

PINEY ROAD:

WORK, EDUCATION, AND THE RE-MAKING OF THE SOUTHERN FAMILY

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To Kaz and the families of Gresham County.

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INTRODUCTION



Helen remembers her house, a wood-frame tenant shack. You could see through the flooring boards to the ground where the chickens were scratching.

Introduction

Driving through the pine woods and pastures on Gresham County's main highway you might be surprised to see scraps of white cotton down fluttering on your windshield. Is it possible that someone is still growing cotton on these piedmont hills? It won't take you long to realize that the white down is coming from the long flatbed trucks rolling by, stacked with crates of white turkeys. It's been decades since cotton died out as a main crop in this area. Now poultry houses dot the landscape and the trademark signs of the big poultry firms are familiar sights in Gresham County. The county not only sends poultry—over seventeen and a half million broilers in 1988—to a neighboring county's processing plants; it exports labor to these factories as well. Women who in the 40s and 50s picked cotton from dark to dark were, by the early 60s, rising in the dark to join carloads of neighbors and relatives for the forty-five minute drive to Piedmont Poultry where they would pluck, eviscerate and pack, often not returning home until it was dark again.

These women's education was typical of that provided for black southerners of their generation: understaffed and underfunded schools operating sporadically in the slack times of the seasonal labor market were neither able nor intended to provide training to equip students for a world much different from that of their parents or grandparents. But the world changed. Today these women see their children and grandchildren facing obstacles and opportunities unknown thirty years ago.

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Questions about increasing literacy rates prompted my research. State business and government leaders have argued that low literacy rates, especially in rural areas, deter industrial development. They maintain that literacy levels must be raised before the state can be truly competitive. But another argument suggests that business leaders recruit low-skill, low-wage industries, fearing labor costs and adversarial relations of the highly skilled

Does a low literacy rate retard economic development, or does it encourage a particular kind of development acceptable to local elites.

and often unionized workforce of more developed industries. According to this argument, low-skill, low-wage employers seek out and are recruited to rural areas to take advantage of a workforce ready to be employed in low-wage industries. Throughout the eighteen months of my study, I weighed these alternatives: does a low literacy rate retard economic development, or does it encourage a particular kind of development acceptable to local elites. I concluded that while an agricultural lifestyle and a low tax base do not foster educational attainment, the causes of low literacy and the failure to complete high school are more to be sought in past and present employment opportunities and in the pressing family responsibilities arising from parents' harsh working conditions, low wages and lack of pensions. In addition, the prospect of readily available low-skill work at relatively high starting wages in poultry or textile plants discourages many from the deferred and less certain rewards of further education in a technical school or college.

This article describes twelve Piedmont Poultry¹ workers and their families. From July 1 to December 10, 1989, and from June 8 to October 8, 1990, I intensively interviewed and observed these Gresham County women and their families. I also interviewed poultry workers from outlying counties as well as plant and union officials. Most of my time, though, was spent with these twelve women and their families. Some are retired now, some work in other plants, but most of them are still working in the same poultry operation where they have worked for more than twenty years.

The Region

Other social indicators of poverty include a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases and a high school drop-out rate.

Gresham County is a rural county in the piedmont region of the Southeast. It is not poor compared to other rural black-belt counties, but mean income and other economic indicators are probably skewed by the rising number of urban professionals moving from the nearby college town of Sparta. For example, although Gresham County ranks near the middle of the state's per capita income distribution, thirty percent of all blacks in the county earn less than the official poverty level. Other social indicators of poverty include a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases and a high school drop-out rate.

There isn't much industry in Gresham County. Out of a 1990 adult population of 9,692, only sixty-eight people work in the county's manufacturing industries. Nearly sixty percent of the county's adults must commute to work in neighboring counties. Although a third of the commuters car pool, there are more cars (10,156) than people in Gresham County. Many people have two or more old cars to insure that there will always be one available to get them to and from work. A car is not only necessary transportation but

¹ The names of individuals and locations have been changed.

also a symbol of independence . For young people, a car is a way to work in Sparta as well as a necessity for dating. But while a car represents economic independence, maintaining and paying for it can keep a young person chained to his first, often low-paying, job — car payments and car expenses require a steady income, so even a few months off for classes at a technical school can begin to look impossible.

Industry Eyes the South

In the 1940s and 50s, cotton was no longer the key crop it once had been. King Cotton was dethroned by a combination of events including the devastating attack by the boll weevil in the nineteen twenties and the introduction to the world market of cotton grown in Brazil and India in the 40s and 50s. The demise of cotton brought an end to agriculture in the southern piedmont. Poor rural families sought domestic or industrial employment. Other industries requiring little manpower arose, including dairying, pine production, and rock quarrying. People lived on the surviving plantations and still produced some cotton for a dwindling market. The tenant system gave way in the 30s to wage labor, thanks in part to the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which limited acreage devoted to cotton. Also, parity payments were to be paid to sharecroppers — increasing the incentives for a transition to wage labor.

Several women had vivid memories of their plantation days — Helen remembers her house, a wood-frame tenant shack. You could see through the flooring boards to the ground where the chickens were scratching. It was her job to sweep the yard and under the house with a brush broom. She remembers that they produced all their food except for sugar, cheese, six cokes a week, and one mullet for the six of them on Friday. They had an ice box and they'd buy ice for a nickel. They'd make the skirts they wore from flour sacks. Mr. Brown remembers that his father earned \$12 a month plus corn meal and fatback. Children helped earn the family's production quota by working after school in the cotton fields. School attendance wasn't enforced and if a child was needed at home or in the fields that child stayed home. I heard the story of the Wilkins plantation many times: children on that farm never went to school during the harvest season because the farmer kept them home to work the fields.

Although remnants of the farm economy existed through the 50s, the farm economy collapsed after the war. Men came back from World War II to find few jobs and the color line intransigently in place. Helen said that her husband finally quit the farm after the farmer repeatedly rented him out to work others' farms. Many decided that options up North were better and some headed to New York, Chicago, or Detroit. Some only got as far as

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One black TV repairman said that in the late 40s and early 50s when he needed a part he had to ask a white person to buy it for him, and this took place not in Gresham County but in Atlanta, the capital of the state.

