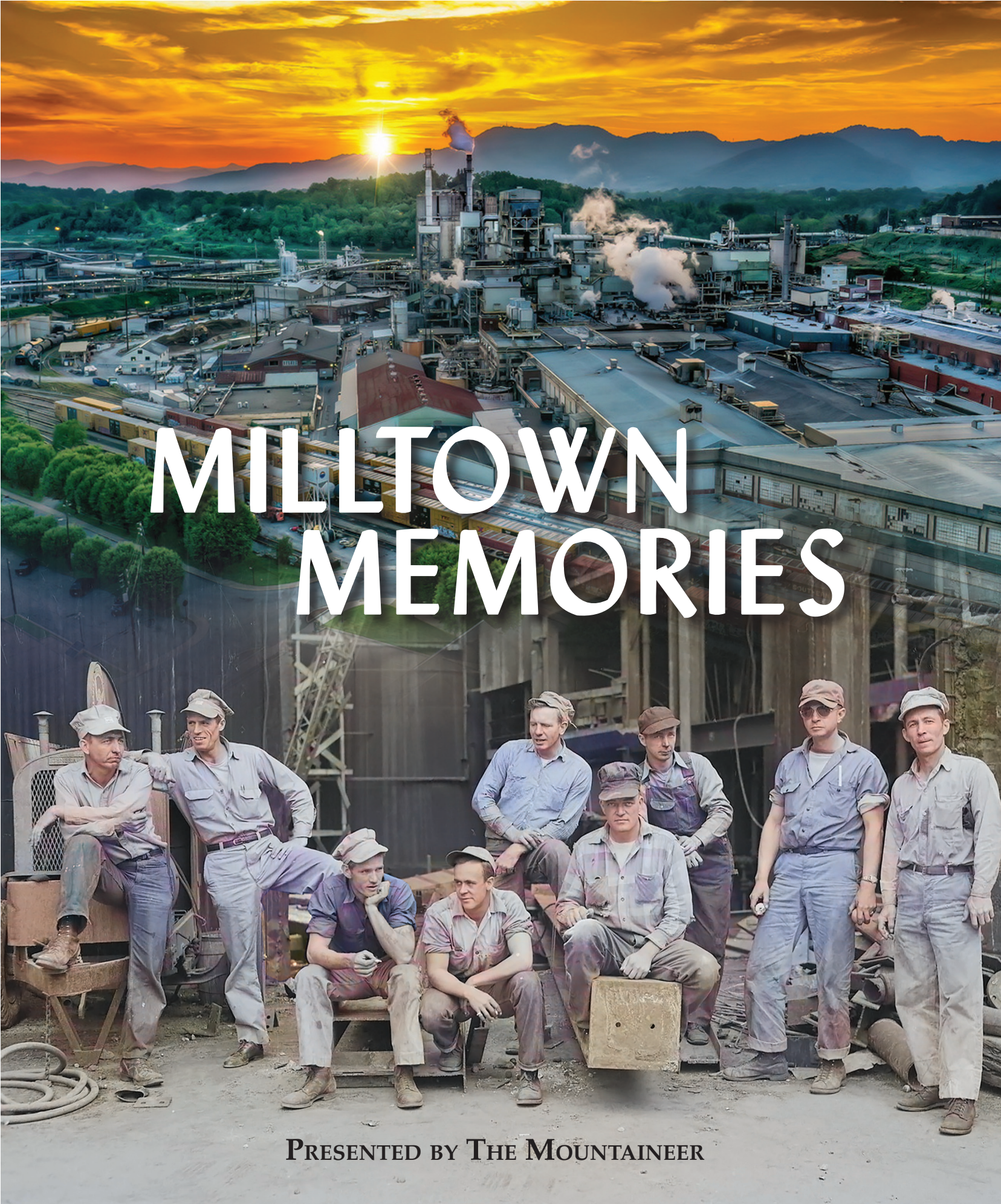

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Welcome to Milltown Memories

Paying tribute to the 115-year history of the Canton paper mill, its workers, the town it built and its lasting legacy in Haywood County has been a massive undertaking.

The mill has been a larger-than-life force, shaping not only our economy, but also our culture. The mill lifted generations of families out of poverty, instilled hometown pride and fostered a collective identity.

We aim for this edition to be a commemoration of the mill and its story — glories, warts and all. Those stories deserve to be celebrated and remembered. Most of all, we hope this souvenir publication will be a cherished collector's edition chronicling the history of the mill — something the families of Haywood County will treasure and share with future generations.

While the closure of the mill is a devastating blow to Haywood County, our milltown culture and heritage will always live on.

— From The Mountaineer

MILLTOWN MEMORIES

PUBLISHER
Jonathan Key

EDITOR
Becky Johnson

CHIEF HISTORIAN
Kathy Ross

ART DIRECTOR
Emily Kepley Moss

GRAPHIC DESIGN
Kylie Frazier
Caroline Hernasy
Mac Heishman

HISTORICAL PHOTO CURATOR
George Anderson

ADVERTISING
Jan George
Jennifer Worley

WRITERS
Kathy Ross, Vicki Hyatt, Peggy Manning, Becky Johnson, Edie Burnette, Gerald Ledford, Elijiah Thornton

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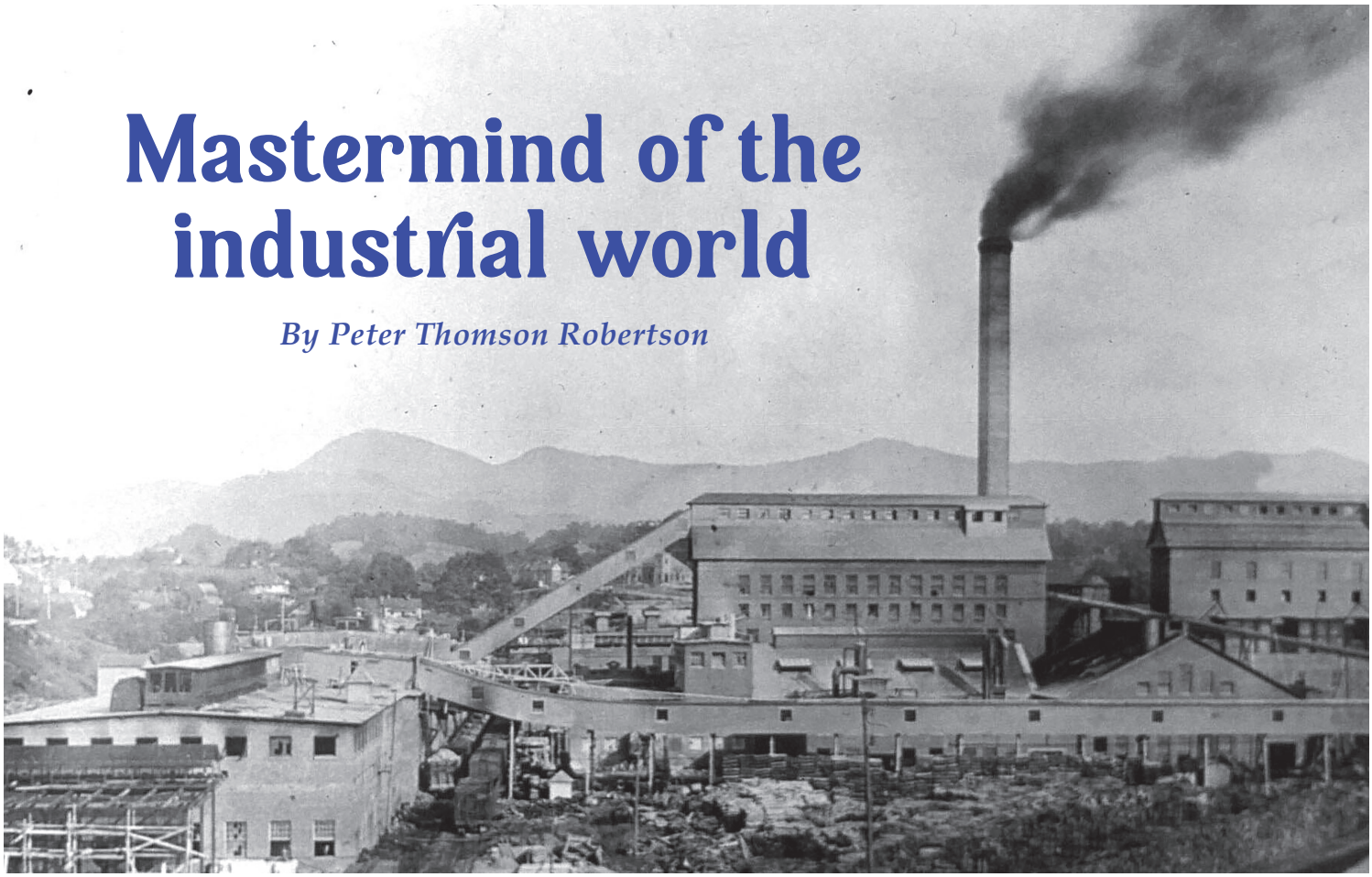
The historic photo on cover came from the Canton Historical Museum.

Free copies of this publication are available for current and retired mill workers and their families, made possible by special contributions from sponsors. Contact The Mountaineer at 828-452-0661.

Mastermind of the industrial world

By Peter Thomson Robertson



Canton mill in 1920.

How Peter Gibson Thomson built a paper empire out of nothing

Champion Founder Peter Thomson.

Editor's note: Peter Thomson Robertson is the great-grandson and namesake of Peter Gibson Thomson, the founder of the Champion paper companies. This article is based on his extensive research when writing a family biography.

People of Western North Carolina remember Peter Thomson as the man who built a very large and thriving pulp and paper mill in Canton that provided worthwhile and well-paid employment, as well as other benefits, to generations.

What they may not know about this enormously successful and wealthy industrialist is that he was a champion weightlifter, had a successful career as a book publisher before founding Champion, was indicted for allegedly bribing a government Postal employee, and he engaged in a bitter fight for control of his companies with his eldest son.

These, especially the latter two, were eye-opening revelations about this hugely successful man for whom I am named that no one of my generation of family members knew anything about. This profile will delve into the complicated man who was Peter G. Thomson.

Early life

Peter Gibson Thomson was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1851, the son of a Scottish immigrant Alexander Thomson and Mary Ann Edwards. Peter's father died at the age of 40, when Peter was just 13, and his grandfather died a year later, leaving Peter as the only man in the family.

In 1868, he scraped together $50 for a membership in the Bryant Stafford and Co. Business Colleges, which entitled him to a full course of instruction in bookkeeping, commercial arithmetic and commercial law, among other subjects.

One little-known fact about Peter Thomson is that he was a champion weightlifter, who in 1873 set the gym record by lifting a dead weight of 1,265 pounds without a harness.

Once, when stepping out of his office at Champion headquarters in Ohio for a mid-day stroll or to get lunch, he came upon a group of employees trying to move a very heavy piece of iron equipment, but could not manage it. Peter stepped in and moved it himself.

In 1874, Peter was introduced by neighbors to a young lady named Laura Gamble from Louisville, Kentucky, who was staying with the neighbors. He escorted Laura to the opera, and one account said Peter fell hopelessly in love with her before they reached the opera house.

They were married the next year, and by 1884, they had six children (one of whom died in the year of her birth): Peter G. Thomson Jr., Alexander Thomson, Mary Bell Thomson, Hope Thomson and Logan Gable Thomson.

For Peter, his Champion companies were truly a family business spanning three generations. Each of his sons worked for the company, as well as his sons-in-law, Walter Randall and Reuben B. Robertson Sr., and then three of his grandsons. Peter died in July 1931 after a long period of declining health, with occasional hospitalizations.

A born businessman

After working as a clerk in the book retail and publishing business, Peter decided to go into business for himself. In 1877, at the age of 25, he borrowed money to open a retail bookstore and start a printing and publishing company.

Peter Thomson's bookstore in Ohio, where he first became enamored with paper.

By 1884, he employed about 100 people and operated five presses in a five-story building. That same year, the factory was destroyed by fire in October at the peak of his Christmas business.

Peter was undaunted, however. He combined insurance proceeds with additional capital from selling his bookstore to reopen his factory by December, losing no Christmas orders. The will and determination to overcome odds would later be witnessed repeatedly as he carved one of the world's largest pulp and paper mills out of the Appalachian wilderness.

Peter had faced ruthless competition from the New York publishing moguls McLaughlin Brothers, described as "a campaign of price-cutting and coercion tactics" in a family history by his son-in-law Reuben Robertson, Sr.

An early testament to his business acumen, Peter plotted a way to get out of the business without suffering a loss. In a bold move, he offered to buy out the McLaughlin Brothers, but then cleverly turned the tables and walked away with $100,000 in his pocket after the McLaughlin Brothers offered to buy him out instead.

Through his printing and publishing venture, Peter had become very familiar with paper. So he decided to build a paper coating mill of his own in Hamilton, Ohio — thus Champion was born in 1893. Peter had discovered patents on a paper coating process that he considered to be industry-leading. He negotiated with the patent owner for the exclusive use of the process in exchange for a 50% stake in his new company — Champion Coated Paper Company.

Peter's timing was perfect as the demand for coated paper exploded. When paper mills in the area could not keep up with his orders, Peter decided to build his own paper mill beside the coating mill.

By 1900, the Champion Coated Paper Company had doubled the capacity of the original plant five times. By 1910, the mill was regarded as the largest coated-paper mill in the world. Peter Thomson met challenges with unflinching determination and always attempted to keep all the employees on the payroll after those disasters.

That, along with his interpersonal skills and excellent employee benefits and employment practices, made the mill workers very loyal to Peter and to the company.

A mill in Canton

During a trip to visit his son, Logan, at the Asheville School for Boys, he ventured to Waynesville for a vacation at Eagle's Nest Resort. It was during this trip that he noticed the abundance of timberlands and realized their value as a source of wood for making pulp.

In 1905, he began buying large tracts of timberlands in Western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee and chose the small town of Canton along the Pigeon River as site for a pulp mill.

During the banking crisis, Panic of 1907, Peter faced a financial crisis of his own. He was in the middle of building the new mill in Canton, financed by earnings from Champion Coated Paper Company back in Ohio, when business slowed down dramatically. Peter faced a liquidity crisis.

Construction of the mill and railroad lines in Canton ground to a halt, and hundreds of workers who'd poured into the area were laid off. Family lore has it that Peter took to his bed with depression.

Peter Thomson is shown with U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Howard Taft and President Calvin Coolidge.

Two friends who were prominent Cincinnati businessmen — including president of Proctor & Gamble William Proctor — stepped forward and offered Peter a lifeline. Borrowing $4.2 million to keep the business afloat, he personally traveled to Canton and put the laid-off employees back to work.

Over the years, the Canton mill was continuously expanded until it became one of the largest industrial operations in North Carolina and the one of the largest pulp and paper making mills in the United States, if not the world.

Champion International emerges

After the death of Peter's son-in-law Reuben Robertson Jr., in March 1960, who was president of Champion at the time, Peter resigns his position as chairman of the board. After 66 years, the company passed out of the family's hands.

Peter Thomson was a great industrialist of his era, making his company a leader in the paper making business. Through his vision, determination, intelligence and resilience, he created an enterprise that provided good jobs and benefits — and in the process, he made himself very wealthy.

With the closing of the Canton mill, the memories of him and of his importance to Western North Carolina will fade, but his legacy is ephemeral.

> *Canton stands a monument to the enterprise and foresight of Peter G. Thomson. But for him, Canton would still be a mere hamlet instead of a flourishing little city.*
>
> — 1931 article in Cincinnati Enquirer following Thomson's death

HOW THOMSON BEAT A BRIBERY SCANDAL

A series of newspaper clippings and documents chronicle a little-known blemish on Peter Thomson's record: an indictment for bribery in 1910. Over the years, Champion had obtained a number of contracts, some of them quite sizable, to produce paper for the U. S. government.

In 1909, Champion won a $200,000 contract from the Post Office Department to provide paper for postcards.

There were complaints that competitors hadn't been given an opportunity to bid, along with complaints about the quality of the paper. The ensuing investigation caught Peter up in a strange web of circumstances that led to his indictment in 1910 for allegedly offering $100 to a postal inspector to make a misleading report about the quality of the paper.

In a trial, the postal inspector testified that he rejected some of the Champion paper for being unsatisfactory, and that while other paper was awaiting inspection, he received an envelope containing five $20 bills without any explanation.

