New South Business Leaders
In The North Carolina Piedmont

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In the late 1800's more and more North Carolinians began to experience a lifestyle which differed greatly from that which they and their families had known on the farm. No longer was toiling in the fields under a bright, broiling sun, cultivating cotton, corn, or tobacco, feeding the chickens and slopping the hogs, the principal ways these folks made a living. They migrated instead to such emerging industrial centers in the piedmont as Winston, Greensboro, Salisbury and Charlotte, where most became laborers in tobacco factories, furniture plants, and textile mills. One textile worker in the Mecklenburg Mill in Charlotte described what the daily routine was like for his mother.

> After a hard shift of breathing in cotton lint, her ears ringing from the constant "bangin" and "slappin" of the motor belts, and the eternal never ending "swishin" of the bobbins and thread, she often worked late into the night hours at our own home. Still tired from the previous day's work, she would crawl out of bed at 4:30AM the next morning, cook breakfast and head out to the mill again to begin another shift.

From 1880 to 1900 the size of the industrial work force in North Carolina doubled each decade, and the value of factory production rose from $20,095,037 in 1880 to $94,919,663 in 1900, an increase of more than 400 percent. A group of intelligent, bold, and aggressive businessmen, leaders of the so-called New South movement, were mainly responsible for the dramatic rise in the number of factories in the North Carolina piedmont between

1880 and 1900. They included such distinguished figures as R. J. Reynolds in Winston, J. M. Odell and Samuel L. Patterson in Concord, Edwin Holt in Alamance County, and H. F. Schenck in Cleveland County, to mention only a few.

Convinced that the South could overcome the poverty and shame produced by the Civil War only if it copied the Yankees and industrialized, these men saw themselves as missionaries in a quest to transform their native region, thereby enabling it to regain a sense of sectional pride by building a robust, modern economy. "New ideas have taken a firm hold in the South, and, to succeed and prosper, we must spin cotton . . . in the light of the new order of things," proclaimed D. A. Tompkins of Charlotte, influential engineer, mill designer, manufacturer, and publicist. Edward Dilworth Latta, whose Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company, locally known as the Four C's, introduced electric streetcars or trolleys to the Queen City in May, 1891, wrote, "We must go forward or retrograde -- there is no resting point with progress."

Some historians regard the New South leaders as heroes who were primarily motivated by a desire to provide jobs for their employees and to uplift the South. Most notable in this regard is Broadus Mitchell in his The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South, published in 1921. "To give employment to the necessitous masses of poor whites, for the sake of the people themselves,

was an object animating the minds of many mill builders," Mitchell asserts. According to Mitchell, factory owners and their white laborers respected one another and saw themselves as more or less equal partners in a struggle to overcome the South's economic and social backwardness.

Paul D. Escott, in his Many Excellent People. Power and Privilege In North Carolina 1850-1900, published in 1985, presents a far less heoric view of the impulses which prompted the New South leaders to establish factories in the North Carolina piedmont. Escott contends that the industrialists of the New South, rather than seeing their workers as allies in a common cause, "continued the hierarchical, aristocratic patterns of power in society that had charcterized antebellum North Carolina." In other words, like their forebearers, the New South industrialists, at least according to Escott, were accustomed to being rich, powerful, and influential; and, after the Civil War, they simply found another way to gain or retain power and influence.

Were the factory and mill owners in North Carolina in the late 1800's mainly interested in providing jobs for their less fortunate fellow Southerners or were they primarily seeking ways to maintain or regain a place of social and economic prominence? How did they feel about their own employees? How did the New South industrialists react to criticism? How did they respond

to those who sought to challenge their authority to run their businesses as they saw fit?

Two men whose careers reveal a lot about the attitudes, motivation, and behavior of the New South factory owners in the North Carolina piedmont are D. A. Tompkins and Edward Dilworth Latta. Both were born in 1851 into the planter elite of ante-bellum South Carolina -- D. A. Tompkins in Edgefield County and Edward Dilworth Latta in the Old Pendleton District. Both went North for their higher education -- Tompkins to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Latta to Princeton. Both moved to Charlotte, Tompkins in 1883 and Latta in 1876, where both acquired prominence and considerable wealth. Tompkins died in 1914, Latta in 1925. Both are buried in Elmwood Cemetery in Charlotte.