Atlanta or Savannah. For those who stayed employment was difficult to find. Having a craft didn't help much. One TV repairman said that in the late 40s and early 50s when he needed a part he had to ask a white person to buy it for him, and this took place not in Gresham County but in Atlanta, the capital of the state. As a leader of the local NAACP described this time period, it was time for blacks to get out of the white man's kitchen. Those who stayed in Gresham found employment limited; they worked at temporary jobs and fought to get into the newly opening industries as part of the regular work force.

The Poultry Plant

The call to industrialize the South is an old one. A century ago Henry Grady was the most articulate sponsor of an industrialized South. But the growth of industry was slow; up until the 50s people still believed in a rural lifestyle, and feared that the South would become another northern industrial nightmare. Agriculturalists, politicians, and local businessmen opposed recruiting new industries, fearing also what they might do to local wages. By the 50s, cotton couldn't be grown profitably in the Southern piedmont—more than a century of cotton cultivation had so depleted the soil that it could produce only pine and pasture. In this atmosphere local industrialization was welcome, especially the efforts of local businessmen to organize the first poultry plant. They opened Piedmont Poultry in 1953 in Sparta, twelve miles away. As one of the founders of Piedmont Poultry said in a political campaign letter highlighting his achievements, "I am proud to have had a part in developing a Poultry Process Plant (sic) in order to give employment to our negro women...in order to give them employment instead of washing clothes in their back yard for \$1.25 and not over \$5.00 a week."

For the women who worked in poultry the day was hard, but working alongside neighbors, sisters, and cousins reinforced their rural social life. Many women described those days as good old days, despite the cold, the unpredictable hours, cars that often broke down, and the difficult and sometimes unbearable pain involved in the work. Some women said that they stood in water all day long, others talked of cuts that would get infected.

Some suffered injuries and many are now suffering from the accumulated effect of repetitive motion problems, including carpal tunnel syndrome and upper disk problems. These injuries are often aggravated by arthritis and bursitis amplified by the many years of damp, cold work. Yet, in those days they could socialize, and the supervisors were paternalistic. Now there is much more pressure on the supervisors to increase production, less socializing among the women, and the work rules are written down.

In the 50s and the 60s the work day was unpredictable, lasting from a couple of hours to twelve hours. For a while in the 50s, they would have to be at work at two or three in the morning. Fannie May reported leaving her house at one in the morning to get into the plant to start her day. When the plant started running two shifts their work day started at six in the morning, but then they didn't know whether they would be coming home in a few hours or very late at night. The length of their day depended on how many chickens were available for processing. In the late 60s the plant was organized by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union and the workers won a guaranteed minimum four-hour working day.

Many suffer from the accumulated effect of repetitive motion problems, including carpal tunnel syndrome and upper disk problems.

I

BE READY BY FIVE

Be Ready by Five

Ruth

In the early 60s, Ruth's mother bought the land and built the house on Piney Road where Ruth now lives with her ten-year-old son, Zack, and her mute older sister, Milly. Ruth's older half-sister, Sue Foster, lives next door with her husband, daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren. One of Sue's sons has a trailer next door to hers, which he uses on weekends when he isn't on duty with the army in Atlanta. Sue's husband has been suffering from bone cancer for the last six years, so there's often a home helper in her house while she is away working for Head Start. Ruth's back door is twelve yards from Sue's front door and the path between them is traveled dozens of times daily by Ruth, Zack, and Sue's three-year-old granddaughter, Emma, who has free run of both houses and always seems to be taking inventory of the comings and goings at Ruth's.

Before moving to Piney Road, Ruth lived with her mother on a farm two miles away. Sue and a half-brother living in Sparta are her mother's children by an earlier marriage. Ruth also has twelve half-sisters and half-brothers by her father's second marriage. Ruth's sister, Milly, is three years older than she and has always been dependent on Ruth for support. Milly receives Social Security assistance. Apart from doing laundry and cleaning the sink, Ruth doesn't depend on her for household work. Ruth's mother lived with them till her death in 1987. She had been sick for eleven years and the financial and physical responsibility for her support fell on Ruth's shoulders. The last two years were particularly hard. Her mother had needed constant attention and Ruth had to hire a full-time nurse to stay with her, going into debt from which she still hasn't recovered. Ruth says that her older half-brother gave her a little money once, as did Sue, but the real responsibility had been hers. Ruth speaks fondly of her mother and of how she learned the value of independence from her, the importance of not having to rely on a man for support. Ruth has lived by that advice, never having married and wanting never to be dependent on a man. It was only after she had become an adult that Ruth became friendly with her father, Peter Anderson, and his large family by his current wife. Ruth never understood why, but he waited till quite recently to marry Dora, feeling he couldn't do so while Ruth's mother was still alive. Peter and Dora live three houses down from Ruth on Piney Road.

Divorce, marriage, or moving to Sparta may alter the daily composition of Gresham County households, but on weekends and holidays children return

At a July 4th reunion of the Anderson children, I met Peter's sixteen children.

to the county for family get-togethers. On July 4th, 1990, I attended an Anderson family reunion and met Peter's sixteen children. Peter and Dora had twelve children together while each had two others present from former spouses. The children, except for Ruth and Millie, were dressed in matching green skirts and blue shorts. The reunion was a model of organization: the children served the food in a long buffet line, other relatives and grandchildren passed through the line while the Anderson siblings fanned the food to keep off the flies. The siblings checked the tables making sure everyone had plenty to eat and drink. One son played the master of ceremonies and presented a plaque to the host, Walter Hunter (the husband of Dora's daughter by a former marriage). Walter was visibly moved by the presentation, and people around us grew uncomfortable at his show of emotions. Ruth commented that he was moved to tears to show his appreciation for the Anderson siblings because his own sisters didn't talk to him. Mrs. Anderson came and sat by us for a while. She had worked in poultry for six or seven years early in her life, but left to take a job at the university. When I asked her if her children always got along so well, she said yes, that they gather at her house every weekend and all play games together. They all live in Gresham County and enjoy each other's company.

The composition of Ruth's household has changed over the last few decades. As a youth, she lived with her mother and her ailing uncle. She nursed her uncle until his death. Besides her mother and Milly, she also had a cousin who lived with her until she died of a sudden heart attack in 1985.

I would find Zack at Sue's house as often as at his mother's.