Thomson admitted sending money to the postal inspector but said the $100 was for unrelated services he asked the postal inspector to perform when he visited the mill in Hamilton.

Character witnesses for Thomson included sitting U.S. Senators from Ohio, two Congressmen, the president of Proctor & Gamble and a director of the Equitable Life Assurance Company. It took the jury just 15 minutes to return a not guilty verdict. Peter sent all the jurors cigars.

After the trial, President William Howard Taft appointed him to a prestigious American Red Cross position and his postal contract was renewed for an aggregate price of $2 million.

A HOSTILE FAMILY TAKEOVER IN CANTON

Editor's note: In compiling a family biography, Peter Thomson Robertson discovered a little-known fact about the family dynasty — one that was hidden from family discussions and the Canton community but had a profound impact on Canton workers.

Peter Thomson's eldest son, Peter Jr., was both a director and vice president of Champion Coated Paper Company and Champion Fibre Company by 1909.

Unbeknownst to his father, Peter Jr. gained majority control of the stock for the Canton pulp mill sometime before 1920. Peter Jr. then sought to take advantage of his new power over the Canton mill. At the time, the Ohio mill was dependent on pulp from Canton — and Peter Jr. attempted to hike the pulp prices.

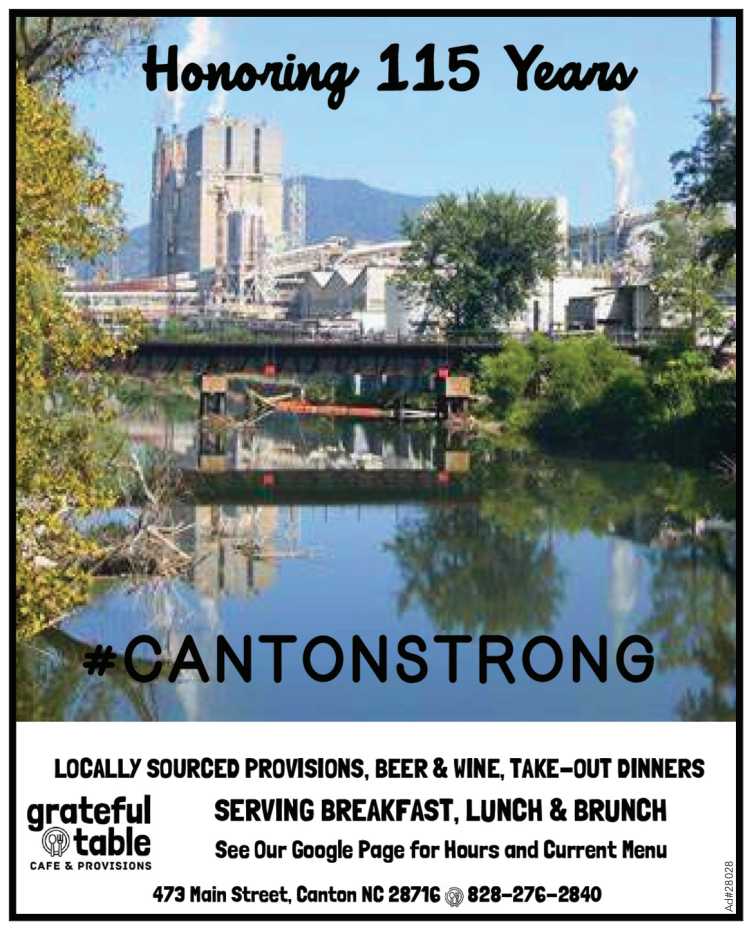
Peter Sr. moved swiftly to force his son out of all roles with the company. Instead, he elevated his son-in-law, Reuben Robertson, to top management with broad powers and vowed to reduce the dependency of the Ohio mill on Canton pulp as long as Peter Jr. had any ownership.

The Ohio mill began to obtain substantial portions of the pulp from other sources, forcing the Canton mill to sell its pulp on the open market, something that was difficult because of cheaper foreign imports.

As finances grew tight, the situation eventually led to an employee layoff, a pay cut and longer shifts — actions that led to the first unionization attempt at the mill.

The circumstances were publicly attributed to "market conditions" but were, in fact, an euphemism for a palace coup and an internal Thomson family fight for control of the company. Reuben Robertson would go on to lead the Canton mill for decades, becoming known as "Mr. Champion."

Reuben B. Robertson Sr., long-time mill manager and Peter Thomson's chosen successor for Champion operations, in the 1972 Canton Labor Day parade.



June 15 – The Division of Air Quality issues an air pollution permit to Blue Ridge's Canton mill, but mill officials challenge some technical requirements with an appeal. The renegotiated permit will be approved the following year.

The last of Fibreville

Early September – The floods of the year before may have signaled the end of Fibreville but Federal Emergency Management Agency buyouts of 16 homes there make it official. The homes are razed.

Labor Day centennial

September – Canton celebrates 100 years of Labor Day festivities with a month-long series of events including concerts, dramas, hikes, bike rides and guided tours of the mill. Free movies are shown at the Colonial Theater on Wednesdays through the month. The Charlie Daniels Band headlines the concerts on Labor Day weekend. Other events include Pickin' in the Park bluegrass celebrations, a Revolutionary War era encampment at Riverside Park, and the Mayor and Aldermen's Reception and Ball at the Canton Armory.

Generosity despite tough times

Through December – Despite a tough seven years since the employee buyout, Blue Ridge reports indicate the remarkable generosity of mill workers and owners. This year, according to The Mountaineer, "Employees and the company contributed $130,000 to the United Way of Haywood County, $48,000 to Santa Pal gifts for needy children in the county, $43,000 to the American Red Cross hurricane relief, $11,000 to the Haywood County Schools Foundation, and provided $10,000 for a pulp and paper scholarship at Haywood Community College."

2006

March – While Blue Ridge has the most sales in its six-year history in 2005, it also loses $20.7 million because of high fuel costs. While CEO Lozyniak is optimistic the demand for drink-carton coated paper will remain strong, he warns a shift to the internet is decreasing demand for paper; 121 paper mills have closed in the past 15 years.

New contract, sale rumors

July – It has taken more than a year of on-again, off-again talks, but the union at Blue Ridge has approved a three-year labor agreement. The agreement includes a 4% raise over time, but union reps say it remains below the average wage of paperworkers in the U.S. — due to the wage cuts they conceded to fund the buyout.

Rumors circulate that a company is interested in purchasing Blue Ridge Paper but the name of that company is not given by mill leadership.

2007

February – A Tennessee Court of Appeals unanimously upholds a 2005 Cocke County jury verdict that awarded $2 million to 303 landowners along the Pigeon River who had sued Blue Ridge Paper. Attorney Gordon Ball has said he plans to sue the paper mill every three years until he dies, three years being the period required between similar filings.

No variances this time

March 12 – For the first time, the Canton paper mill is not seeking a variance on color requirements for its wastewater discharge permit. Some environmental groups still criticize the mill, saying it is too large for a river the size of the Pigeon.

Potential buyer named

March 26 – Blue Ridge Paper confirms it is in sale discussions with The Rank Group, which owns a company known as Evergreen Packaging. The Rank Group is owned by New Zealand billionaire Graeme Hart. The group has already purchased the International Paper plant in Pine Bluff, Ark., where workers say the sale went smoothly.

April 3 – Along with its wastewater discharge permit, the mill's air quality permit is up for review. At a public hearing, 16 speakers urge the state to renew the air permit. Environmentalists, however, express concerns about air quality and health and question whether the state is able to hold the mill accountable.

Blue Ridge sponsors teen singer

May 10-11 – Teen musician Britany Christian spends several days in Haywood County, and two nights in concert to raise funds for the "Education Rocks" campaign sponsored by Blue Ridge Paper. The event raises $50,000 for Haywood County schools.

May 11 – After a remarkably difficult period, Blue Ridge Products posts a profit of $4.9 million for the first quarter of the year and pays out about $293 in profit sharing to each employee, with additional bonuses tied to other goals. In addition, says CEO Lozyniak, the company is looking to hire about 100 people to replace retiring workers at the Waynesville and Canton plants.

Blue Ridge sells to Rank Group/Evergreen

June 14 – Blue Ridge Paper Products is purchased by Rank Group for $338 million. The announcement follows a vote by union workers at the Blue Ridge mills to relinquish their rights to profit sharing. Under the agreement, employees who sacrificed a portion of their pay in exchange for stock will be paid out. The proposal is favored by workers at most of the satellite Blue Ridge plants, but not at Canton — where the vote was 299 against, 285 in favor. The deal will receive federal approval and be completed in July.

Leadership changes

Late August – The Waynesville and Canton paper mills will now be known as Evergreen Packaging Group, with headquarters in Memphis, Tenn. Only two of the leadership members of Blue Ridge will remain with the new management team.

August – An ongoing drought has prompted water conservation measures at the Canton mill, which is using about 30 million gallons of water a day, compared to 50 million gallons per day before the modernizations of the early 1990s.

Oct. 5 – Evergreen says it is cutting 122 jobs, including about 24 salaried positions. The move reveals a different method of operation for the new mill owner: local employment and economic development officials are not contacted by the company when layoffs occur.

Fabled bluegrass band Balsam Range, which hails from Canton and made the town famous with its song Papertown, performs at the 2017 Canton Labor Day festival.

2009

January, March, April – The Great Recession is blamed for temporary, rolling layoffs of up to 130 at Evergreen Packaging for periods ranging from a week to a month.

Nov. 9 – Members of Smoky Mountain Local 507 in Canton and Waynesville approve local supplements for a five-year labor contract, the first under Evergreen. Unlike previous contracts, the totals of the votes at each mill site are not released by either Evergreen or the union.

December – Evergreen announces it is partnering as a sponsor of Folkmoot USA, North Carolina's international folk festival, based in Haywood County, for 2010 through 2013. Evergreen becomes the first international corporation to commit to a multi-year sponsorship of the festival.

2010

February – Rumors surface that Graeme Hart, owner of the Rand Group and Evergreen, might be considering the sale of his international package companies. An Evergreen spokesman calls the rumors, "speculation, nothing more."

May-June – After negotiations with EPA, the state grants Evergreen a wastewater discharge permit — after the mill has been operating under an expired permit for four years. Environmental groups say EPA conceded too much, and Environmental groups in N.C. and Tennessee file an appeal.

2011

April 12 – Men and women begin lining up at 5 p.m. at the Employment Security Commission Office to be considered for jobs at Evergreen Packaging, their number reaching 300 by morning. Some wait in below-freezing temperatures throughout the night. Evergreen has requested a pool of about 150 applications, and those in line say the mill has a reputation as a good employer.

June – In an agreement with EPA, Evergreen begins using soil removed from Barber's Orchard, a Superfund site, to cap and close off portions of its landfill. However, landfill neighbors express concern about the arsenic and other chemicals in the soil, questioning whether they will pose a risk to neighbors.

2012

May – The lawsuit against the wastewater discharge permit has been put on hold as part of an agreement between environmentalists, the EPA and Evergreen. The parties agree to have scientists study wastewater color and how it affects tourism along the Pigeon River.

Aug. 21 – A worker is injured at the Canton mill, but unlike previous owners, Evergreen officials do not release information on the name of the person, type of injury and nature of the accident.

2013

Air quality mandate – funds required

December – In order to meet stricter EPA air quality regulations, the company announces a $50 million upgrade to switch two of its five boilers from coal to natural gas, but asks for $15 million in government grants to help with the expense.

2014

Blue Ridge Southern takes over rails

July 24 – Trains coming through Waynesville and Canton now display the yellow and black colors of the Blue Ridge Southern Railroad, which has bought out Norfolk Southern's lines in the region.

August – In the final hours of the legislative session, the N.C. House joins the state Senate to provide $12 million to bring natural gas into Haywood County and help Evergreen comply with federal regulations. The county has committed another $700,000. There are conditions, including salary levels for workers and a commitment that the company will continue to operate through at least 2024.

October – After voting down a new contract presented in July, union workers at Evergreen Packaging approve a four-year labor contract with Evergreen. The deal includes what will amount to a 9% wage increase over the next four years.

2015

Workers rally around doctor, pharmacy

Early January – Evergreen employees learn their on-site clinic and pharmacy will be closing at the end of March. They hold rallies to save their relationship with the popular Dr. Tony Jones. Evergreen officials say a declining number of patients is forcing the move, a claim workers dispute. In April, Haywood Re-

Flooding along the Pigeon River in 2021 swamped the town of Canton and the mill, a repeat of the catastrophic flooding in 2004. Photo courtesy of A Shot Above

gional Medical Center acquires the clinic and opens it to the public, with Dr. Jones as its medical director.

2016

The year becomes the second-driest in Haywood County history, second only to 1904. Rainfall for the year is about 40% below normal, and Evergreen draws heavily on Lake Logan to maintain paper production.

2018

February – Haywood County commissioners formally approve a property tax break for Evergreen previously agreed to in 2014 tied to air quality improvements. The mill would have faced an additional $100,000 in property taxes due to the natural gas upgrade, but the county cuts that amount in half.

Evergreen is almost done with its air pollution upgrades. Two coal-fired boilers have been shut down and replaced by natural gas boilers. Two others are being outfitted with pollution scrubbers. The mill's original giant smokestack, at one time the tallest in North Carolina, is demolished.

June – The Haywood County Chamber of Commerce honors Evergreen Packaging as its Business of the Year, in recognition of its $50 million investment in environmental upgrades.

2020

April – The mill is considered an essential business when the pandemic hits, allowing it to remain open and in production.

Sept. 7 – Due to Covid, Canton's Labor Day celebration takes to the sky with the Bandit Flight Team conducting a flyover parade across the county before making a pass over Evergreen packaging at noon as the mill whistle sounds.

Evergreen stock goes on market

September – Evergreen reorganizes as Pactiv Evergreen and issues a public stock offering. Company president and CEO John McGrath calls the move "an exciting milestone in the storied history of our great company."

Fire and death

Sept. 21 – A flash fire at the Canton mill kills two contract workers working inside a tank as part of a maintenance outage. At least 50 firefighters join the mill's crew in fighting the blaze. Though the two contractors who died, Brett Burgueno and Curtis Butler, are from out of town, Haywood County citizens are among those who raise more than $10,000 for their families.

2021

Mill cleared; contractors fined

March 16 – Evergreen Packaging is cleared of fault in the fire that cost the lives of two contractors in September, though the N.C. Department of Labor issues the contract companies more than $117,000 in fines. The fire occurred when a heat gun fell into a bucket of resin, igniting the resin and the vapors around it.

April 5 – A fire breaks out at the mill, the second in six months, though this time there are no injuries reported, and it is quickly extinguished.

Another permit, another hearing

Due to Covid, a public hearing on the mill's wastewater permit is held online instead of in-person. Speakers are divided between those supporting the mill and environmentalists wanting stricter standards.

Flooding strikes again

Aug. 17 – Flooding along the East Fork of the Pigeon River sweeps death and destruction through Cruso, Center Pigeon, Canton and Clyde, killing six. Businesses in Canton are flooded, and hundreds of homes are destroyed.

Evergreen mill officials will tell N.C. Gov. Roy Cooper that flood control measures put in place after the dual catastrophic floods of 2004 kept the mill from severe damage this time, with flood gates, sump pumps, and better electrical designs allowing the mill to proceed with almost no down time.

Flash fire injures two

Aug. 18 – As flood waters recede in Canton, two mill workers are injured in a flash fire, believed to be caused by a buildup of methane gas in the building near the truck scales. Brandon Carter

and Mandy West are both being treated at the Joseph M. Still Burn Center at Doctors Hospital in Augusta, Ga. Mill officials later refer to the fire as being caused by "an extreme weather event," referring to the flooding, apparently the cause of methane buildup.

2022

Union leader criticizes mill safety

Jan. 1 – Smoky Mountain Local's president, Troy Dills, charges that Pactiv Evergreen hasn't done enough to ensure worker safety, saying the two workers hurt in August were the latest in a long line of mishaps at the mill. Dills says a similar flooding-related explosion occurred in 2004, and accuses the company of failing to take precautions against future accidents. At Dills' request, the Department of Labor sets up a mobile classroom to train workers in job safety. Evergreen does not respond to The Mountaineer's request for a comment, but instead sends a memo to employees challenging what it terms "false and misleading statements made to the media."