D. A. Tompkins, after learning the practical side of industry by working for the Bethlehem Iron Works in Pennsylvania as a mechanic, draftsman, and machinist, came to Charlotte as a representative of the Westinghouse Company. For the next thirty years, he labored tirelessly to promote the economic development of the piedmont section of the two Carolinas.

> When I went to Charlotte, I asked nobody any favors. I was a machinist. I looked out for my own work, did each job that came my way the best I could. . . . . I kept at work, and kept cheerful.

Tompkins's record of accomplishments is staggering. He founded the modern Charlotte Observer and transformed it into a

organ for urban boosterism. First for the Westinghouse Company and later as owner of the D. A. Tompkins Company, he traveled throughout the piedmont, almost single-handedly creating the cotton seed oil industry. In addition to designing and overseeing the construction of dozens of textile mills and mill villages, Tompkins owned and operated three mills, one in Edgefield, S.C., one in High Shoals, N.C., and the Atherton Mill in Charlotte.

D. A. Tompkins took pride in his ability to create what he regarded as a safe and pleasant environment for his mill workers. He published textbooks, such as Cotton Mill: Commerical Features (1899), which influenced the design of mill villages throughout the South. "The Atherton and its surroundings are marvels of beauty," commented a textile executive who visited Charlotte in May, 1900. "There is nothing to approach it in any factory settlement I have seen in the North." But all was not as wonderful as Tompkins claimed. Cotton mills were noisy and dangerous places. They were called "hummers" because of the deafening din which their machines produced. Accidents at the Atherton were numerous, such as the mangling of a worker's hands in June, 1893, or the death of an overseer in the carding room in October, 1902, when he became entangled in the belting apparatus. "He was dead in six seconds," the Charlotte Observer reported. Caught up in an

regimented atmosphere, the workers would occasionally lash out at one another, as in December, 1898, when a shooting occurred between two residents of the Atherton mill village.

Especially revealing in terms of Tompkins's attitudes about his workers is a letter which he wrote on October 15, 1906, to a textile official in Patterson, N.J. Tompkins defended his practice of not placing closets, bathrooms or hot water in his mill houses. He explained that the majority of his mill hands had grown up in rural areas, where such "modern improvements" were unknown. "Sometimes they would object to ordinary clothes closets," he stated, "on the plea that they were receptacles for worn out shoes and skirts that ought to be thrown away and destroyed."

Edward Dilworth Latta moved from New York City to Charlotte in October, 1876, and established E. D. Latta and Brothers, a men's clothing store. In 1883 he founded the Charlotte Trouser Company, a textile plant that manufactured men's trousers for disribution throughout the South. But his greatest accomplishments came as president of the Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company or Four C's. In February, 1891, he signed a contract with the Edison Electric Company to install an electric streetcar or trolley system in Charlotte, to connect the center city with Dilworth, a suburban district which he was developing just south of the Charlotte.

Like Tompkins, Latta had no patience with anything but obedience from his workers. On December 2, 1903, forty-eight trolley conductors and motormen walked off the job and marched from the carbarn in Dilworth to the heart of the city, where they milled about and sought support for their strike. Latta, who was in New York City when the walkout began, arrived in Charlotte on December 3 to find many townspeople wearing buttons that boldy proclaimed, "I walk." How did Latta respond to this challenge? He simply fired all the strikers. All of them. In a letter published in the Charlotte News, Latta explained,

> I regret, beyond expression, the exigency of the situation, causing me to part with a body of men for many of whom I hold a personal attachment; but it could scarcely be expected by any thoughtful fair-minded person that on my return I would dismiss those who had graciously rallied to our interests and reinstate others who, without provocation during my absence, elected to abandon their position with no other expectation than that the company and the public would be without service.

D. A. Tompkins and Edward Dilworth Latta, like many leaders of the New South in the North Carolina piedmont, struggled courageously to strengthen the economy of the region. But their actions were not completely unselfish. When challenged or threatened, men like Tompkins and Latta drew stength from the conviction that their interests were also the interests of the broad masses of the people, even if the general public was not intelligent or advanced enough to agree or understand.