Ruth and Zack feel a close relationship with Sue and Sue's family; Zack refers to Sue as his grandmother. I would find Zack at Sue's house as often as at his mother's. Several times I visited Sue and found Zack cooking at his aunt's stove. He goes to Sue's house after school and stays there when Ruth is working late. Zack probably calls Sue his grandmother because that is how she is presented to the school. It is Sue, not Ruth, who attends to school matters, and it was Sue who asked me for help in finding someone to tutor Zack during the summer. After I had tutored Zack, it was Sue who noticed that he was reading the paper and commented on it and on how happy it had made her son to come home and find Zack reading.

Outside the two houses of the immediate household, Ruth traces kinship ties to many families in the county, and to quite a few in Sparta. She knows how everyone is related — kinship ties are important to her. She depends on kin for services, getting a used car through her half-brother, her car insurance through a distant cousin, her son's haircut from another half-sister. One day we were making a social visit and an exchange of goods to a blind, elderly friend. The produce was almost rotten by the time we arrived, but that didn't seem to matter for the important point was that the connection hadn't been broken. These bonds that connect individuals and households

serve a purpose more important than exchanging produce. Gresham County residents keep abreast of job openings, exchange food, and form bonds that can be called on in an emergency. The elderly gentleman's wife was a stroke victim and required a visiting aide. It didn't take Ruth long to establish that this woman was related to her and exactly how. She'll remember the connection and use it.

In addition to her actual kin she has room for many others in her fictive kin network. The elderly couple who run the funeral home where she sometimes works on the weekends are her Mommy and Daddy. They not only refer to each other in kinship terms, but take on some of the responsibilities that those terms imply. Her "Daddy" constantly worries about her and how she is getting on with her boyfriends. He worries when a boyfriend doesn't treat her right. When Ruth was recuperating from her hysterectomy this summer her "Mommy" brought her juices and prepared food to eat. Ruth worries about me and when I've been sick or she hasn't heard from me in a few days she calls to check and see that I am all right. In the first few weeks after the hysterectomy, I was running around from bank to doctor's office to insurance company to plant, helping out with the paper work. A clerk at the bank asked Sue if I was one of those household helpers and if so where was I from because I didn't act like I was from around here. Sue found that extremely amusing and told me that she replied "No, she doesn't act like she's from around here," (implying that I was not a white racist) and that I was Ruth's daughter down from the North to help out. When the clerk look astounded Sue responded, "Yes, we have white family, but we've just kept it quiet, until now."

Ruth started her full-time working life shortly after her graduation from high school at a locally-owned fast-food restaurant in 1963, making \$2.60 an hour. In 1966 she left to enter the poultry plant. When I asked her why she chose poultry, she said that she had considered the university, but they paid only every two weeks and she needed a pay check every week. Also, the poultry plant paid more. She earned \$2.75 an hour and worked from 37 to 44 hours a week depending on how many chickens there were to kill each day. On the average she would take home one hundred dollars a week. She never knew when she would get home — sometimes it would be as late as 9 o'clock. At first her mother cared for Zack and, after her mother was no longer able, her sister Sue took over that responsibility. She now pays Sue between \$50 and \$100 every two weeks to care for Zack and look after Milly.

Ruth was working three jobs when I met her and is currently working a fourth. The main job is at the poultry plant paying \$6.12 an hour. Her normal schedule is 9:30 to 6:30. She brings home around \$200 a week after deductions, which include health insurance. Her second job is at the local nursing home, where she makes \$4.35 an hour. When I first met her she was working

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nights, three nights on, three nights off. On the nights that she worked, she would sleep for a few hours after coming home from the poultry plant until 11:00 P.M. when she would start at the nursing home. She worked at the nursing home until seven in the morning, would come home, take a bath, and rest for an hour before she had to go into the poultry plant. Her third job was working for her "Daddy" at the funeral parlor in Sparta. She would relieve at the desk, help arrange flowers, or drive the hearse as needed. When she worked at the funeral home she would bring home a weekly check of \$20-\$30. She recently picked up a fourth job working weekend evenings at the same fast-food restaurant where she started her working career twenty-seven years ago. One of her friends has been working at the restaurant since 1966. Ruth commented that her friend's hourly wage is more than her own at the poultry plant. She acquired this fourth job because she anticipated leaving the nursing home due to state certification requirements. Ruth didn't pass the certification test and resented having to take it after having taken care of sick people all her life. The nursing instructor had accused her of not being able to read at one of the instruction sessions and that insult had hurt her deeply and ruined the class and the test for her. A nurse later promised to help her through the test, since they didn't want to lose her, but Ruth's pride was deeply hurt and she refused to be tutored.

Jane

Jane was bedridden as a result of neck trauma from her 23 years of "pulling crow".

Jane Harris lives on Piney Road about a quarter of a mile from Ruth's. I first interviewed Jane in November of 1989. She was bedridden at the time as a result of neck trauma from her twenty-three years of "pulling crow" at the poultry plant. Some years back her doctor removed a disk and it gave her some relief. Sometimes she can walk around although on a good day it still takes her all day to clean her house. When I interviewed her she was having a bad day, lying on the couch with two hot-water bottles underneath her. She had a two-year-old with her at the house and said that he can help her by dialing 'O' if she should need him to.

She described the work that she did for her twenty-three years at the plant:

I pulled crow – cut necks, cut liver, cut gizzards. . . pulling crow is straining. . . you need a sharp knife – you cut the neck and pull bone. You have to get every third chicken – just as fast as you could reach. Sometimes I missed it. We had to get forty-five sometimes up to sixty a minute.

When she would complain about the strain to her back, the plant nurse would wrap it or put Ben Gay on it. The nurse often gave her something to take – "no-name pills" she called them. Then they would send her back to

work. Sometimes it hurt so much that she just couldn't continue pulling craw. She told me of one day in particular when she was hurting real bad and she tried to swap tasks with a friend. Frances said "Sister, I'll give you a break." But then they came and moved Frances. Another friend, Hazel, gave her a liniment and she continued working. She finally left the plant in 1982 and is now collecting disability after a lengthy fight with the company.

She described to me her experiences with school. "I didn't go to school but a little. Mama was sick." She said she never learned much and can only read at about a fourth-grade level. She said that she dreamed about going to California and getting a good job, but then added "But I never been to California."

I asked her why she started working at the poultry plant and she said that it was the only job at the time (1959) that would hire blacks. She had children and needed the job; her husband worked infrequently. She needed to be at work at six A.M., but never knew when she would get home. Sometimes it would be as late as 10 P.M. She didn't have relatives around so she had to depend on neighbors to help care for the kids. Hazel helped when she didn't have to work and other times she got different neighbors.