Oct. 5 – Pactiv Evergreen receives its third notice of violation for dust that has been falling on vehicles and homes around the Canton mill. The problem began in September 2021 when 25 complaints were lodged, followed by complaints in August and October 2022. Mill manager John McCarthy has informed environmental officials that cartridges in the lime kiln dust collection system have deteriorated. Repairs have been delayed by supply-chain shortages and faulty replacement cartridges. The company offers car-wash vouchers and detailing services to affected residents.

2023

#20 machine shut down

Early February – Pactiv Evergreen shuts down its No. 20 paper machine, citing a sagging demand for paper and an overload of supply in its warehouses of the uncoated free sheet the machine produces. About 38 workers are to be diverted to other duties at the mill to avoid layoffs.

The final blow

March 6 – Pactiv Evergreen corporate leaders meet with mill managers and announce the Canton mill will close by summer, likely late May or early June. The news catches Canton, county and state leaders as well as mill workers by surprise. Some 1,000 workers at the Canton mill and Waynesville satellite facility will lose their jobs.

March 7-25 — The greater Haywood County community slips into a state of heartbreak and despair. Workers are fearful, confused and angry — unable to get answers about when their last day of employment will be. Local leaders are likewise desperate for answers about what will happen to the mill after the shutdown, and whether Pactiv Evergreen would be willing to sell it. But information coming from Pactiv Evergreen is little to none. A rapid response effort is organized by county and regional partners to assist the 1,100 dislocated workers, however, nothing could be triggered until the company provided official notice to the state of its closure, which didn't happen until March 23.

March 9 — Hundreds attend a community wide prayer service in Sorrells Park across from the mill.

March 16 — The town of Canton sponsors the first of what will be many job fairs, with dozens of employers turning out to court the skilled and hard-working millworkers. Millworkers realize that given the wide-spread labor shortage and good economy, there are plenty of jobs to be had, including 1,200 manufacturing openings in the region.

March 25 – Employees of the Canton mill and Waynesville satellite facility finally receive official layoff notices in the mail saying their expected last day of employment will be June 6. However, Evergreen later says a skeleton crew will be kept on at the Waynesville facility in hopes of selling the facility.

April 5 — N.C. Gov. Roy Cooper visits Canton, pledging to hold Pactiv Evergreen responsible for upholding all state laws, repaying a $12 million grant due to breach of contract and providing $5 million to Canton in his budget. He will visit again the following month with his wife to go shopping downtown. The entourage of top state leaders visting Canton includes the Attorney General, head of Department of Environment.

April 13 — Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers announced Pactiv Evergreen was donating the two mill whistles to the town.

May 24 — Hundreds gather at Sorrells Street Park in Canton to listen to the last mill whistle, a symbolic and tearful moment that signaled the last day of production at the mill.

June 8 — The community shows up by the hundreds to honor millworkers on their last day, greeting them with posters and hugs as they exit the chute for the last time at the end.

Millworkers lash a row of hard hats to a fence on their last, a final salute and farewell to the glorious era of the Canton paper mill.

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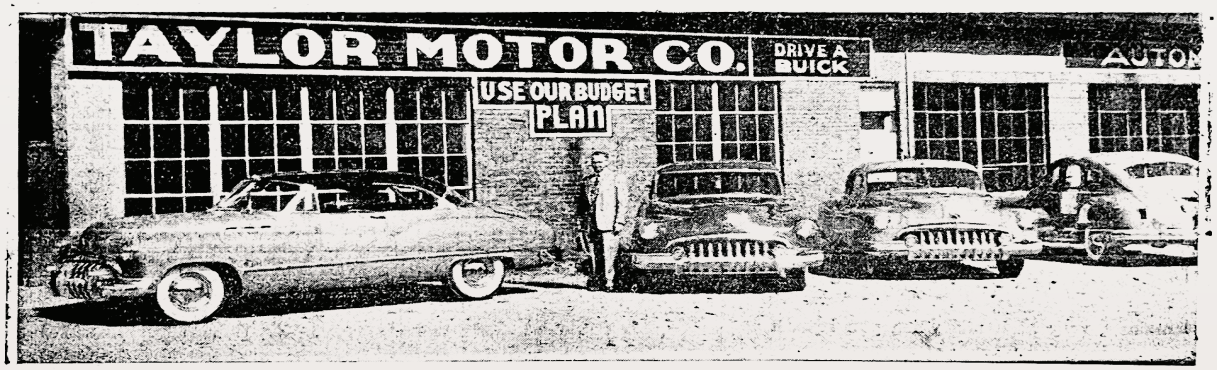

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Meet Mr. Champion

By Peter Thomson Robertson

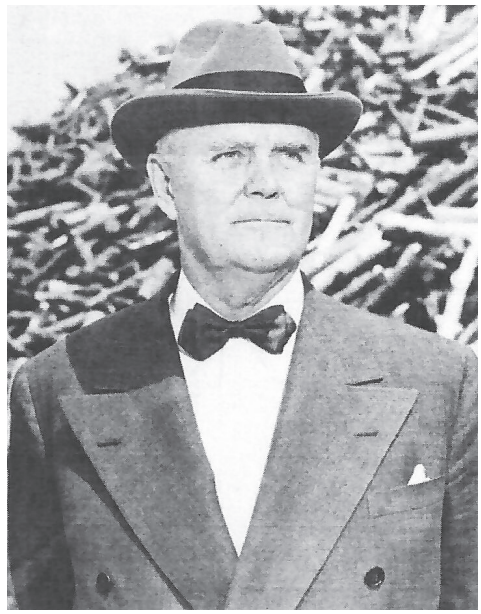
The legend of Reuben Robertson Sr. runs deep

Editor's note: Peter Thomson Robertson is the grandson of Reuben B. Robertson Sr., and great-grandson of Champion Founder Peter G. Thomson.

1905 was a monumental year that would forever change the trajectory of Haywood County — Peter G. Thomson launched construction on the Canton pulp mill and began amassing timber holdings to feed the grand new enterprise.

But another, equally significant milestone happened that same year: Thomson's daughter, Hope, married Reuben Robertson.

Reuben, a lawyer in Cincinnati, traveled to Canton in 1906 at his father-in-law's request, only "temporarily," to resolve pending legal issues and help with land titles. Reuben used to say that he "went to Western North Carolina for 50 days and stayed for 50 years," though it was actually more than 60 years.



Reuben Robertson Sr.

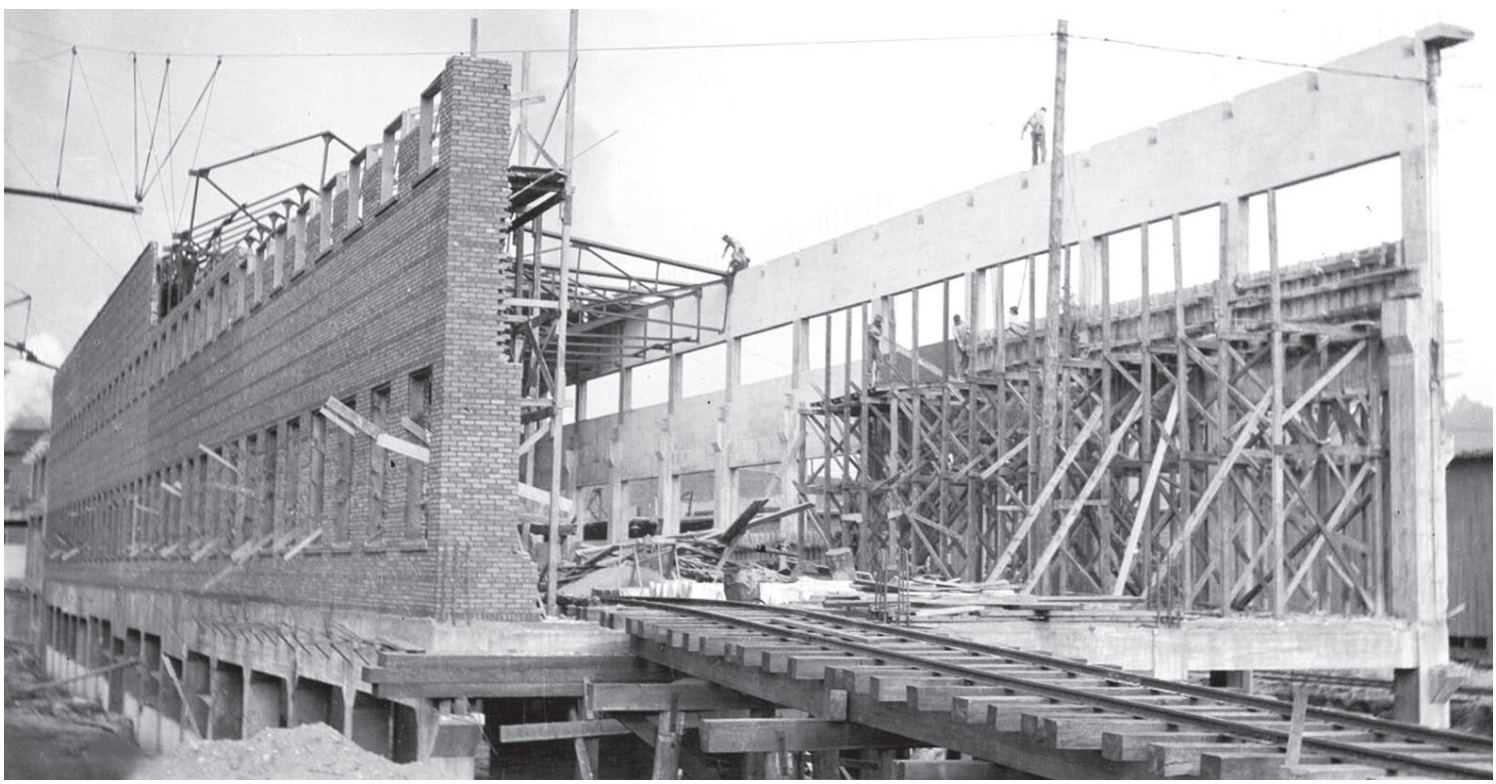
Reuben moved to Canton with his young heiress wife and nine-month-old daughter. They first settled in the sawmill and logging village of Sunburst that Champion Fibre had built in the mountains outside of Canton.

Despite her privileged upbringing, Hope was very resourceful and settled in well to the rustic life. She not only made clothes for herself and her daughter, but she even started the first Sunday school in the logging town.

Hope was an independent-minded, tough and fiercely determined woman — traits she undoubtedly inherited from her father and from being surrounded by three competitive, older brothers.

In later years, when Reuben was away on business, he came home to find their house empty, with no note telling him where the family had gone. Eventually, he got in touch with a real estate broker who informed him that Hope had bought a new house and moved while he was gone.

In January 1908, Reuben became con-



During the height of the Great Depression, the Canton mill builds what was then the world's largest book-paper machine.

Public Library - Reuben Robertson, Sr., (holding his signature hat in the front row) at the dedication of the Canton Public Library in 1954, one of many civic projects funded by Champion and Robertson.

cerned about the in-fighting among the various managers overseeing the mill. He persuaded his father-in-law to give him complete control over the operation. He became president of Champion Fibre in 1925 and eventually rose to the presidency of the entire Champion enterprise in 1946.

Needless to say, Reuben never left North Carolina and never returned to the practice of law.

Mr. Champion

Reuben was known as a genial and friendly man, who reportedly knew the names of all the Canton mill employees and regularly asked them about their families.

"He was one of that rare breed of businessmen who could be found in the factory talking shop with his employees, and he was not superficial about it, but talked and listened with knowledge and concern. Old-timers insist that Robertson let it be known that his office door was open to any employee who had something to say, good or bad, and the employees insist that the story of this open-door policy was true, not a legend that has grown with time," according to a passage in Troubled Waters: Champion International and the Pigeon River Controversy by Richard A. Bartlett.

Rueben was affectionately known as "Mr. Champion," but at his death, he was dubbed "A Thoughtful Giant," which well-captures a lot about him.

Underneath that friendly demeanor, however, was a skilled and tough negotiator first evidenced by his persuasion of Peter Thomson to give him complete authority over operations not long after the mill started up. He also negotiated a long-term employment contract for himself and the title of president, and successfully ended a labor strike in 1924 that kept the plant from becoming a union shop.

An innovator

Reuben was fiercely loyal, not only to his father-in-law's company, but to the mill and its workers, whose livelihoods he was determined to protect at all costs.

In the mid-1920s, civic leaders, businessmen and newspapers rallied around the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, to be made up of adjoining mountain lands in North Carolina and Tennessee.

Champion Fibre Company happened to hold 100,000 acres of timberlands within the proposed national park boundaries, timberland that was integral to feeding the pulp mill. Reuben Robertson and Champion were having none of the park in general, nor the taking of the Champion timberlands in particular.

In 1925, Reuben became the public face of the opposition, placing a series of full-page ads in the Asheville, Charlotte, Raleigh and Knoxville newspapers bearing his own signature. The ads reminded readers that the company had 2,000 employees whose livelihoods

would be threatened.

After protracted skirmishing, a jury trial and closed-door negotiations in Washington, Reuben settled on a sale price of $3 million for the timberlands. And he promptly invested those proceeds in a mill expansion to benefit the very workers he'd been trying to protect.

In the middle of the Great Depression, Reuben made an astounding decision to build what was then the world's largest book-paper machine.

"The cash infusion and resulting expansion meant that the people of Canton and Haywood County enjoyed prosperity in the midst of calamity," wrote Danny Varat in "The Champion Family: Mountaineers in the Modern World" (2002).

Foresight and innovation were among Reuben's greatest strengths. He made the sage decision to use some of the timbersale proceeds to build a dam and reservoir upstream from the Canton mill to ensure a steady supply of water during droughts — which would later prove vital to sparing the mill from shut downs during dry spells. He named the reservoir Lake Logan after his brother-in-law Logan Thomson, the third son of Peter Thomson and one of the top officers of both Champion companies.

Reuben also started assembling a compound of cabins at Lake Logan relocated from the company's timberlands that he called Sit 'n' Whittle, which was used as a retreat for vacations and for entertaining important customers and visitors.

A steward

While Reuben was a tough negotiator, he also made Champion a leader in forest management.

One of his major interests was forest preservation. He encouraged people to consider trees as a resource that could and should be replenished. At a time when others stripped the land of its timber without regard to future growth, Robertson advocated selective cutting, reforestation with nursery seedlings and flood and fire prevention.

Champion offered free white pine seedlings to landowners, Boy Scouts and school children, and encouraged their planting as a method to control erosion.

Reuben's interest was no doubt sparked in part by his friendship with Dr. Carl Schenck, the forester for the Biltmore Estate of George Vanderbilt, which included nearly 120,000 acres of timberland.

Reuben B. Robertson Jr. and his family recreate on Lake Logan, which served as a corporate retreat for Champion, as well as a vital water source to keep the mill running during times of drought.

Dr. Schenck opened the first school of scientific forestry in the country in 1898, known as the Biltmore Forest School. After Schenck had a falling out with Vanderbilt in 1909, Reuben invited him to move the school to Champion's old sawmill town of Sunburst.

Reuben also hired the paper industry's first professional industrial forester.

A champion to workers

Reuben also made Champion a leader in employee relations. Following the model of his father-in-law at the Ohio mill, Reuben imbued Champion Fibre Company with a paternalistic approach to its employees and their welfare, on and off the job.

Not only did Champion pay good wages, Reuben also established a safety committee, an insurance plan, a company store, a credit union, old-age bonuses, wage incentive plans, and profit-sharing programs. Champion led the paper and pulp industry in these areas.

Reuben personally championed causes to benefit the quality of life for his Canton workers — donating land for a post office, twice donating land for a town hall, donating money for a library, creating a gathering place for mill oldtimers known as Snug Harbor, and even setting up a hospital during the typhoid epidemic.

His most notable contribution to the people of Canton was the founding of the Robertson Memorial YMCA in the early 1960s, making a personal donation of $135,000, along with a $150,000 donation from Champion. Champion contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Y over the years, from subsidizing its annual operating costs to renovation campaigns.

The inventor

There are a couple of aspects of Reuben's life that few people knew about. He was an inventor, with several patents to his name, and a master furniture maker. His first two patents were designed to improve Champion's pulp and paper making processes and the third was a stand and bench to place a suitcase on for packing and unpacking.

Reuben also invented other things for which he did not obtain patents. The most notable was a sun hut that allowed

Reuben Robertson, Sr. (left) and forester Dr. Carl Schenck at a tree planting ceremony in 1951.

two people to sit outside in the sun at Lake Logan, sheltered from the weather by a plastic front piece that rolled down. In addition, he made small boats with paddle wheels for use by children at Lake Logan.

