

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Dozens gathered inside of Mauney Memorial Library's community room recently to learn about the once vibrant textile mills that shaped local lives.

The recent opening of the library's exhibit "The Rhythm of the Factory: Life and Labor in North Carolina's Textile Mill Communities," featured guest speakers Charlie Jenkins, who shared his experiences working at Loray Mill in Gastonia, and Tom Shytle, local author of "Carolina Roots: From Whence I Came."

Jenkins talked about his time at the mills and how the industry has changed since the free trade agreements were signed into law in the 90s. He shared his experience of working at Loray when many workers, inspired by the Union, went on strike. He said that after he finished up after working late one night, he started for home and noticed that he was not alone.

Two men on motorcycles had pulled out in front of his car and two more had pulled out behind him. He was sure that they were Union workers, who were very unhappy with the laborers who continued to keep Loray running. Worried about what they would try, he said that he slouched down in the middle of his front seat and drove that way for most of the trip home.

He laughed when he recalled that he was ready to gun the engine and run over the two in front of him and stop short for the two behind if they tried to pull anything. They followed him most of the way home, but, aside from intimidation, the mysterious bikers caused no harm.

Shytle talked a few moments about his new book, "Carolina Roots." In addition to offering unique insights to the events, which changed the nation, state

and local community over the past 80 years, the book offers Shytle's personal perspective of growing up on a Park Yarn "mill hill."

It took about two years for him to complete the book. "In the beginning, 'Carolina Roots' was to be a journal to leave my children and my grandchildren in order for them to know something of the world, in which I lived, because it was so much different than the world, in which they now live," he said. "It was to cover the past 80 years related to the events I considered important enough to pass on to them. However, it evolved into something a lot bigger than a personal memoir."

From his 45-year love affair with his wife and soulmate, Mil, to his rascal moments with one of his best friends, Lafayette Pearson, the book shares experiences many can enjoy. It also covers his 25 years of service in the US Air Force, including a special covert assignment during the Cold War.

He signed and sold copies of his book during the reception. Books can be purchased by mailing name, address and \$15 to Tom Shytle, 187 Huffman Road, Blacksburg, SC 29702 or online at www.Amazon.com

"The Rhythm of the Factory" exhibit is offered at the library during normal business hours and will run until September 27, 2008. Librarian Margot Plonk said that this is the first exhibit the library has offered in the past several years. She was pleased with the turnout for the opening ceremony and hopes more will come to learn about how the textile industry made its mark on Kings Mountain.

Things to learn at the exhibit...

■ "The Rise of Textile Mill Communities" – After the Civil War, industrialization changed the South. Textile mills sprang up all along NC's rivers and newly constructed railroads. Agriculture was struggling, cash crops like cotton and tobacco were being grown more often, causing prices to fall. Many small farmers moved to work in the mills and brought with them their rural way of life with emphasis on community and family.

■ "Working the Shift" – Millwork was a family-based labor system. Mills recruited entire families. The process of making raw cotton into cloth was multi-step and many different jobs were offered in the mills. Jobs depended on a worker's age, gender and race, but also on experience, speed and skill. The atmosphere was noisy, hot and crowded and the work was repetitive.

■ "Calling the Mill Village Home" – Mill owners built villages near mills to attract families of workers. This was beneficial to both owners and laborers. It provided a strong sense of community and also allowed owners to keep an eye on employees. The village consisted of small, simple houses and, before 1910, few had electricity, running water or a sanitation system.

■ "Living in a Mill Centered World" – Mill's influence rarely ended at the factory door. Store, schools and churches were built, owned or tied to the mill



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Brent Baity, left, gets author Tom Shytle, right, to sign his book, while they talk about some of the times Shytle had with his buddy Lafayette Pearson, middle.

in some way. Churches encouraged a strong work ethic and discouraged alcohol. Schools educated children often torn between studies and work. Company stores kept money coming back into the mills.

■ Also, learn about "African Americans in the Mill Village," "Men in the Mill Village," "Women in the Mill Village," "Children in the Mill Village," "After the Whistle Blows," "Cotton Dust and Poverty," "Neighbors Divided," and "A

Legacy of Community."

■ On Sept. 16 – The library will feature guest speaker Leon Neal, who contributed to the exhibit.

■ Also in Sept. – Bob Brown from the Belmont Historical Society will give a presentation; and, Michael Fox and the Possum Holler Old Time String Band will perform "Old Time Cotton Mill Music" and will lead a community "jam" session. For more details, call the library at 704-739-2371.

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