Jane has six boys who live on Piney Road. Of her six boys, four graduated from high school and two quit in the twelfth grade. Her oldest boy, Lester, 37, recently moved back to Piney Road from Sparta. He finished high school and now installs irrigation systems. Winston, 32, also lives on the road but works in a small town about fifteen miles away. He also runs the club next to Ruth's house. Gregg, 29, left school in the twelfth grade and now tests chickens in one of the other poultry plants. He lives with his mother. Sam, 22, graduated from high school and works at a steak house in Sparta. The youngest boy, Allan, is twenty. He graduated from high school and works in a sewing plant in Sparta. He also recently moved back to Piney Road. When I asked Jane if any of the boys ever considered working in the poultry plant, she said that Lester had tried it, but quit. Winston said working in the poultry plant was a killing job and he wanted no part of it.

Jane said that it was hard to raise her six boys. She didn't have running water (there's still an outhouse out back) and would have to carry water and wood. Sue's husband, Zyet, would help. She said Zyet was good to her. He would come by with collard greens and sometimes meat. "He would seem to know when I needed food." She says that although it was hard to raise her boys under those conditions, "It sure is good to have them around now."

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Winston said working in the poultry plant was a killing job and he wanted no part of it.

Frances

Frances lives north of Sandy Grove about three miles from the northern border of the county. Her house was constructed recently by her boyfriend, a drawn, quiet man. Frances says he doesn't read very well and has a hard time keeping a job. When I interviewed Frances, he was staying home keeping Frances's granddaughter who lives with them. Several of her children have house trailers on the same house lot. Her sister lives with her and does much of the house work. Frances also bakes cakes and caters dinners for extra household cash. Her front room is dominated by a wood-burning stove, and a granddaughter was adding wood on a cold October morning when I visited her. Her sons, and other boys who she said could as well be sons because she had raised them, were in the front room, waiting for Frances to dispense the weekly cash and dispatch them on errands. As this went on, she told of her work at the plant and her problems as shop steward. She pointed proudly to her law book by a set of encyclopedias.

Frances left school in the seventh grade. She began picking cotton after school; her work life started early. She started working in poultry in the 50s. Back then she would stay in Bradford to make commuting easier. "Both were hard work," she said. Despite the hard work of those days in poultry, she described the early days in the poultry plant as good days. People were nicer then; now, management is strict.

In the early 60s, Frances took a break to have children, but returned to the plant in 1965. Her mother lived with her and took care of her ten children. Her mother had a crippled leg, and didn't mind having a child or two stay home from school and help her. Since Frances left for work before the kids got off to school and returned after they came back she said that she didn't know that her kids were skipping school. It wasn't until a truant officer appeared at her house and took away two of her children that she discovered her mother had been helping the children lie about school attendance.

None of Frances' ten children finished high school.

None of Frances' ten children finished high school. Three worked in nearby rock quarries, three in poultry, one works for a van manufacturer, and three were not working. Eight of them live in the county, two in a neighboring county. "All live within hollering distance" she told me proudly.

While we talked a grandchild read a book. She said that her granddaughter had gone to Head Start, but fell behind in kindergarten and they decided to keep her back. She said sadly that she had never had time to spend with her children as they were growing up and now she wishes she had more time to give to the granddaughter she is raising. She told me that one of her priorities as steward was to change the working schedule. She wanted it to start earlier

so women could be home early enough to help children with schoolwork. As it is now, some women, like Ruth, don't get home until 6:30 or 7:00. They have no time to help with the schoolwork.

Fannie Mae

Fannie Mae Harris lives in downtown Bradford in a white frame house. Her house looks small from the outside but inside it has been remodeled and is large and roomy. On a day Ruth and I visited her she was sitting in the TV room with her two grandsons watching an educational program. The boys and their mother, her daughter, live with her since her son-in-law died several years ago. As she showed Ruth and me around the house, she introduced us to her mother who was near ninety and mentally sharp. Fannie Mae's husband, who had worked for a lumber firm in town, had remodeled the house shortly before he died six years ago.

Fannie Mae retired from the plant four years ago, having worked there for thirty-two years. She started working at the plant on a Monday, January 11 of 1954. Hazel started the next day and Hattie started the day after. They traveled to work together. Fannie Mae never got a driver's license, although she did sometimes drive to her sister's house. Sometimes she hitched rides to work, but she said "I never did know who I would ride home with." She took a job at the plant in Sparta because there was no work in Gresham County. Before working at the plant she had worked for a doctor who lived up the street. He paid her \$7.50 a week. She also had some work grading eggs for a short time, but it was only part-time and didn't pay much.

While she worked at the plant, her mother watched her six children. All of her children finished high school. The oldest is getting a doctorate (she wasn't sure which field) in Louisiana. The daughter's husband is a lawyer who now works as an undercover agent. One son works for a plant in the nearby city. Another works as a salesman in South Carolina. The second daughter went to college for three years and works for a doctor in Atlanta. Her youngest daughter and her two sons live with her. This daughter had gone to the local technical school and then to a business school but still can't get a job.

When Fannie Mae started working at the plant in the 50s, there was only one shift and they had to be at work at eight or nine in the morning. She said the first day she worked fourteen hours. It was rough back then, but she survived. There was a time in the 60s when there was no night shift and they had to be in work real early, sometimes as early as three in the morning. Sometimes they would work only a few hours if there weren't a lot of chickens. When the union came they won a guaranteed eight-hour day. They

One of her priorities as steward was to change the working schedule. She wanted it to start earlier so women could be home early enough to help children with schoolwork.

still didn't do away with mandatory overtime, however, and even those working in the plant today don't know what time they'll get home in the evening.

We started talking about Gresham County and what she thought was needed to make the county a better place for the young people. She felt that the county needed jobs, places where blacks could work, and recreation for the kids so they don't get into trouble during the summer. She also felt that there was a need for more appropriate counseling. She gave as an example her grandson, who won a basketball scholarship but still couldn't go to college because he didn't know where he would get the rest of the money. This theme was repeated many times by women or their children: blacks in the county were either not encouraged to go on to college or were given incorrect information about appropriate colleges.