The politician

Reuben developed close friendships with political, business and community leaders from North Carolina and elsewhere. One of Reuben's most significant relationships was with Rev. Billy Graham. In 1956, Reuben hosted Rev. Graham and Vice President Richard Nixon for a weekend at Lake Logan.

After Nixon was elected president, Reuben wrote him a congratulatory letter and recalled the visit to Lake Logan: "I believe the occasion was a distinguished one in that it was there that you caught your first mountain trout and it was also there that you had your first opportunity to get fully acquainted with Billy Graham."

Reuben was also friends with a number of North Carolina governors, and was a recognized leader in government, business and universities. During World War II, President Roosevelt appointed him as one of the four industry representatives on the War Labor Board, and to the Business Advisory Council in the Department of Commerce. He also led the top paper-making and forestry organizations.

Passing the torch

Reuben's son — Reuben Robertson, Jr. — followed in his father's footsteps by attending Yale, but instead of studying law, he got a degree in chemical engineering so he could better understand the paper making process. Immediately after graduation, he spent several months traveling throughout Europe with Reuben Sr.'s forestry friend Dr. Carl Schenck learning about good forestry practices.

In the fall of 1930, Reuben, Jr., came to work at the Canton mill, learning the business from the ground up under his father's guidance and tutelage.

Reuben, Jr. worked for Champion for his entire professional career, succeeding his father as company president in 1950, though Reuben Sr. remained chairman of the board of directors.

Tragically, Reuben Jr. was killed by a drunken driver in 1960 at the age of 51 in Ohio. Haywood County was stunned by the news, flags were flown at half mast.

Just four days later, overcome with grief at losing his son and business heir, Reuben Sr., stepped down as chairman of the board — bringing the 'Thomson-Robertson family leaderhips of Champion to an end — though he remained a member of the board for many years, maintaining an office for Champion-related activities in Asheville well into his 80s.

Reuben Robertson's contributions and achievements left a lasting legacy on the region, enough so that North Carolina songwriter Jimmie Haynie memorialized him in a ballad entitled "The Ballad of Reuben B." The following is one of the verses:

"From the mountains to the ocean,
from the valleys to the sea.
A man stands tall among us all,
his name was Reuben B.
By trade he was a lawyer,
paper making his destiny.
He gave us Champion Papers,
this giant of industry.
He gave the best part of his life
for 50 years or more.
Now he's a legend in his time,
he'll be loved forever more.
As long as there's a mountain
and rivers run down to the sea.
We'll always love this humble man —
the man called Reuben B."

Canton Labor Day parade in 1962

Milltown, Boomtown

By Vicki Hyatt

The community now known as Canton had three previous names, but the name that stuck personified the vision of the town's founding fathers to become an industrial center.

The community was first called Vinson, in honor of an early postmaster. Then Buford after a railroad man who helped open the territory to commerce. Then simply Pigeon River.

When the community's early business owners were meeting to come up with a new name for their town, Cash Mingus went outside for a break and began admiring a bridge spanning the Pigeon River. On a truss, he spied the words "Wrought Iron Bridge Co. Builders, Canton, Ohio." He went back into the meeting and declared the new name should be Canton — made official in 1893.

The 1900 census listed the town's population at 230. Little did they know what was to soon come — the population would explode by 500% by the end of the decade and climb to 2,584 by 1920.

As construction began on the $1 million Champion pulp mill in 1905, workers came from all over the U.S., Canada and Europe. Canton historian Carroll Jones pegs the population at 1,680 during the height of the construction boom in 1907, not counting boarding and transient workers who lived in barracks, shanties and tents on the construction site.

The rapid growth underscored the need for public infrastructure in a town with no water system, fire protection or paved streets. A bond was passed in 1907 to address the needs. Over the next decade, the town would see the advent of electric lights, a telephone system, concrete streets, a fire department and water and sewer lines.

The first public school, the Canton Graded School, opened in 1907. But it wouldn't be nearly enough to accommodate the children of all the mill workers. In 1922, North Canton and Penn Avenue schools were built, and in 1931, Canton High School was built.

Local leaders at the time were acutely aware of how Thomson had forever altered the course of Canton. He was heralded as the pioneer of an industry that

would create millions in increased wealth, with anticipation of millions to come, according to the "Haywood County Industrial and Resort" published in 1916 by the Carolina Mountaineer.

In barely a decade, Canton's downtown had transformed into a bustling and diverse business district, complete with the Cantonian Theater showing motion pictures. Advertisements in the special edition touted all the latest and greatest merchandise and services — drug stores, furniture stores, a car dealership, auto mechanics, hardware stores, lumber stores, pharmacies, a photography business, and, of course, Champion Bank.

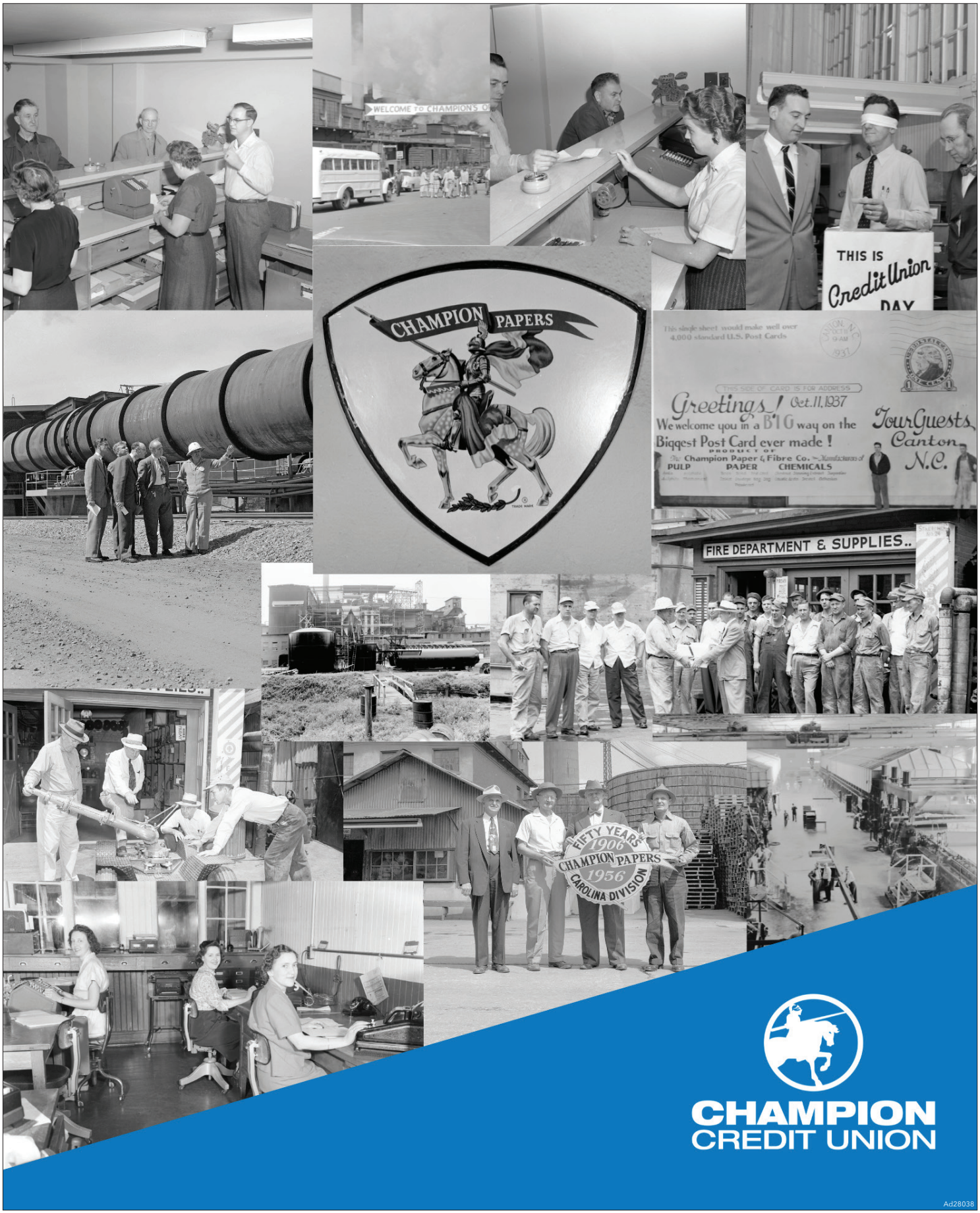
Canton Ice and Laundry Company was producing four tons of ice daily by 1916, but couldn't keep up with demand, so an expansion was planned. One ad for two acres of land claiming to have "the prettiest views in Canton" warned that "good Canton real estate is getting scarce."

By 1930, Canton was the second largest community in Western North Carolina with a population of 5,117.

The presence of Champion largely insulated the town from the Great Depression. It even expanded during the Depression — investing proceeds from the sale of timberlands to the Great Smoky Mountain National Park into building the world's largest book-paper machine.

Canton's first fire department on Main Street in 1910.

But by now, the boom was over. The town's population remained relatively flat around 5,000 through the 1970s. By 1990, mirroring a decline in workers at the mill, the town's population had dropped to 3,790, climbing slightly to 4,422 by 2020.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Fibreville under construction circa 1906.

The rise and fall of Fibreville

By Peggy Manning

For the better part of a century, the company row-housing known as Fibreville was home to a thriving community of mill workers and their families along the banks of the Pigeon River in Canton.

The birth of Fibreville dates to the mill's construction in 1905. Housing was sorely needed given the population explosion of builders. So, Champion Founder Peter Thomson purchased 55 acres from Mary Ann Patton for $100 per acre. The builder in charge was Thomas Marr, a former railroad builder who later became chief of Champion's tannin extract operation.

Most of the original 60 houses were small four-room weatherboard bungalows, with a few larger homes for managers. By 1912, they all had bathrooms and new pastel-colored asbestos siding.

The community shared strong bonds, with the breadwinners working together at the paper mill and the women raising their children together. In a 1999 interview, Suzy Burnette Paquette said she could count from memory 108 children living within a half-mile radius of her Fibreville home.

A walk to Canton through Fibreville could take hours for all the visiting. Judye Morgan Carleton recalled walking to the post office with her mother daily in the 1940s.

"People would be sitting on their porches, and we'd stop at house after house on the way home," she said.

Fibreville childhoods were filled with stories of rollerskating up and down the street, the excitement of the first television and gathering at the park for hot dog roasts and softball games.

"Everybody was so good to everybody else's children," Adina recalled in a 1999 interview with The Mountaineer. "Maybe the reason it was so great was, everybody was pretty equal. They made about the same thing, lived in the same kind of house. We just had a lot in common."

There were a few drawbacks to life in the mill's shadow, however. Laundry would sometimes have to be brought off the clothesline and washed again due to discharges from the mill.

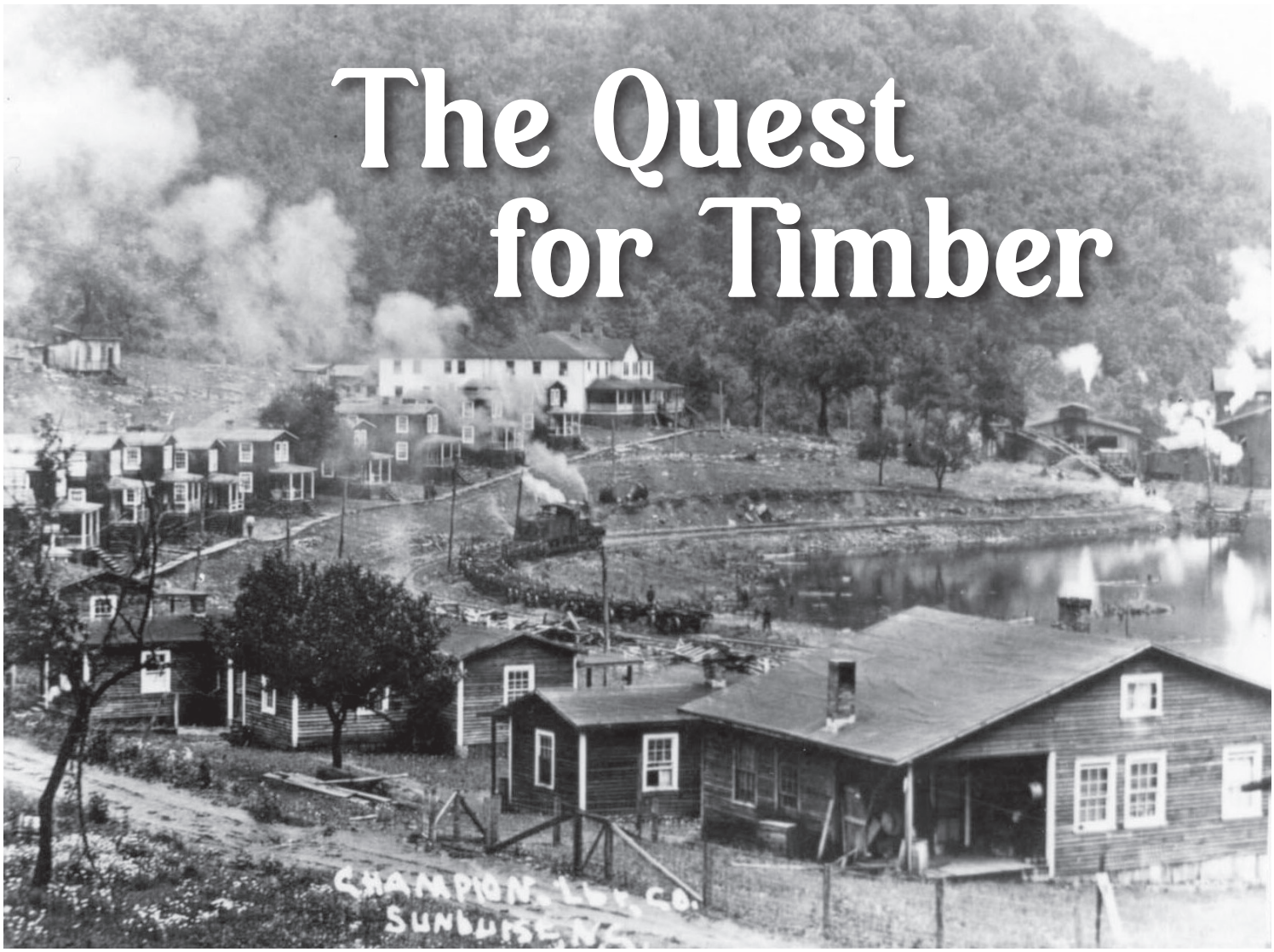
To entice workers, Champion offered long-term, low-interest loans to buy houses. In the 1950s, Champion sold any remaining Fibreville houses it still owned.

Since the area was prone to flooding, many of the houses were moved to higher ground over the years. Others were torn down due to age. The back-to-back floods of 2004 ravaged all but one of the 17 remaining homes.

The lone woman spared from flooding begged to be included in the FEMA buyout, because she did't want to be the only one left in Fibreville. The last vestige of Fibreville was razed just a year later in September 2005.

But to local residents, that area will always be considered Fibreville.

The Quest for Timber



The logging village of Sunburst in 1914.

Logging the mountains in the name of the mill

A logging boom was well under way when Peter Thomson searched for a site for his pulp mill in Western North Carolina in the early 1900s. Construction of that mill extended the boom and the life of the logging camps — providing an insatiable appetite for lumber, even scrap trees as opposed to the prized hardwoods that had driven the market up until now.

Thomson originally set up his own logging camp at a place he called Sunburst along the west fork of the Pigeon River. Plans to float the logs downstream to the mill didn't pan out. Instead, a maze of rail tracks would push their way into the coves and hollers of Haywood County and beyond.

As forests closer to home were gobbled up, Champion moved further and further afield to feed the mill's demand. While Champion purchased enormous swaths of timberland, the job of harvesting that timber and laying the rail lines to get it out was like a gold rush. Champion contracted with sundry sawmills, logging companies and rail crews. As the march moved west across the mountains, tracks were laid, taken up, and laid again like tendrils — puncturing the wildest places left in the East, including the high, steep slopes of the Smokies that would later become ground zero of a bitter fight between Champion and the creation of a national park.

Entire villages cropped up around the logging operations, including churches, schools and hotels. Big Creek, which was and still is the middle of nowhere, briefly had a movie theater to cater to the logging village.