Schooling in the Cotton Economy

Schooling for the rural poor of Gresham County was closely tied to the schedule of the cotton crop. Many of the women I met went to one of two schools, both preserved today as fellowship halls of churches (see picture on page 21). Schools had one room with a large wood-burning stove in the middle. The younger children sat on one side of the stove and the older children on the other. One teacher taught all classes, but often the older children taught the younger. Anyone who finished seventh grade could be a teacher, so the upper grades didn't get much advanced training. Black schools in the county only went up to the eleventh grade. If you wanted to graduate you had to go to Sparta and board there. A family often couldn't afford to send any children, or they had to make choices about which ones to send. One woman said that she had wanted to go to school in Sparta but her family decided to send her sister instead.

I wish a million times I finished school.

Ruth had been present at an interview with Fannie Mae and a question I asked prompted a lively discussion about the school they attended. Because Fannie Mae was older, she remembered conditions that preceded Ruth's experiences, but both remembered the big wood-burning stove that sat in the middle of the floor and separated the older children from the younger children. The older children would go out in the morning and get wood for the stove. An older child would also be responsible for getting a branch to be used as a switch, because learning in those days was overseen by the switch. Miss a spelling word and that branch rendered its decision. Fannie Mae remembered lunches served from commodity food distributed to each school. They would open the cans of pork and beans and eat them cold on plates they had brought. Fannie Mae would also carry fatback biscuits prepared by her mother who cooked for white people. For a few years,

Fannie Mae went to school in Atlanta but left school in the eighth grade. She was then fifteen. "I wish a million times I finished school."

Raising a Family

During the 60s these women who worked in poultry were also raising their children. Because the hours were long and unpredictable, women needed help in the house. Sometimes they had a husband who helped but sometimes the men had unsteady jobs and couldn't be counted on to be home. In only one case did the father figure prominently in the housework. In Evelyn Stevens' family the father prepared breakfast and picked up the children from after-school activities. But often the husband, even if he didn't work, couldn't be counted on to do the domestic chores. Many men had two jobs, or spent time looking for jobs. Without a male at home it was essential to have someone, either an older child or another adult, in the house to prepare dinner for the young children and to help with the domestic chores. Sometimes it was a mother or mother-in-law; sometimes it was a sister or aunt. There was always someone around, only Jane said she didn't have family and had to rely on neighbors to help. Families were three, sometimes four generations. Often the families didn't live in the same house but had separate dwellings on one plot of land—at Frances' place there are six dwellings.

Schooling the Children

Schools changed dramatically in the decades between the second world war and today. In the early 50s schools were small and community based. Very little money was spent on schools for blacks in the county. But following the 1954 Supreme Court ruling of separate but equal facilities, schools consolidated. The first black twelve-year high school was constructed just north of Royalton, and a white elementary and high school was constructed on the main highway between Royalton and Bradford. These three buildings served the county for almost twenty years until the county integrated the schools in 1970. In Gresham County the school board implemented a freedom-of-choice program. Families could voluntarily enroll their children in the white schools. This attempt at delaying real integration lasted until 1970, when a new superintendent was brought in to reorganize the school system. Instead of a twelve-year black school, and two white schools, there would be an elementary school using the previously all-black facility, and a common middle school and a high school.

The fifty-nine Gresham County children, except for the younger ones, participated in the integration of the schools. After 1970 physical segregation

When she went to the white school black students were put in the bottom group and had to work their way to the higher groups.

was replaced by a tracking system that led to early testing and placement, and blacks more often than not found themselves in the lower tracks. Once tracked it was difficult to change. Educational quality suffered, and with it guidance for postsecondary schooling. My interviews showed some common problems. Judy Taylor, daughter of Mary Taylor, said that schooling was different for the whites. When she went to the white school black students were put in the bottom group and had to work their way to the higher groups. Only one other black went to college from her graduating class. Blacks were not encouraged and weren't given accurate information about colleges. Young people complained about the quality of counseling in the high school. Judy said that the counselor suggested that she apply to Morehouse, an all-male institution. She only discovered the error when she received the reply from the school. She finally applied and was accepted to Morris Brown, but found herself unprepared for the amount and level of work required. Judy told me that she had never had to write a research report in high school and had to learn how in remedial courses at Morris Brown. Mary said that another kind of discrimination goes on, a social discrimination that limits black parents' participation in parents' committees. Mary had always worked with the PTA but often wasn't called for meetings. She said once that her daughter wanted to participate in the twirlers and was given incorrect information about the time of rehearsals. She felt the exclusion was intentional.

Cheryl Stevens (Evelyn's daughter), who is younger than Judy, also felt that schooling was disadvantageous to blacks. She felt that early testing and early tracking put black children at a disadvantage. The lack of late-afternoon buses after activity hours hurt blacks, many of whom came from families where both parents worked. She said that she was able to participate in basketball and track because her father could come and pick her up. She learned how to be assertive because she participated in sports activities; if it hadn't been for her participation in athletics she would have been shy. With the encouragement of a black coach she went to a business college in Atlanta, and became an accomplished public speaker and an active member of her church. It's hard to imagine Cheryl as shy; she is poised, well-dressed and articulate, yet she said she learned these qualities through her school athletics program. Cheryl also felt that counseling at the school was a problem. She saw it as a problem for everyone, black and white; there just wasn't enough counseling, and the counselor didn't have time to work with everyone individually. Although brochures were available, high school students had to know what they wanted, information wasn't volunteered.

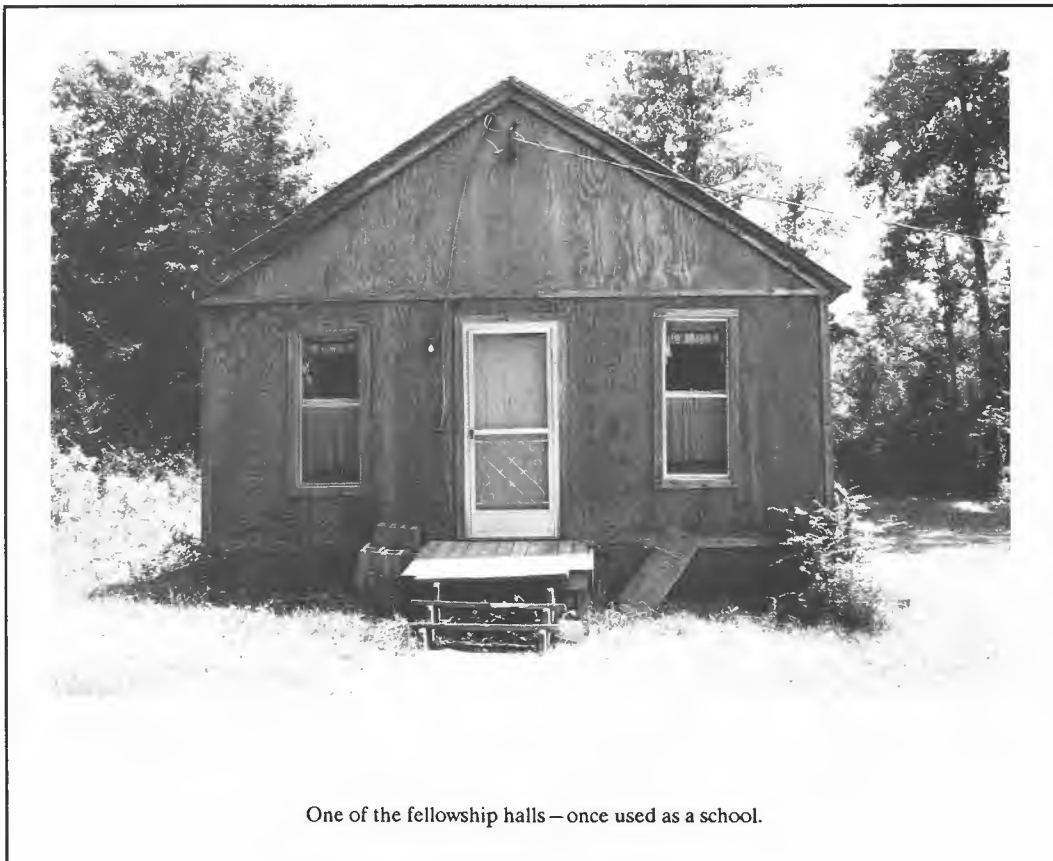
Teenagers in Gresham County since the 60s have faced a labor market quite different from the single industry that dominated poultry in the 50s and 60s. The area has been industrializing ever since the 50s, but the pace picked up rapidly in the 70s. Today, industries employ Gresham County

youth, both black and white. Opportunities exist in health care (two large hospitals hire women, as do several nursing homes in the area), garment and textile plants, and electrical and chemical industries, all of which started operations in the last three decades or began hiring blacks in the late 60s. Toward the eastern end of the county rock quarries still hire young men. Today the black teenagers of the county see the poultry plants as employment of last resort. Many have seen their mothers work there, and reject the plantation-like conditions. When hearing that I wanted to talk to her mother, one young woman said "It's like a chain gang in there." Some young people have tried working there, but they leave quickly, moving to other industries in Sparta. Others leave to go on welfare – and why not when you consider hours away from home, money for childcare, and transportation costs? It doesn't pay to work when there is a welfare alternative. Ruth gets angry at the young women who chose that alternative. She worked hard and is raising her son and paying her bills, why shouldn't she get angry? But it is an alternative; unless there is someone home to keep the family, working at poultry these days doesn't always pay. Still, the fact of the plant's existence influences how children see their employment opportunities; like a bad apple it affects them even if they never work there. Guidance counselors, principals, teachers, and the teenagers themselves all know that kids in the Gresham County school system can always get a job in poultry. The social worker told me that when kids drop out, they usually tell her it's to get a job. They don't have a job in mind and they don't need to, because poultry is always hiring, you don't need a high school diploma, and you don't even know how to read (it's the one plant in the area that allows you to take the application home). The plant screens for drugs, but not for literacy.

Today the black teenagers of the county see the poultry plants as employment of last resort.

II

FAMILY, EDUCATION, AND WORK



One of the fellowship halls — once used as a school.

Family, Education and Work

These twelve women have a total of fifty-nine children, fifty-eight of whom are still living. Six of the women are currently married and their husbands are the fathers of all their children. Three are widowed and the three other women are not married and were not married when they had their children. Of the fifty-nine children, forty finished high school. Eighteen went beyond high school – nine attended tech school, three completed tech school, four attended college, and two completed college. Most of the children stayed in the county after finishing school. Because I wanted to know what hard work and poor education in the earlier generation would mean for the life chances of the young rural poor today, I tracked what happened to the children of a dozen poultry workers I had come to know particularly well. The majority of those who left obtained jobs as professionals or technicians. Sixteen of the children are either pink or white collar workers, three are in the military, and four are unemployed. Of the sixteen professional or technical workers, only four live in Gresham County. Those who are currently in the county are blue collar workers.

For those children who finished high school, education did not bring financial rewards. Even if you attended technical school, the only chance of obtaining a competitive salary was to leave the area. Young people didn't see technical school as a way to reap financial gains. The admissions officer of the regional technical school told me that when he describes their program a common response is "why should we go to school two years without any income and then start out earning \$6.00 an hour when we can go to poultry and get a job for \$5.90 an hour?" Even Cheryl, who attended a two-year college, chose to live at home rather than Atlanta because her family was nearby, even though this meant a substantially lower salary now and no possibility of advancement. Judy Taylor also chose to stay, though she has to work forty miles away because the school district won't hire her as a teacher. For Judy and her brother who attended college for two years, being close to their family was more important than the financial rewards of urban life.

Investment in education only brings rewards if a child is willing to move out of the county. The surest way of earning enough to live on in Gresham County is to add another job onto an already low paying one. Many of the children work two jobs. Judy, in addition to her teaching job, works as a night supervisor in a local chemical plant. Her reluctance to move to the city is common among poultry workers in other rural counties. I talked to twenty-five workers who come in to Sparta on a bus from counties to the east and

Investment in education only brings rewards if a child is willing to move out of the county.

south of Gresham County. More than half had high school diplomas. Many had job or technical training and one had three years of college. They had either stayed in their county or moved back because they wanted to be near their families or they wanted their mothers or mothers-in-law to take care of their children.

If they stayed, finishing high school didn't make much difference in their salaries.

Staying in the county, although it is the choice of most of young people, has its costs. If they stayed, finishing high school didn't make much difference in their salaries. Having a second job was a more certain path to a higher income. Despite the lack of incentives many people finished high school — perhaps because of family insistence or because the American dream of opportunity through education exists in their minds (even if not in reality). Completing high school doesn't bring a guaranteed job. Technical training might, but only if you leave the county. The desire to be close to your family, to help the mother who raised you, more often than not keeps you at home in a low paying job. For children and families the choice is difficult. Hazel, who was single while she raised ten children, putting them all through high school and seeing them leave one by one, was caught stealing from the local grocery store. Jane, on the other hand, enjoys the presence and financial help of her children now that they are grown and have settled near her. These two are perhaps extremes, but nevertheless exemplify the difficult decisions that children make in considering their education and work options.