There was another kind of logging camp, however, a more mobile version, that traveled with the timber harvest. Following is a description of life in those logging camps, written by Haywood County native and historian Gerald Ledford, who has co-authored five books on the logging camps and railroads of Western North Carolina, titled "If Rails Could Talk."

Life in the logging camps

By Gerald Ledford

There was a saying among the loggers: "Ninety days, ninety dollars. A hundred days, a dead man."

They knew there was a limit to how long a man could stay on the job without a break. The men worked six days a week, rising before daybreak and immediately heading to the mess hall for breakfast before starting work.

If logging had progressed more than half a mile beyond the camp, the cook would prepare lunches for the men in buckets or lunch pails to eliminate travel back to the mess hall for lunch.

After a 10- to 12-hour day, the men returned to the mess hall for supper. Those with any energy left might play a game of baseball, while others would talk and enjoy a chaw or smoke tobacco.

Alcohol consumption was forbidden by most lumber companies, and for good reason. Intoxication played a role in a logging camp murder at Beech Gap on the Swain-Haywood border during a Sunday afternoon card game. Despite the risk of being fired, alcohol was still present in many camps. During Prohibition, moonshiners did a brisk trade with logging camps.

When the men got off on Saturday evening, the lumber company usually provided rail transportation into town via a flat car, with someone volunteering to be the brakeman. It was all downhill from the woods camp to town, so the flat car could roll by gravity.

All the larger camps had a cook with several assistants to help with preparation, serving and cleaning up. The assistants were called "cookies" and the servers were called "lobby hogs." The food was served family style on large plates and bowls, kept filled by the lobby hogs.

The men consumed 7,000-9,000 calories every day, so the cook had to prepare tasty food in ample quantities. Some kind of meat was usually on the menu at every meal, along with biscuits, baked bread, gravy, mashed or fried potatoes, apple pie and some vegetables in season. Mealtimes were strictly for eating, conversation at the table was frowned upon.

Men would leave a job if they felt like the quality or quantity of food wasn't up to expectations. The loggers even had a name for cooks who they believed weren't good at their jobs, known as a "gut robber!"

Some of the camps had small stables and pens for oxen, horses and mules that were used to skid the logs to the railroad. As logging moved upstream to higher elevations, animals could no longer be used. Steam powered machines named Lidgerwood and Clyde, outfitted with large spools of steel cable, were able to reach timber several thousand feet away on steep mountainsides.

A dollar or two every month was deducted from a man's pay to cover medical costs. Most company doctors lived in the sawmill town but would visit each of the camps at least once a week.

The doctor would ride the log train early in the morning to the high elevation end of the line with his rail bike called a velocipede. That way, the doctor would be traveling downhill. If he was unable to complete his visits in a single day, he could stay overnight in one of the camps. Should an accident occur, a special train or gas-powered railroad speeder could be used to fetch the doctor. A few camps were connected by telephone like those at Sunburst, which made communication much easier in the event of an accident.

The Champion Commissary in Sunburst logging village in 1912.

Men of the 106th Engineer Regiment came to Sunburst during WWI to train on building bridges and trestles in the war effort.

From tent camps to string towns

The most common logging camps were the so-called "string towns." Dwellings were wooden barracks with windows, permanently mounted on railroad flat cars. The railroad would simply lay down a side track next to the main line and back the "string town" cars into the siding, no off-loading was necessary.

Some of these dormitory-style accommodations had two floors. While the string town buildings were better than other types of camp lodging, flu and colds could spread quickly.

Tent camps were the most rustic of the logging camps. Tents sat on top of wooden platforms that served as the floor. Sometimes, the platforms had wooden, detachable walls that provided a little more protection from cold temperatures and wet weather. However, because of the canvas roof, any kind of stove for heat was out of the question. These structures tended to be very cold in winter and hot in the summer because they had no windows.

The most popular type of logging camp lodging were "set-off" houses. They were small wooden buildings with tar-paper covered roofs, two windows and a small wood stove. Set-off houses were occasionally occupied by families, and the company would deduct a small rental from the man's pay.

The houses traveled on flatbed rail cars from camp to camp. They were picked up by a rail-mounted loader and literally "set-off" beside the railroad tracks, then loaded up again when it was time to move to the next location.

Battle for the Smokies

By Kathy N. Ross

Champion wages war with Tennessee over acquisition of timberlands

The fight over pollution in the Pigeon River was not the first time Champion battled the state of Tennessee, nor the first time it raised the specter of closure over legal wranglings. Warnings of a threat to the Canton mill's future and personal confrontations were part of the mill's battle, first against creation of a national park and then in efforts to get top dollar for its timberlands.

When the fight finally ended, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was born, and Champion not only survived but thrived — using proceeds of its timberland sales to help keep workers employed during the Great Depression. Meanwhile, the county become a key gateway to the national park, a linchpin in the tourism economy.

But there was one significant and telling casualty, a Tennessee lawyer who would be disbarred and whose role in the legal wranglings over timber payments would forever be suspect.

The idea of a park in the Southern Appalachians had been floated during the national park movement of the 1890s and early 1900s. The idea gained steam in the 1920. North Carolina created a commission in 1924 to promote the plan, and Tennessee followed suit in 1927.

Opposing the park

Champion president and Canton mill director Reuben Robertson opposed creation of the park. Fearing such an enterprise would severely limit access to timber for pulp and paper, he instead encouraged creation of national forests, which allowed timber harvest.

"The proposed area once established as a National Park withdraws for all time and regardless of changed economic conditions one of the very large natural resources of Western North Carolina from all industrial use," read a Champion advertisement that blanketed the region.

In May 1924, President Coolidge signed legislation enabling the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains Park, provided North Carolina and Tennessee could purchase 427,000 acres and present it to the federal government. The only significant opposition had come from Champion.

Champion logging operations within what is now the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Warring over price

Almost 93,000 acres of Champion timberlands were in the proposed park boundary, both in Tennessee and North Carolina. More critically, these lands contained some of the oldest hardwood and spruce forests in the Southern Appalachians.

Once the park was a reality, Robertson turned his attention toward getting top dollar for Champion's lands. He also purchased some timberland outside the proposed park boundaries as a replacement source.

The battle waged in Tennessee was far different from that in North Carolina.

In North Carolina, Robertson agreed to suspend logging operations in the areas within proposed park boundaries. He offered to do the same in Tennessee, but that offer went off track, thanks to his adversarial relationship with Knoxville drug company owner Col. David Chapman, chairman of the Tennessee park commission.

Robertson and Chapman seemed to clash from the beginning. Robertson accused Chapman of leaking private information about their meetings. Chapman believed the mill's claims on the worth of its lands bordered on extortion.

In 1928, John D. Rockefeller Jr. gave $5 million to buy land for the park. Private contributions were also being raised, and the states had set aside funds. It was time to begin acquiring the lands. And with Champion, in Tennessee, it seemed that would be by forced condemnation.

Tennessee filed suit in January 1930 against the pulp and paper company. Champion claimed its Tennessee timberlands were worth $4.18 million. During the trial, Tennessee claimed the land was only worth $500,000 to $800,000, in part because the steep slopes would make it impossible to profitably harvest much of the timber.

Before the five-member jury came back with a verdict, however, Robertson met one more time with both state commissions, offering a compromise of $3.25 million. Chapman countered with an offer of $1.5 million. Robertson lost his temper and called the offer ridiculous.

Though Robertson had previously suggested mediation in lieu of court, Tennessee opted for a jury trial — an ill-fated decision that ultimately backfired.

After a month of deliberations, a three-member majority of the jury handed down a verdict of $2.55 million, including almost a quarter-million dollar settlement for "incidental damages" Champion had suffered. The other two members of the jury disagreed, stating they believed the land worth $1.25 million, with no additional damages.

Strange dealings

The jury verdict was surprising, and park supporters accused Champion of influencing the jury improperly. Arno Cammerer, assistant director of the National Park Service, claimed that Champion representatives had entertained members of the jury before the verdict.

In 1935, Sevierville lawyer Clyde Bogart, a member of the Park Commission, was indicted on tax evasion charges. Among the income he had failed to disclose to the Internal Revenue Service were two payments totaling $15,000 from Champion Fibre.

The payments from Champion coincided with Bogart's role in helping select the jury for land condemnation trial. Bogart was not only convicted of tax evasion, but also disbarred from practicing law for five years on charges "of representing the state and a client at the same time."

At best, Bogart's action was a blatant conflict of interest. At worst, he was paid by Champion to pick friendly jury members who would influence the verdict.

Bogart's payments from Champion didn't come to light until four years after the trial, however. Meanwhile, Chapman called the verdict a "stunning blow" to the park movement and appealed. Robertson fired back in a Knoxville newspaper, saying it was Tennessee that had opted for the jury trial instead of arbitration as he suggested, but now the state did not want to abide by the result.

And so, Robertson added, Champion would proceed with harvesting the timber on the proposed park lands in Tennessee while waiting on the appeal to proceed — a move that would undermine the ecological value of the land for its old-growth forests. Because his relations with N.C. officials had been more cordial, he continued to hold off cutting timber there.

Federals intervene

In light of Robertson's threat to log the lands, the federal government intervened, and representatives for both Champion and Tennessee arrived in Washington for additional talks.

In April 1931, a deal was reached, but "not without difficulties," as Peter Robertson writes in a book about his grandfather, Reuben Sr. The meetings were so contentious between Robertson and Chapman that federal officials separated them and acted as go-betweens.

President Roosevelt at the dedication of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1940. The U.S. flag, borrowed from the Haywood County courthouse, had been a gift from Champion park opponent Reuben Robertson.

A deal was eventually inked to pay Champion $3 million for its park lands — with $1 million from Tennessee and $2 million from North Carolina — making Champion's timberland acquisition the largest, and perhaps most contentious, of the park's holdings.

Meanwhile, Robertson praised N.C. and U.S. Park officials, and the Park Service praised him. The mill president had no kind words for Chapman.

Robertson used some of the timberland payments funds to construct "Lake Logan," named for the son of his father-in-law and Champion Founder Peter G. Thomson. Robertson also invested money in mill expansion, including what was then the largest book-binding machine in the world, which helped keep employment high at the Canton mill throughout the Great Depression.

In an ironic twist of fate, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the park on none other than Labor Day in 1940, the U.S. flag flown during the ceremony on Newfound Gap was borrowed from the Haywood County Courthouse. It had been a gift to the county from Robertson.

This story drew heavily on Peter Robertson's writings of Reuben Robertson, Jr., including a story on this subject he wrote for The Mountaineer. Other sources include Knoxville, Sevierville and Asheville newspapers.

The legal architect who secured the mill

By Peggy Manning

When Peter Thomson came to Western North Carolina looking for a site to build a pulp mill with plenty of forests to feed it, he hired a man with a reputation for land deals and knowledge of the best timber tracts.

That man was Waynesville attorney George Henry Smathers, who had the foresight to record details of those transactions in his memoirs.

Today, those papers are gems, capturing stories like the ill-conceived plan to build a flume to float timber from the headwaters of the Pigeon River to the mill in Canton, a tax battle with the county and Thomson's cleverness.

George Smathers 1919

Smathers first met Thomson at the Dickey House in Murphy in February 1905. At first, Smathers told Thomson to locate the mill as close to the center of the "spruce belt" as possible in Swain County.

However, Thomson preferred Canton — mainly because his advisor, Montgomery Smith, had led him to believe a flume would be possible. Property was purchased for $100 an acre from W.J. "Dick" Hampton and Canton Mayor J. Nelson Mease.

"I put in practically all my time during the months of May, June, July, August and September in 1905 for the purchase of the land, investigation of the titles and in preparing deeds," Smathers wrote in his memoirs.

Smathers called Thomson's attention to a 1901 state bill that encouraged the building of pulp and paper mills and tanneries in Haywood and Swain counties — but only applied to plants erected on the Pigeon River below the mouth of Jonathan Creek.

Thomson wasn't dissuaded, however. Instead, he had Smathers lobby legislators to alter the bill so he could tap the state benefits.

Thomson then had the foresight to absolve himself of future river pollution. Smathers secured agreements from all the landowners along the river, releasing Thomson and his heirs from damages.

Thomson instructed his advisor Montgomery Smith to negotiate with Mary Ann Patton to purchase 55 acres of her property on the west side of the mill for worker housing that became known as Fibreville. But she refused to talk with him because she had heard that Smith could hypnotize people, according to Smathers' memoirs.

Patton, who was Smathers' former school teacher, insisted on dealing only with him. Incidentally, she wanted to know if pollution going into the Pigeon River would poison her livestock.

"I told her that while stock would not want to drink the polluted water of the river, it would not poison the stock, but I learned that it would kill most of the fish," Smathers wrote.

Shortly after work began on the mill in Canton, taxation became an issue. Thomson wanted Canton town leaders and county commissioners to waive taxes on the mill for 10 years. Smathers told him it would be against the state constitution and the best he could do would be to lobby for a low tax value on the property. Unmoved, however, the county tax assessor assigned a value of $750,000 on the mill.

Smathers played political hardball, bordering on blackmail, by threatening to expose commissioners for their own property being undervalued on tax rolls. The mill's value was reduced to $500,000.

Between 1916 to 1920, Smathers negotiated the purchase of 100,000 acres of timberland in Swain and Sevier counties — lands Champion later lost to the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. After a long and bitter battle, Champion agreed to a $3 million sale and furnished the services of Smathers to help transfer the titles.

After the settlement of the park property, Smathers retired from his general law practice, concentrating his work on the land title matters of Champion, working for the company until 1944. He died in 1950 and is buried in the family plot at Green Hill Cemetery in Waynesville.

Setting the stage for Champion

Vicki Hyatt

The legacy of Charles Wells looms large in Canton's early evolution

Charles Wells' early store is shown in the center of this photo with oxen roaming the streets before Canton was ever formed.

Before Canton was even known by that name, 19-year-old Charles Wells envisioned its great potential, put down roots and rolled up his sleeves to help build the prosperous town it would become.

The Buncombe native was drawn west in 1881 by the railroad, to the end of the line at what was then known as "Pigeon River." At the time, it was little more than a wide place in the road, quite literally — a ford there served as a river crossing along the Western Turnpike, a trade route through the mountains.

Upon his arrival, Wells had several hundred dollars, which he invested in inventory for a general merchandising business.

Before striking out for Haywood, he saved money by lining the floor of his bedroom with coins. When it was filled in, he figured he'd have enough money to strike out on his own, recounted great granddaughter Jan Wells Grove, who heard the story told by her own father, John Wells.

The coins on the floor prompted skepticism from Charles' father, who quoted Benjamin Franklin: a fool and his money are soon parted.

"Daddy told the story over and over," Grove said. "C.T. proved his dad wrong."

When Wells arrived in what's now present-day Canton, there were no defined streets and only a handful of stores. Thanks to easy railroad access, however, vacationers and capitalists found their way here over the next several years — giving rise to hotels, rooming houses, grist mills, a tannery and a bobbin, spoke and rim factory.

Business pioneer

Wells was integral to this growth, building one business after another along Canton's fledgling Main Street — a butcher shop, a dry goods store, a fish market, a movie house. Wells' store was the first one to offer coffins and caskets, thus marking the start of Wells Funeral Home in 1888. It is the oldest continuously operating funeral home in the county — now in its fifth generation of management under the same family.

Along the way, Wells married Addie Teague, with whom he would raise seven children. Eventually, a major portion of Main Street was dominated by the Wells family holdings, and commercial units not occupied by family businesses were marketed as rental property.

Landing a mill

This was the Canton that Peter Thomson first laid eyes on when he came to the mountains in 1905, looking for a place to build his paper mill. Wells was one of four town leaders who courted Thomson to pick Canton.

Concerns were expressed about dangerous fumes and ill effects caused by industrial operations, according to "Thomson's Pulp Mill" by Carroll C. Jones, but Thomson's confidence and assurances that the mill would be a blessing allayed local concerns. The group even confessed that the town had $300 in indebtedness, something that likewise didn't deter the industrialist.

Several leading citizens, including Wells, sold land to Thomson for the future mill site, which started out as 53 acres. Wells was also one of the founders of Champion Bank.

As Canton leaders were planning for Thomson's visit, it was thought fitting that he stay in Wells' home. Known as the Penland House, it had caught Wells' eye when he first rode into town. One of his daughters recalled him saying it was his intention to own it one day, which he did to house his rapidly growing family, and lived there until his death in 1927. It was eventually demolished and is now the site of the Canton post office.

The next generations

All seven Wells children became prominent men and women in the community in their own right.

Martha Wells Branson and her husband established a Buick dealership in town, while Margaret Wells Hudson and her husband opened Hudson Department Store. Carey Wells Sr. started a dental practice in town — one that his son joined years later.

Mary Wells Freeman became a large property owner in the greater Canton area and raised cattle, while Wallace sold dry goods much like his father.

Two of the sons, Broadway and Jim,

went to school to learn embalming and operated a separate business at 53 Main St., next to their father's general merchandise store that focused primarily on the funeral business.

The one Wells family business that has operated continuously since Charles Wells first started selling caskets is Wells Funeral Home.

Jim Wells was joined in the family business by his wife, Dutch McCracken Wells, who ran the funeral home together as second-generation owners. J. Wells Greeley, who still is active in managing Wells Funeral Home and Cremations, remembers his grandmother Dutch as being an astute business partner.

"She was very instrumental in the success of that business," he said. "She was a person of such stature and poise. You never doubted she knew what she was talking about."

A 1940 newspaper article on the family business referred to it as solving a problem in "delicate relations."

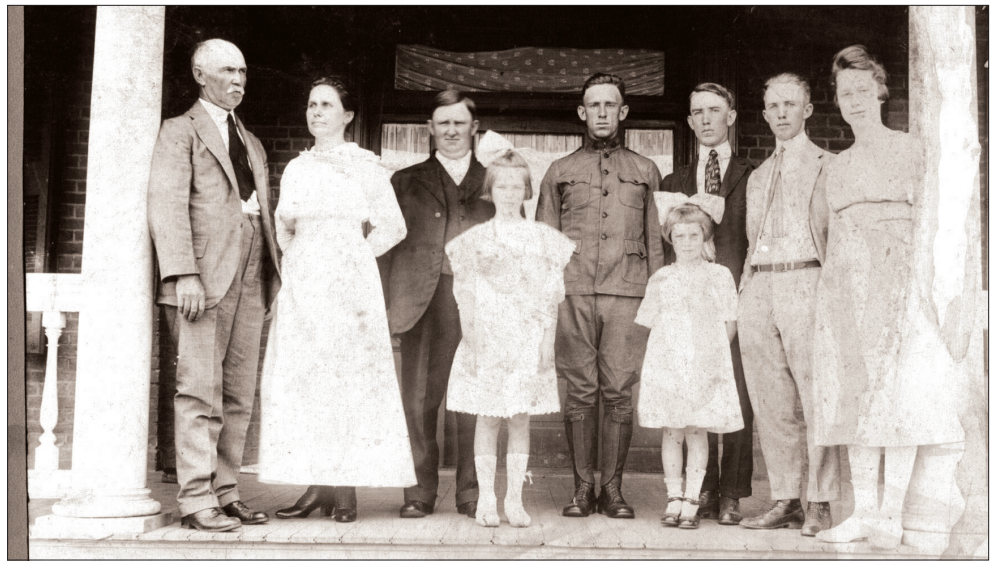
"That is we strive, through careful, studious effort to lend an air to a most unfortunate occasion of quiet, sympathetic dignity that we believe tends to allay the grief of those we are serving," Jim Wells was quoted as saying.

In 1963, the business moved to a newly built facility at the east end of town where it still operates today. Both Jim and Dutch Wells became prominent community leaders, organizing Christmas displays and working with numerous civic organizations in town.

"(Dutch) was instrumental in instituting the Girl Scouts in Haywood County and strongly promoted women going out and working, whether they were married or not and anything she could do to support that, she did," Greeley said.

Jim Wells was known across the county for his seemingly endless supply of Juicy Fruit chewing gum he gave away to all children he encountered — and sometimes even to adults. At his funeral in 1966, he was memorialized for this small gesture for which he is remembered by many to this day.

Jim and Dutch Wells had two daughters. The youngest Miriam, married Patrick Greeley. On the day they were wed, Jim Wells offered his new son-in-law a position at the funeral home. In joining the business, they became every bit the community leaders as third-generation owners as their predecessors were.



Charles Wells and his wife Addie are pictured on the steps of the family home with their seven children: Margaret Wells Hudson and Mary Wells Freeman in front, and Broadway, Wallace, James M., Carey Wells Sr. and Martha Wells Branson.

Their son, J. Wells Greeley, joined the family business as well, getting a degree in mortuary science from the University of Minnesota. In 2000, he became the fourth-generation owner.

He went on to expand Wells Funeral Homes and Cremation Services to locations in Waynesville and Candler, and build Wells Events & Reception Center in Waynesville in 2014 to better serve families and provide a venue for community events.

Just as Greeley's father was welcomed into the family business by his father-in-law, Greeley has done likewise with his own son-in-law, Ryan Jacobsen — who represents the fifth generation of family management in the 135-year-old business.

It's been 142 years since Charles Wells decided to set down roots in the community now called Canton — one where his family has made significant contributions through the years.

Those contributions are still evident through the buildings that remain in the downtown Canton area, the business acumen passed down through four generations and the remarkable legacy a young man's journey has left in Haywood County.

Sources include: "Canton: The Architecture of Our Home Town," by Camille Wells, granddaughter of Charles Wells; "Thomson's Pulp Mill" by Carroll C. Jones; publications of The Mountaineer, and interviews with Dr. George Freeman, Camille Wells, Jan Wells Grove and J. Wells Greeley.

Dutch Wells may have married into the family, but was an instrumental business partner to her husband, Jim, as the second-generation owners.

What's a milltown without a company store?

By Edie Burnette

Before the advent of a formal company store, Champion sold household commodities for employees and families in various vacant spaces within the factory buildings.

By 1922, the Champion Employees Store sold groceries, clothing and dry goods out of a one-story brick building, and by the 1930s the building had nearly doubled in size with the addition of two wings and a second story.

Aside from providing food and necessities at reasonable prices for workers, Champion had another goal: encouraging workers unaccustomed to regular cash income to manage their money wisely.

The store was seen as a "strong agent for social and commercial change, unlike other mill town company stores which kept low wage workers caught in a debt trap," according to The Log, a Champion publication.

"It was never intended to be a way to be used as a way to financially enslave employees," according to the late C. W. Hardin, former communications editor and photographer for Champion.

Rather than using cash for purchases, "Doogaloo" was a scrip negotiable only at Champion's store that basically amounted to a salary advance. The round metal coins would be used to buy anything in the store.

Workers received a dividend from the store each year, just before Christmas, based on a percentage of what they'd spent at the store over the course of the year. In 1937, annual trade dividends among 2,100 patrons amounted to $45,000.

A variety of high-quality, moderately priced goods posed a challenge for competing downtown merchants, The Log reported. A 1931 advertisement touted home delivery, with three delivery trucks and "snappy drivers." Pictures show an orderly, clean, well-stocked store brimming with vegetables and fruit, shelves stacked with cans, even oysters and a magazine rack.

Animal feed, over-the-counter drugs, coal, gasoline and tires were among the extensive inventory, and a wood yard supplied wood and kindling.

As Hardin said, "You could live out of the company store."

The late Keitha Morgan Campbell worked in the mill's main office next to the store.

"After work, I ran over to the store, bought what I planned to cook for supper, went home and cooked it. It was a real convenience. Their meat was always good," Campbell said.

The late Mary Carroll Ray recalled going next door from the main office for lunch.

"It was a nice place, a good thing to have," Ray said. "I remember that Daddy bought our Christmas gifts there ."

The soda fountain was especially popular. Older children headed to the store's soda fountain after school before going next door to the YMCA.

"Howard Hemphill made the best chili," Campbell said, "and good milkshakes, too."

The company store was demolished in the early 1960's to clear space for mill expansion.

The Company Store in downtown Canton.

Dances were just one of many social activities the YMCA provided for the families of millworkers and the people of Canton.

More than a social anchor, YMCA embodied Canton's mill spirit

By Edie Burnette

In 1920, Champion Founder Peter Thomson set the stage for one of his most lasting legacies to the people of Canton other than the mill itself: dedicating a YMCA as "his gift to the enrichment of the cultural, educational, recreational and spiritual life of the Canton community."

The Y became the major social hub in Canton and was the largest facility of its kind west of Charlotte. Thomson personally funded the $75,000 construction of the imposing brick building, located behind Champion's Main Office on Main Street and beside The Company Store.

The YMCA was a gathering place for teens of the era.

The lives of a predominantly rural population were broadened by the wide variety of activities at the Y. Champion employees and their families had access to the Y at no cost, while others paid a $2 membership fee.

An early story described the YMCA as a "home" with an "army of youngsters who are constantly under supervision." It was also "home" for an army of adults drawn by the programs and activities that radiated throughout the town and beyond.

By 1926, the Y roster had 1,443 members, eventually topping 6,000 — becoming the second largest industrial YMCA in the state.

There were myriad clubs within the Y: the Tri-Hi-Y for girls, Hi-Y for boys, the Y Men's Club and Friends of the YMCA for adults. Gray Y teams, as they were called, mowed lawns, sold Christmas trees and newspapers to pay for uniforms, and packed and delivered Christmas baskets filled with food.

Thomson set up a special fund to provide free membership for the best scholars in Canton schools from 6th through the

11th grades.

Members were treated to lectures, musical programs, plays, bridge and checker tournaments, banquets and dances. Community clubs utilized the Y for meetings, and families used it to host social events, from wedding receptions to baby showers.

During WWII, the Y served as a morale booster, including regular entertainment from a Rockette-style chorus line of young women.

The Y's sports teams — baseball, football, and basketball — were wildly popular and top-notch. The late Ross Kilpatrick, who went to the Y every day, played on a championship football team, traveling to games as far away as New Jersey.

"We were given the opportunity to travel, a chance we would not have had otherwise," he said.

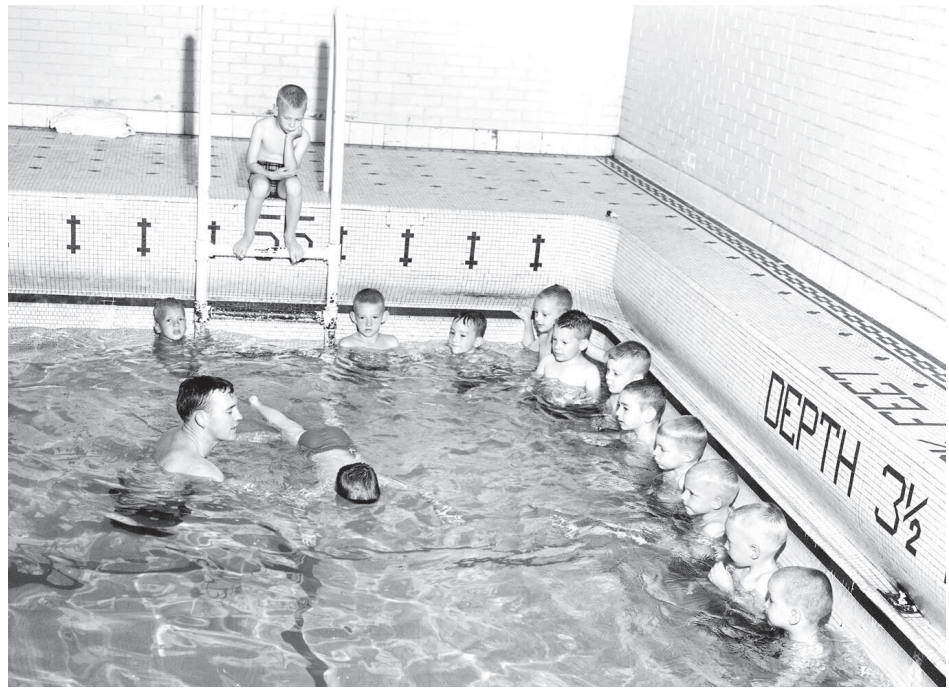
The Champion Y fast-pitch adult softball team became a formidable competitor and gained recognition throughout the Southeast, even playing in the Softball World Series. The wooden bleachers would be full for home games, a faithful group of vocal fans followed the team's bus on the road.

Clogging was big at the Champion Y, with square dance teams traveling far and wide for exhibitions, competitions and performances.

The Y was home to a swimming pool and bowling lanes — with numerous bowling teams. And Friday night "sock hops" were a community favorite.

Beyond providing fun things to do, the Y's positive impact in the community gave townspeople the feeling of belonging and inclusion.

"You had people there who seemed to take an interest in you. If you got in trouble, they approached you and tried to get you on the right track," according to Skeeter Curtis. "It was friendships, being there with each other, staying there all day."



YMCA swim lessons in 1961.

Champion YMCA All-World softball team at New York World Series games in 1960.

Snug Harbor served as a gathering place for Champion old timers, pictured here in 1950.

Unbreakable bonds

By Peggy Manning

Old Timers cherish mill friendships long after their paper-making days end

Seventy years ago a special haven for retired mill workers was dedicated in Canton — beginning a long tradition for so-called 'old timers' to keep in touch.

Snug Harbor offered "Lifetime Champions" a place to visit, play cards and checkers, read, listen to the radio and watch television. Or maybe brag about who could roast the best potatoes ahead of the spring "Spud Roast," when homegrown potatoes were roasted around the Snug Harbor fireplace courtesy of the Retired Champions Potato Roasting Clan.

For Old Timers whose life had revolved around the mill, retirement could be scary, a threat to their identity, sense of purpose and friendships. But Snug Harbor was a lifeline. They gathered weekly at the white two-story frame house, former home of mill watchman Elmer Lyons.

Another Snug Harbor tradition was the "The Old Timers Bell."

"The oldest man at each meeting gets to ring the bell," said mill retiree Dale Godfrey.

Dating to 1906, the bell was used to summon workers during the mill's construction, mounted on a field office shack. It was replaced by a steam whistle once the mill opened.

Champion President Reuben Robertson presented the bell to the Old Timers at Snug Harbor in 1955.

"I rescued it from threatened oblivion about 20 years ago and have kept it ever since as a treasured memento of those early days," Robertson said at the time.

The Old Timers later returned the bell to the mill, where it was displayed in the main office. In 2001, mill management gave it back to the Old Timers again.

Snug Harbor was eventually torn down to make room for mill expansion. The group met for a while at the YMCA, then the Canton Armory until it was flooded in 2004. The weekly gatherings then fell by the wayside, but annual reunions have remained a staple aside from the Covid year of 2020.

"I absolutely love going to the reunions. Everybody talks about things that have happened at the mill over the years and what's going on with the mill now," said Godfrey.

Reunions are open to those with 25 years or more, even if they're still working, and Godfrey is proud of the fact he hasn't missed a one "since I got my 25 years in." Godfrey worked at the mill 42 years, with a one-year hiatus in 2007 after being laid-off in a downsizing.

"They called us in and said 'Today's your last day,'" he recalls.

After a year as a car salesman, he

Reuben Robertson donates the old Champion bell, used to summon workers before the whistle was installed, to Snug Harbor in 1951.

saw a "now hiring" sign by the mill and got his old job back — even his old time clock number.

> *Friendships which have met the tests of war and peace, depression and prosperity, happiness and sadness, have become so much a part of our lives that they should not be permitted to fade away, but should continue to enrich our lives for years ahead.*
>
> — Champion President Reuben Buck Robertson at 1953 dedication of the first Snug Harbor.

Years ago, workers at the Canton mill were recognized for years of service with special tokens of appreciation. Godfrey recently was gifted a precious set of dishes from Clara Metcalf — embellished with the Champion armored knight and stallion, signed on the back by Reuben B. Robertson. They were originally presented to Metcalf's grandfather on the anniversary of his 25 years of service at the mill.

This year's gathering of the Old Timers will be held at the Canton Recreation Park in August. Ray Whitted, at 100 years of age, was the bell ringer at last year's reunion, but has since passed away, so the honor will fall to the next oldest. This year's union will be even more nostalgic, more meaningful, more bittersweet following the Canton mill closure — a reminder that one day, eventually, the gatherings will end as the last of the workers age out.

The annual Potato Roasting Party was a Snug Harbor tradition, pictured here in 1957.

Champion old timers gather for a reunion at the Canton armory in 2012.

A deadly, dangerous job

By Kathy N. Ross

When duty calls, elite crew answers

Since its construction, the pulp and paper mill in Canton has been a dangerous place, with its chemicals and byproducts, industrial machinery and potential for fire. For most of that time, the mill's in-house volunteer fire and rescue crew have taken those risks head-on.