III

PINEY ROAD AND THE NEW SOUTH



Toward the eastern end of the county rock quarries still hire young men.

Piney Road and the New South

In the last fifty years, the South has been transformed from an agricultural to an industrial society, but the transformation has been very uneven. Urban areas have expanded, spurred by technologically advanced industries whose jobs offer competitive salaries, career ladders, and sometimes union protection. Rural areas have mainly attracted low-skill industries, with low or horizontal wage structures, and with few benefits or career ladders. This regional division of labor markets reflects a forty-year policy of expansion tied to business leaders' resistance to industries that would threaten the prevailing low wages. It also reflects rural school systems that are underfunded, understaffed, and limited by anti-progressive values. The plantation economy was transformed, but not in ways that undermined its underlying social relations.

Each of the families I know in detail has a different history. I have no reason to think that they are exceptional, though; they represent what's happening across the rural South and probably beyond. Eleven of the women did not finish high school; most have less than a seventh-grade education. They left school at different ages, from thirteen up. Some say they are hardly able to read while others describe themselves as competent readers. Their children differed in their success in school — most finished high school but some didn't. A few went on to obtain higher degrees, including one in a doctoral program. The educational trajectories of the children were not related to either the mothers' feeling of reading competence or educational attainment. All Hazel's children either graduated or are still in school despite the fact that she left school after the fourth grade.

While the families differed in their histories, they faced common patterns in how they adapted to work in the poultry plant. The women shared low wages, long commutes, and unpredictable schedules. They managed by forming car pools and sharing the driving expenses; they managed their households by extending their families to include adult non-wage workers as supplementary household labor. This pattern, already well known in the rural south, now serves a different purpose, the support of a female employed in an urban job. Although conditions that required the extended family are different from those of earlier agricultural employment, the effects were the same: strong family allegiances that motivate against upward mobility when that mobility required leaving the area.

The latter half of the 60s brought changes that had a profound effect on black workers and even more of an effect on their children. The first change

Rural areas have mainly attracted low-skill industries, with low or horizontal wage structures, and with few benefits or career ladders.

The extending, always changing household is a way of coping.

was the integration of industries—prior to the 60s blacks who worked in industry did so as janitors. Reacting to protests and law suits, industries opened their production jobs to blacks. Secondly, the economy was in an expansion phase and more industries were moving to the area and offering higher pay and more humane conditions. Some workers left the poultry industry. For the first time, men in the area were able to get industrial jobs and although the starting pay was often not much better than in poultry, there were retirement and other benefits. These new electrical, chemical, trucking, and warehousing industries significantly altered the job prospects for the region's children. Poultry played a role. It was an employer of last resort: if you needed a job in a hurry, poultry was always there and always hiring. The starting salary was above minimum wage, high enough to discourage attending a technical school. New industries offered better employment opportunities for Gresham County residents. At the same time the recruiters for the poultry plants widened their recruitment to include even more rural counties—now recruiting from a radius of seventy miles, and recruiting Mexican workers.

The labor market is still limited—wage rates are still significantly lower than in Atlanta. The poultry personnel manager reported that he couldn't recruit computer repair personnel because they can make twice as much in Atlanta. The urban pull exists—but leaving the family and the rural life with its community cohesiveness is difficult, and few take that option.

Women reflecting on their employment at the plant complain about the harsh conditions, yet they acknowledge that their families are better off because of their employment.

The twelve families reflect the historical transformation: starting as children in the cotton fields, adding their production to the household count, making as little as \$12.00 plus fatback and cornmeal for a whole family's monthly production. Leaving their childhood in the late 40s and 50s, they faced employment opportunities that had not been there for their parents. Some started their independent work careers as domestic workers in local houses, but by the late 50s, they too laid down the broom and joined the industrial work force in one of only two non-domestic sources of employment—the growing poultry industry. As a group these women saw the transformation of the industry, from its small, paternalistic beginnings to the largest industrial employer in the region. Its management changed three times during that period, from a local owner to a multinational conglomerate. They saw their conditions of work change from the paternalistic individual owner to the impersonal manager and a hierarchy of supervisory staff who run the plant by the book—titled increased production. Bathroom visits are now numbered and timed, there is no paid sick leave or personal time, and unpaid time off is severely limited. Women reflecting on their employment at the plant complain about the harsh conditions, yet they acknowledge that their families are better off because of their employment. Every family owns their own house (sometimes a mobile home) and land;

many of the children attended college or post-secondary institutions, and a few graduated from college.

The rural counties are paying for the industrial policy of the late 50s and early 60s when they turned down unionized industries because of businessmen's fears of unionized workers. Instead local chambers of commerce and political leaders courted low-skill, low-wage industries. These industries and the new fast-food restaurants which served the growing number of college students provided an opportunity for many people to make a decent living by working two jobs. Holding two and sometimes three jobs became a way of supporting a family and providing what were becoming symbols of the middle class – good cars, TVs, recreation rooms, and modern kitchens. But the costs were high – the wage earner delegated the responsibility for the family's daily needs to a relative. There was little time to spend with the children while they were growing up, although the children usually had a grandmother or aunt in the house. The strategy of the extended family worked, as it has in so many other contexts worldwide, but at the expense of personal time with children that is the requisite for their individual education and social mobility.

Children face the dilemma early on. They follow their parents' urging to do well in school, but the path to higher education also leads them away from their families. In a community where honesty, hard work, and family are important, why should young people take the path that almost certainly will lead them out of the county?

This is not to downplay the importance of education. But education has been dichotomized – personal, family and community learning needs stand in opposition to school learning. The families I visited had books in the house, read newspapers, kept track of world events, and traveled. They took pride in their knowledge, abilities, judgement, and group leadership skills – skills not often learned in school. School gave credentials for jobs – but jobs that didn't often hire rural blacks. In fact, many people who have succeeded in business, including the first black business owner in the county, had little formal education. Even the plants that once didn't require high school degrees now require them for employment. However, as rural blacks know well, the diploma requirement is used more as a screening device than as an indicator of necessary skills. Whether this requirement will affect the county's high school graduation rate remains to be seen. Changing high school graduate requirements may not effectively alter the drop-out rate if they are not coordinated with educational delivery.