They take pride in their accomplishments, from saving lives to saving the mill, all the while holding down regular jobs within the mill. Not that they have saved everyone, however. Dozens of deaths have been recorded at the mill over its 115-year history. Mill Fire Chief Joey Franklin said many have had to deal with a sense of helplessness when there was someone they could not save.

Nonetheless, Ray Inman said serving on the fire and rescue team "is one of the best things I've ever done."

"I would not trade what we've done out there for nothing," said Inman, a firefighter, paramedic and high-altitude rescuer before retiring in 2010.

The mill posed many dangers to workers, including the risk of being caught in the heavy machinery shown in this 1969 photo.

Evolution

The department had its official beginning in 1946, when the mill organized 30 volunteers into a fire-fighting brigade and began sending them out for training. But its heritage can be traced back to advent of WWI in 1914, when the community formed an ambulance corps to serve as a military guard unit. It was a perfect fit, for most of the corps' members were mill workers. Training to treat wounds during combat made them able to treat injuries at the mill. Champion welcomed the idea, paying a third of the cost of warehouse rental for the corps to store its equipment.

In a sense, everyone was expected to do their part. The Log, the company newspaper, included periodic instructions on emergencies — how to apply a tourniquet to a severed artery or safely pull a person free of a live electrical wire. Each issue of The Log espoused safety tips, like cautioning workers to look both ways before crossing the mill's maze of railroad tracks or warning that "many employees have been killed or seriously injured trying to work around machinery while sleepy."

In the early days, the maintenance crew would also respond to emergencies, signaled by the howl of the "wildcat whistle." The number of blasts indicated the accident's location within the mill.

Champion firefighters hoist their leader, Ted Woodruff.

Fire department veteran Charles "Sandy" White recalled how his grandfather, maintenance superintendent Claude Holtzclaw, carried a metal fob on his key ring that listed the numbers and corresponding mill locations. Later, firefighters carried a card with the same information, so they could know almost instantly what part of the mill needed their response.

White's father, Jack, also served as a firefighter, making Sandy the third generation to do so. Such a legacy was common, with new firefighters being recruited by the generation who came before them.

It was an elite team. Men — and later women — had to apply to serve on the

fire department, and the squad voted on each applicant. A single "no" vote could turn an applicant away.

After his hiring at Champion, Kenneth Johnson signed onto a waiting list for the fire department, for the squad had long been capped at 30 members. He still remembers the interview and the phone call that followed, telling him he had been accepted. By the way, the caller told him, the fire department's annual banquet was that night. Johnson called his mother and asked if they could postpone her birthday celebration. Then he went to the banquet.

The next day, he heard the wildcat whistle and checked his card, arriving to fight a grass fire caused by a spark from the mill locomotive. He did make it home in time for his mother's delayed birthday dinner.

Saving lives, saving the mill

Within the mill's department are teams that specialize in high-angle rescues and hazardous materials response. Some do both.

It is hard for these men to pinpoint their most dangerous challenges, but when one mentions the "turpentine fire," several nod in remembrance. When a maintenance crew lit a blow torch to shear some bolts, turpentine vapors ignited. As Johnson drove down the hill from his home that night, he could see the flames shooting skyward at the mill and knew it would be a tough one.

Inman also remembers that fire, going vertical in turnout gear, dealing with flames below and trying to douse the fire that was erupting above their heads along the conduits carrying electrical lines. As the lines heated and sparked, he said, they sounded like dynamite.

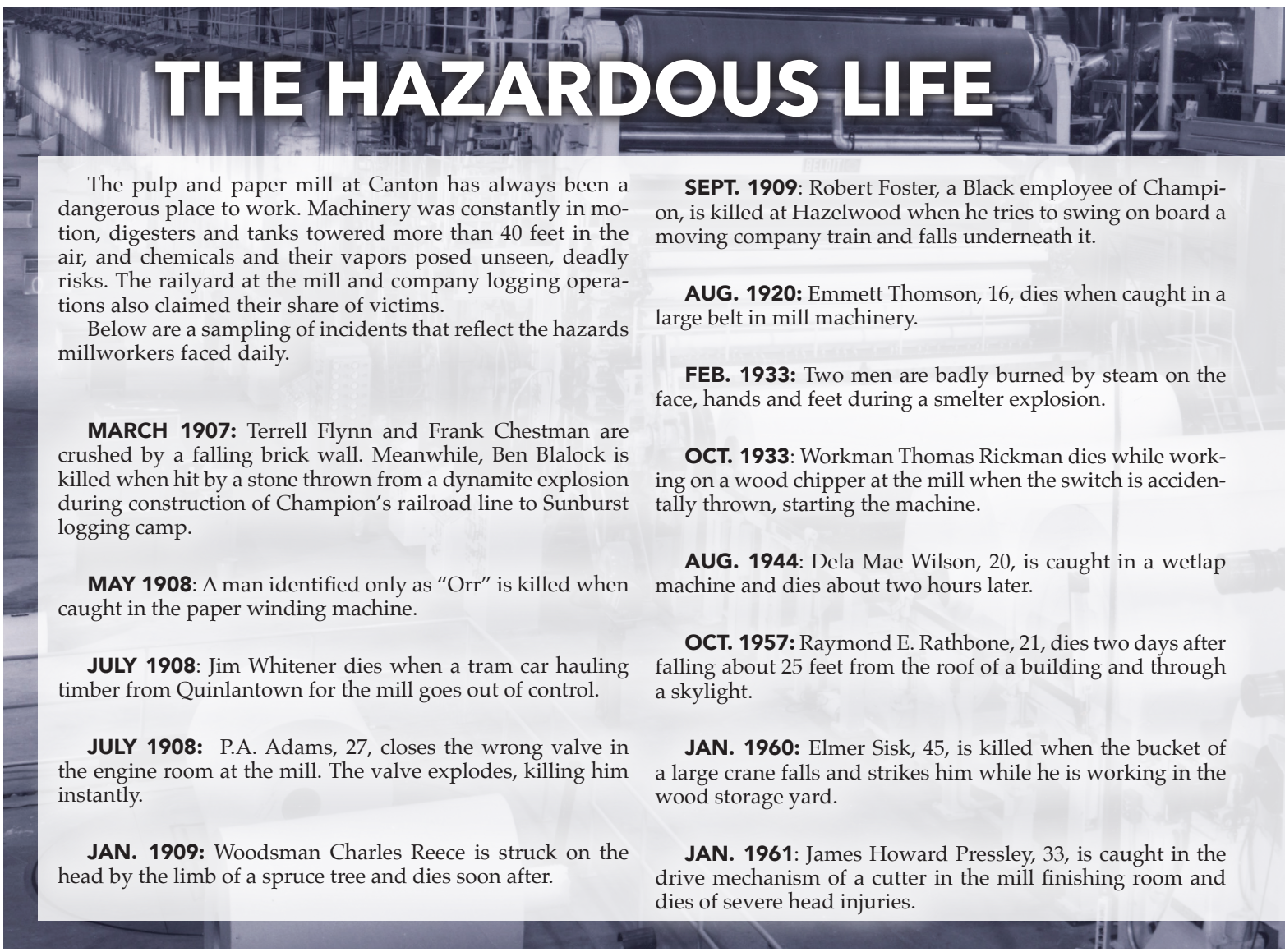
No one was seriously injured that night, not even the workers with the blow torch. But the risk was staggering.

So why take on such a job in such dangerous circumstances? The men were fighting for their jobs, they said, particularly since the digester building, where the chips are "cooked" in 15 massive cylinders, was in peril.

"The bravery shown that night probably delayed shut-down of the Canton mill until today," Johnson said. "If that fire had not been contained, I don't believe they would have built the mill back."

The men recall other fires, including Chief Franklin's strange and surreal challenge of going into a "chip bin" to fight a blaze, and times that piles of coal would combust.

There was the 1984 control room fire



THE HAZARDOUS LIFE

The pulp and paper mill at Canton has always been a dangerous place to work. Machinery was constantly in motion, digesters and tanks towered more than 40 feet in the air, and chemicals and their vapors posed unseen, deadly risks. The railyard at the mill and company logging operations also claimed their share of victims.

Below are a sampling of incidents that reflect the hazards millworkers faced daily.

MARCH 1907: Terrell Flynn and Frank Chestman are crushed by a falling brick wall. Meanwhile, Ben Blalock is killed when hit by a stone thrown from a dynamite explosion during construction of Champion's railroad line to Sunburst logging camp.

MAY 1908: A man identified only as "Orr" is killed when caught in the paper winding machine.

JULY 1908: Jim Whitener dies when a tram car hauling timber from Quinlantown for the mill goes out of control.

JULY 1908: P.A. Adams, 27, closes the wrong valve in the engine room at the mill. The valve explodes, killing him instantly.

JAN. 1909: Woodsman Charles Reece is struck on the head by the limb of a spruce tree and dies soon after.

SEPT. 1909: Robert Foster, a Black employee of Champion, is killed at Hazelwood when he tries to swing on board a moving company train and falls underneath it.

AUG. 1920: Emmett Thomson, 16, dies when caught in a large belt in mill machinery.

FEB. 1933: Two men are badly burned by steam on the face, hands and feet during a smelter explosion.

OCT. 1933: Workman Thomas Rickman dies while working on a wood chipper at the mill when the switch is accidentally thrown, starting the machine.

AUG. 1944: Dela Mae Wilson, 20, is caught in a wetlap machine and dies about two hours later.

OCT. 1957: Raymond E. Rathbone, 21, dies two days after falling about 25 feet from the roof of a building and through a skylight.

JAN. 1960: Elmer Sisk, 45, is killed when the bucket of a large crane falls and strikes him while he is working in the wood storage yard.

JAN. 1961: James Howard Pressley, 33, is caught in the drive mechanism of a cutter in the mill finishing room and dies of severe head injuries.

that shut down the mill for three to four days, and the time a high-pressure steam valve blew, destroying the generator room. Most of them remember a series of chlorine gas leaks during Champion's modernization. One incident involved more than 50 workers, most of them contract laborers.

"I think we got every ambulance in the county," Inman said.

Dennis Williamson and Inman teamed up on one of their most grueling challenges, when a worker cleaning and welding in a digester fell off the scaffolding, breaking several bones. The two men had to enter through a manhole at the top of the 47-foot tall cylinder, rappel to the injured man, stabilize and "package" him so that he wasn't further injured, then have him hauled back up and through the manhole at the top. Temperatures were well over 100 degrees in the digester that day, they said.

The mill constantly touted safety to workers, like this campaign in 1983.

OF MILL WORKERS

JULY 1968: Two employees are killed, two more hospitalized and three treated at the scene when they are overcome by gas while cleaning sand and gravel from a sewer line

JAN. 1981: Three men are injured and hospitalized with burns when chemicals spill over from a wood chip digester.

AUG. 1985: Twenty-two contractors and millworkers are treated at Haywood County Hospital following a chlorine gas leak blamed on a faulty air control valve.

JULY 1986: A chlorine gas spill injures 54 workers at Champion when a safety valve on a tanker car fails. The safety valve had been installed after a similar accident injured 22 workers the previous year.

MARCH 1987: Michael Lewis, 39, dies when a portion of a grated walkway he's standing on gives way, and he falls 60 feet.

MARCH 1990: Bernadette West's right arm and shoulder are pulled into the felt covering the rollers of the No. 12 paper machine. Harold Medford is also caught when he grabs West to keep her from being pulled into the machine. Bobby Moore grabs a knife and cuts through the felt, releasing the two.

DEC. 1992: Harley Lee Putnam, 58, is killed trying to free jammed paper in a roller when he falls backward, hitting the floor about 20 feet below.

AUG. 1993: Guy Matthews is severely burned over 42% of his body when a tank containing heated oil bubbles over.

APRIL 1994: Burton Fox suffers a fractured hip and facial injuries when he falls about 23 feet while changing a part on the No. 19 paper machine.

OCT. 1994: Kevin Moore loses his right hand when it becomes caught in an auger feeding coal into a boiler. Attempts to reattach his hand are unsuccessful.

JULY 2004: Thomas James Davis, 65, falls from a platform and dies while working on the No. 19 paperboard machine.

SEPT. 2020: A flash fire at the Canton mill kills two contract workers, Brett Burgueno and Curtis Butler, who were doing maintenance work inside a tank.

AUG. 2021: Mill workers Brandon Carter and Mandy West are seriously injured in a flash fire, believed to be caused by a buildup of methane gas in the building near the truck scales.

That was one time the men were physically unable to return to their normal mill jobs the same day as a rescue, Williamson said.

As a whole, the mill was supportive of the fire department, though it varied by managers through the years. White recalled a training exercise in which he was to enter a burning building and "rescue" a fellow firefighter. He could not see his target, he said, because the firefighter was wearing black turnout gear.

So White came back to the mill insisting the team be assigned yellow turnout gear, to ensure they would be easier to spot in smoke-filled buildings. He got what he asked for — until the next order of gear arrived, all of it black, ordered by a manager attempting to save money.

Now the fire team is drawing to a close, but only in the official sense, Johnson said. Its members are determined to nurture the sense of family and community they have cultivated for seven decades.

"When we find out that one of our family members needs anything, we're going to be there," Johnson said.

A 1958 group photo of Champion's in-house fire and rescue crew made up of volunteer millworkers.

Blue-collar union pride

By Peggy Manning and Kathy Ross

A repair crew for the #13 paper machine.

A framed charter hangs on a wall at the Smoky Mountain Local 507 in Canton, a proud symbol of a decades-long struggle for paper mill workers to gain union representation.

The anti-union stance of Champion Pulp and Fibre Company is as old as the mill itself. For half a century, it was enforced by Reuben Buck Robertson, both Canton mill manager and eventually president of Champion itself.

Robertson kept unionization at bay with a "goodwill" policy that benefited both employees and the company. He set up a credit union, company store, wage incentive plans, profit-sharing programs and "old-age bonuses." In a time when not everyone owned a car, company supervisors even drove employees back and forth to work.

In the tough paper market of the early 1920s, however, the hard work of mill employees was not enough for the company — and the company's good will was not enough for some of its workers.

The strike of '24

In January 1924, the company cranked up production demands, despite scaling back shifts and cutting wages by 10%.

Workers formed two locals with help from the American Federation of Labor, one under the International Papermakers and the other under the Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite and Papermakers.

Champion responded with a firm hand by shutting the mill. Robertson blamed the closure on market conditions, not the union, but most saw it as an unspoken message.

The unions countered by calling a strike and setting up picket lines. As Robertson gradually reopened the mill, those on strike "hissed and jeered" at the non-union workers and "scabs" who crossed the picket lines. No violence or arrests were reported, however.

By the end of February, Robertson laid down rules for workers to return to their jobs: surrender their union membership. Workers bowed to Robertson's demands, turning in 1,000 union cards to the Champion office, and the strike ended March 31.

Canton Labor Day parade in 1949.

IN A TOWN WHERE WORKERS RULE, CANTON GOES ALL IN FOR LABOR DAY

Labor Day is a big deal — a BIG deal — in Canton, not to mention the longest running festival in the state.

Canton's first Labor Day festival dates to 1906, while the mill was still under construction.

That first year, 16-year-old Pearl Coman Price became the first Labor Day queen. Pageants have threaded their way through the Labor Day festival ever since, evolving from beauty pageants — yes, including swimsuits — to judging based more on talent, poise and speaking skills.

Canton's Labor Day festival has not always been held in the town. In 1932, it was held at Lake Junaluska, with Southern Railway hauling workers and families to the lake. The event included fireworks, a fiddling contest, athletic competitions and a hog-calling contest. About 18,000 attended.

Champion had a significant labor force from the Black community. Early Labor Day festivities had segregated athletic competitions, special worship services and concerts for the "colored" community — so labeled in the published schedules.

During World War II, the Labor Day parades went "gasless" to conserve fuel for the war effort, with floats drawn by horses or steers.

Since the 1960s, a "wagon train" has made a three-day journey across Haywood County, camping along way, en route to the Labor Day Parade. By 1976, the wagon train totaled more than 50 wagons and 100 horses.

Tragedy struck in 2017, when a pickup truck slammed into two of the wagons as they made their way down Jonathan Creek Road, killing two riders Jason Messer and Boney Summey, who was a mill worker.

The wagon train tragedy was not the first to strike the Labor Day festival. In 1921, 13-year-old Louise Young drowned in the YMCA swimming pool a few hours after the swimming competitions.

Labor Day celebration has been disrupted only a few times in its 116-year history: due to polio and flooding in the 1940s, and then Covid and flooding in 2020 and 2021. It's one tradition that won't be going anywhere despite the mill closure.