The media often portray the southern states as backward and lacking in education and industrial development. The alternative view, supported by this study, is that the low literacy and educational levels are not just the result

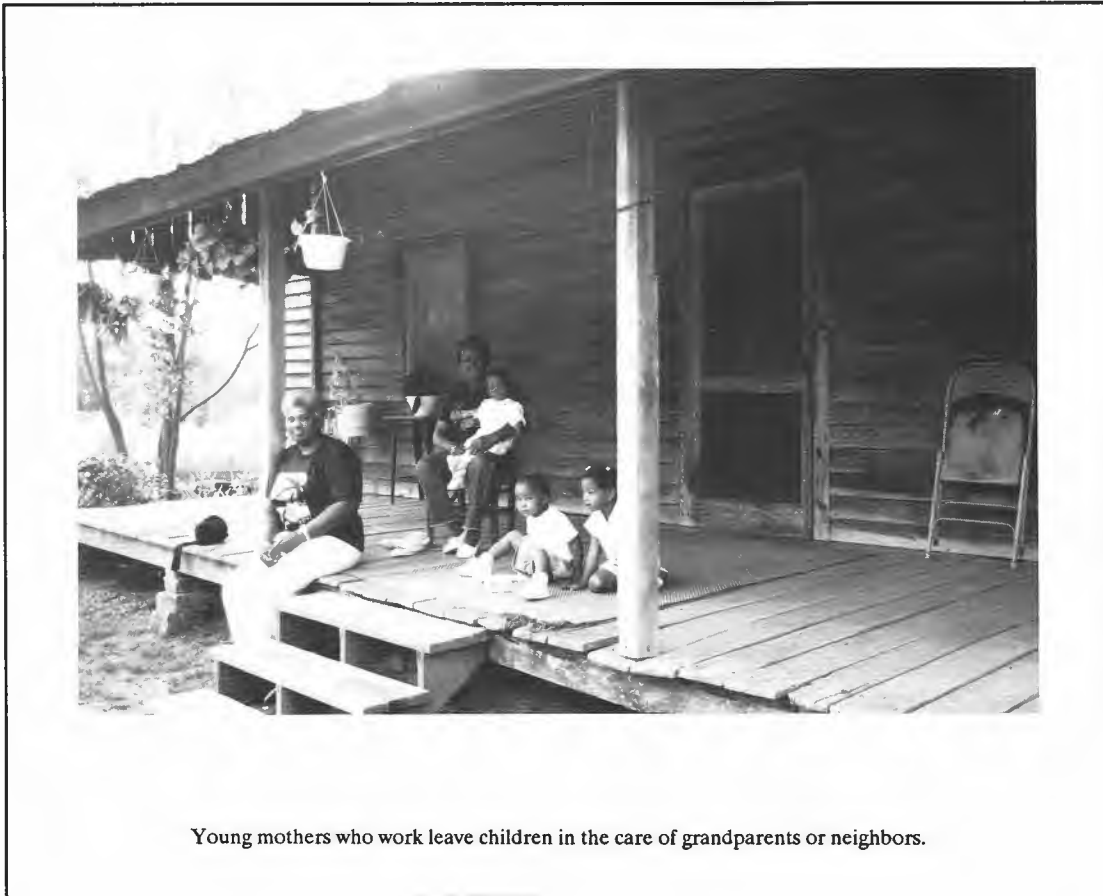
But education has been dichotomized – personal, family and community learning needs stand in opposition to school learning.

Staying in the rural county brings little return to education, especially when second jobs are easy to obtain.

of backwardness, a lack of economic development, low taxes, and inadequate schooling. Instead these result from an intentional policy of attracting low-skill, low-wage industries. This study showed that the women who worked in poultry became the main breadwinners or at least a substantial contributor to the family's income. The women worked long hours and the car pool commute which took extra hours kept them away from their families for ten to fourteen hours a day. Overtime was unpredictable; women often didn't know in the morning when they would return home. A common way to solve this problem was to extend the family to include another adult non-working household member, sometimes a husband but more often a mother, mother-in-law, aunt or sister. But extended families carry with them reciprocal obligations. Children, once they are finished with school often decide to stay home to "help their mothers out." Staying in the rural county, which most children do, brings little return to education, especially when second jobs are easy to obtain. However, staying in the rural county is often preferred to the difficulties of urban life; when young people can supplement their salaries by working two jobs many do. This strategy works, but leaves the women with little time to go to school themselves, or to help with their children's schoolwork, and no pension for their retirement years. They must depend on family members for support in their old age. The result is the development of underdevelopment – southern style.

IV

FUTURE OF THE RURAL SOUTH



Young mothers who work leave children in the care of grandparents or neighbors.

Future of the Rural South

The future of the rural South is inextricably connected to the kinds of industries it develops or attracts. Low-skill industries such as textiles are the first to move to third world countries. Poultry, less inclined to leave because it is tied so closely to the production of chickens and turkeys, is importing Mexican workers at a rapid rate. The South needs locally-run industries, those which are willing to make a long-term commitment to the area, to participate in the training of a work force, and to ensure that the work force is provided for in its old age. There is a great need to develop training programs on a part-time or short course basis to help the youth graduating from high school who already have financial obligations. Counseling should be expanded and the possibilities for post-secondary education explored individually with students. But the main deterrent to education advancement is the lack of local high paying skilled jobs. Until those jobs are available, young people of the rural South are faced with the difficult decision of whether to leave or stay. If you leave your family you reject your obligations to provide material, physical, and emotional support. When the choice is to stay, the alternatives of obtaining a technical degree and being under-employed versus limited education with multiple jobs creates an easy alternative. For the children of this study the choice was clear: most people stayed and found employment where they could, supplementing their income with second and sometimes third jobs. This generation's choice will reverberate into the next.

The South needs locally-run industries, those which are willing to make a long-term commitment to the area, to participate in the training of a work force, and to ensure that the work force is provided for in its old age.

Recommendations

- Industry and private industry councils should encourage the development of locally owned industries through tax incentives.
- Private industries should be encouraged to develop on-site education programs through tax incentives.
- High schools should expand their counseling services to ensure that each student knows his/her postsecondary options.
- Technical and high school should consider joint programs leading to a high school and technical degree.
- The regional technical school should expand to offer more evening, weekend, and short courses.