"Canton has been hit hard, and if the mill had remained closed much longer there would have been some failures in business and much suffering in the community," the Carolina Mountaineer reported. "The mill will be running as usual in a few days in all the departments and we hope the 'Champion family' will be happy again."

The next attempt to unionize in Canton was in November 1946, but it failed before coming to a vote. At issue was Champion's policy of giving returning World War II soldiers their jobs back, at the same seniority level, which meant demotions for others. Patriotism apparently prevailed.

Union emerges

Robertson's iron fist and big heart apparently kept the workforce satisfied and the union suppressed for the mill's first 50 years.

That changed almost immediately when Robertson stepped down following the sudden death of his son, Reuben Robertson, Jr., in 1961.

Union supporters organized a vote every year until it passed. As mill management became more corporate, support for the union inched upward.

Champion leaders remained vocal in their opposition, however.

"A union in this mill could not possibly benefit any of us, but instead we strongly believe it would do serious harm. For this reason we intend to use every proper means to prevent the union from coming in here," Willis Kirkpatrick, division manager for Champion, said in a Waynesville Mountaineer article in 1962.

Workers overwhelmingly rejected the union that year: 1,582 against vs. 421 in favor at Canton, and 94 vs. 33 at the Waynesville plant.

Employees would reject the union three more times before it finally took in 1966, albeit by a slim margin of 677 for and 583 against — giving rise to the Smoky Mountain Local 507.

A voice for workers

The union quickly proved its mettle, delivering immediate returns for workers' union dues. Workers scored a raise of up to 48 cents per hour for 1966 and additional vacation time.

Labor negotiations for a new contract happened every three years after that. Several times, union members voted to strike, including in 1969. Each time, a deal was reached through negotiations, and the strike averted.

The contract talks were akin to a game of "chicken." In 1972, workers at "Little Champion" in Waynesville rejected a labor contract their Canton brethren had agreed to. Champion set a deadline for the Waynesville workers to take the offer before it was withdrawn, and they caved.

Twice, union members with protest signs took to the streets in solidarity with fellow millworkers who were fired due to missed work related to illness.

Haywood County boasted the most unionized workforce in the state of North Carolina in the 1980s. The union was a source of pride, which county economic director Robert Croft learned the hard way.

During a speech to the Waynesville Kiwanis Club in 1987, he said organized labor was the "biggest stumbling block to luring new industry to Haywood County." Croft was soon run out of town by political pressure from county commissioners, one of which happened to be a Canton union officer at the time.

Given the good pay at Champion, labor negotiations through the years often centered on benefits, overtime, shift schedules, seniority preferences and the like. The union also negotiated the terms for how layoffs would be conducted, should they occur.

Union members picket in 1971.

Buyout

The traditional role of the union — standing up for workers rights against the mill's corporate management — took a different tone in 1999 when workers themselves became the owners.

To save the mill from closing, workers gave up 15% of their wages and benefits in exchange for owning shares of the company. Only union workers could vote on the buyout, to the chagrin of non-union salaried employees who protested the buyout.

In 2005, the Smoky Mountain Local 507 became part of the United Steelworkers of America.

In the final years of the mill, relations between Pactiv Evergreen and Smoky Mountain Local 507 were tense. In 2022, local union president Troy Dills accused the company of failing to do enough to ensure worker safety, following a fire that injured two workers. Evergreen responded by issuing letters to employees, challenging what it called "false and misleading statements made to the media."

The future of Local 507, like so many entities with connections to the mill, remains uncertain in the wake of the mill's closure. Should a buyer come along for the Waynesville facility, which is being sold instead of shuttered like its Canton counterpart, the Local 507 could continue to be a presence in Haywood County.


Canton's Labor Day festival in 2017, showcasing hometown bluegrass legends Balsam Range.

Pigeon River battleground

By Kathy N. Ross

Mill's history entangled with environmental controversy

During construction of Champion's pulp mill in 1906, its lawyer, George Smathers, went farm to farm along the Pigeon River downstream, asking property owners to sign a waiver releasing the mill from liability for damage to the river.

Smathers' foresight, under the direction of Champion founder Peter Thomson, would not be enough to stem waves of controversy the pulp and paper mill would generate when it started production in 1908, when its smokestacks darkened the air and wastewater turned the Pigeon River's clear stream black.

Once the mill started production, it was clear that lawyer Smathers could not get signatures far enough downstream to shrug off the environmental damage. People who remembered that time later described an almost instant transformation of the Pigeon, from clear waters to a black flow topped with foam sometimes more than a foot thick.

Carl Bryson, who died in 2001 at age 108, was a teenager when Champion started production. He had grown up in Iron Duff, swimming and fishing in the Pigeon.

"But when they put that ooze in the water, the fish just lay piled up in great bunches," he said in a 2000 interview. "Their bellies would just shine."

A 1910 article in The Waynesville Courier described the river becoming "very foul" for at least 15 miles downstream.

"Dead fish can be seen floating on the surface of the Pigeon, and on the river banks wagonloads of dead fish could be gathered up. It is terribly offensive to the smell. Stock will not drink the water," the article stated.

Champion's economic and cultural benefits to Haywood County and surrounding regions have always been tempered by its effect on the environment. Opinions on how damaging the environmental effects were, and whether they were offset by the benefits, have varied, often depending on where folks lived.

Many locals were willing to accept the changes in the air and river, for the mill provided high pay and good fellowship in a strongly supportive working environment. But for Tennessee people, the look and smell of the river, which colored the water as far as Knoxville, overwhelmed any benefits that might trickle their way.

Promises and slow progress

Several times during the mill's early years, Tennessee state legislators threatened to sue Champion to halt pollution. But after Gov. Ben Hooper met with Champion officials, including mill manager Reuben B. Robertson, he agreed to give the company more time to clean up the Pigeon.

That time stretched into decades, and a pattern emerged. Tennessee would complain. Champion would respond with promises to clean up the river.

Gradual improvements were made along the way, spurred by a series of federal laws in the late 1940s and 1950s. In 1948, mill officials declared that oxygen levels were adequate for fish survival in the Pigeon by the time it reached the state line — though the type of fish, and whether there were actually fish present, was not reported.

In 1955, Champion built a tower to cool the water it used for paper production before putting it back into the river, though it cooled the water to nowhere near the river's proper temperature. Federal laws prevented the discharge of raw sewage into rivers, prompting Canton to tie its sewage lines into the mill's wastewater plant.

Another victory came in 1969, when

Opponents battling river pollution from the mill erected this billboard along I-40.

Nelson Ross holds up jars comparing water from the river to clean water during a public hearing on mill pollution in 1988.

Haywood County health officials noted a significant improvement to the Pigeon — mosquitoes were now able to breed on the waters below the mill.

'A durned fish'

The 1970s ushered in a new era — from strengthening Clean Air and Clean Water acts to creating the Environmental Protection Agency. And then came the first salvo.

In 1977, the EPA sued Champion for failing to meet the standards of the Clean Water Act by a July 1976 deadline. The lawsuit was dismissed the next year after the mill installed a water clarifier and paid a $45,000 penalty, the largest of its kind in the state at the time.

But it was merely a skirmish in the bigger battle to come. Tennessee was out of patience and wanted the EPA to stop granting Champion permit exceptions on the basis of "severe economic harm."

For Haywood County, the face of the clean river movement became Charles Dickens "Dick" Mullinix, a retired packaging engineer who moved to Haywood County around 1976. Coming from the industry himself, Mullinix believed Champion could do something about the condition of the river, and he took it on as a personal cause — helping found the Pigeon River Action Council, later the Dead Pigeon River Council.

Locals took a particular affront to Mullinix, because unlike many mill critics, he lived in Haywood. The antipathy was so strong that when TV station WLOS named Mullinix its "Person of the Week" in December 1987, Haywood County citizens tried to organize a boycott against the station's advertisers.

But nothing, not threats of death and arson, nor a car crash that almost killed him, kept Mullinix from his campaign.

Legal, bureaucratic and emotional events propelled the issue through the late 1980s. Tennessee sued Champion, both in N.C. and

federal courts. The EPA held hearings on issuing a pollution discharge permit. Thousands attended, with Tennessee schoolchildren petitioning for a clean river and Haywood County families pleading for their jobs.

"What's more important, a family or a durned fish?" asked Champion employee Bruce Medford at one hearing. Nelson Ross held up jars of dark water from the Pigeon River at the hearings, while in Haywood County, school superintendent Charles McConnell tore posters reportedly depicting both sides of the issue off the wall of an elementary school.

Closure threatened

Champion held to one theme: it was willing to spend up to $350 million on a modernization that would dramatically improve the quality of the river but would have to close if forced to go all the way and meet federal standards.

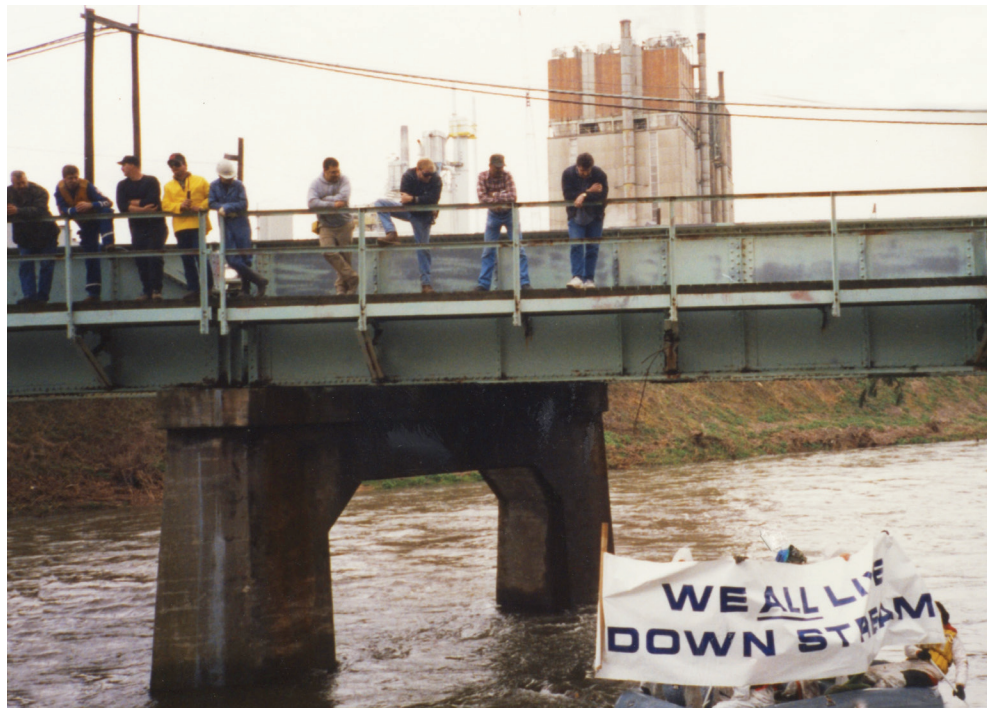
"There is no technology available to us today to economically achieve and keep this mill competitive and meet those strict standards," said Oliver Blackwell, Canton mill manager and vice president of operations.

Blackwell was Mullinix's counterpart, the face of the mill during the controversy. He repeated warnings that the mill might have to close. By 1988, fear and anger dominated as the possible loss of 1,400 of the county's best-paying jobs loomed. The community was caught in a storm of hearings, threats and campaigns, even parades, to save the mill.

In retaliation against Tennessee, North Carolina legislators threatened boycotts of Tennessee whiskey. Locals also tried to organize a boycott of Pet Dairy headquartered in Tennessee — until they realized much of the milk from Haywood dairies went to a Pet processor.

When trace dioxin levels were found in fish, warning signs were posted along the river banks, advising people not to eat fish caught downstream from the mill. Locals removed some of the signs, which were replaced.

In March 1988, a deal was struck between North Carolina, the EPA and the mill to end the impasse over a pollution discharge permit. Canton's community expressed relief, but there was one more



Protestors float down the Pigeon River in Canton.

hurdle. Tennessee leaders had to agree.

They didn't. In December, Tenn. Gov. Ned McWhirter announced Tennessee would not consent. In response, Champion announced it would no longer fight Tennessee's demands. But the mill would have to drastically reduce operations and cut workers, if not close entirely.

"There is some chance that part of the mill can be saved, but it will be a very small part," Blackwell said.

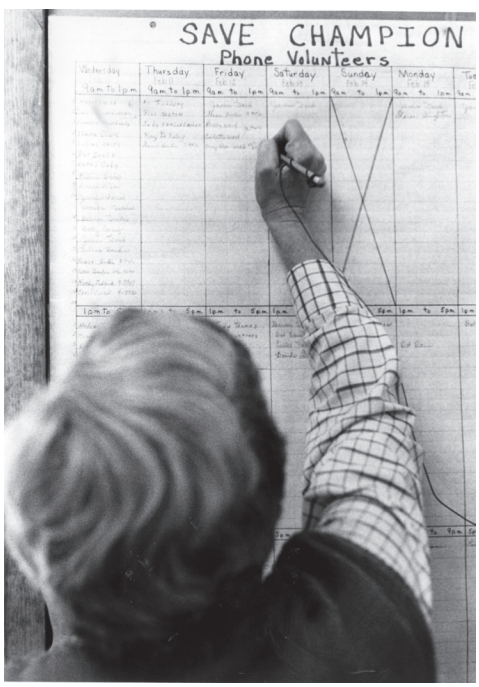
All of Haywood County seemed to shudder.

"We're watching our lives shatter,"

Signs warning of dioxin levels in the Pigeon River were torn down by locals, but later replaced.

Protestors form a bucket brigade, scooping dirty water from the river and throwing it back onto the mill's property.

Pisgah High School students told a Mountaineer reporter. One mill employee stopped work on his new house. A student questioned whether she would be able to attend college. A hairdresser wondered if her family would have to move if her husband lost his job at Champion.



Mill supporters launch a campaign of their own to save the beleaguered mill.

A not-so-deadly blow

Over the next few months, however, Champion backed away from its doomsday predictions. The company conceded it could keep the mill open, but would have to cut about 1,000 jobs over three years.

By March 1990, job losses were dialed back to only 300, with headlines declaring "Champion to modernize; job loss less than expected." And just a few months later, the mill actually hired 30 people to replace retiring and vacationing workers.

The idea that Champion had preyed on the fears of its workers to win concessions was rarely discussed, except among environmentalists. Job losses did come over time, though mill officials said those losses were due to other factors — including modernization and a decline in paper demand.

The river underwent significant transformation. Fish populations improved, and warnings against eating fish were lifted. Tennessee rafting outfitters began offering trips below the Walters Hydroelectric dam. Champion, meanwhile, sponsored whitewater competitions on the Pigeon to promote its improvements.

But mill critics pushed for more. About 300 college-age environmentalists converged on the mill in March 1993 to protest. They formed a bucket brigade, dipping water from the river and tossing it across the mill's fence line, shouting "Take it back."

Almost no mill employees came out to witness the protest, though the Canton Papertown Association offered the group Girl Scout cookies and drinks — which protestors refused.

The battle raised its head every few years, when the mill had to periodically renew its pollution discharge permit — including the constant specter of lawsuits from Tennessee. And with each permit, Tennessee gained ground.

In 2007, for the first time, the mill didn't seek an EPA variance on its wastewater permit. But it remained a target. It seemed environmentalists, after 70 years of being stalled or ignored, were determined to press for every advantage. The mill was simply too big for the river, they said.

One Tennessee lawyer announced his intention to sue the company every three years until he died or the mill closed. A number of class action lawsuits had already been filed, with one awarding payments, long delayed over legal wrangling, that amounted to about $4,500 for each participating property owner.

Clearing the air

Pressure was also building on the mill to lessen the pollution discharged into the air. In the early 2000s, now the employee-owned Blue Ridge Paper Products spent $22 million to cut air emissions by more than half in the wake of the N.C. Clean Smokestacks Act.

But the mill would soon be caught in the crosshairs of tighter federal air standards driven by global warming concerns. In 2013, Evergreen, the new owner of the mill, announced a plan to replace two of its coal-fired boilers with cleaner-burning natural gas. But it would cost more than $65 million, and Evergreen asked the state for help

North Carolina providing $12 million and Haywood County commissioners kicked in a pot sweetener. In return,

the company had to commit to operate with a minimum of 800 employees at better-than-average wages through 2024.

After Evergreen announced the mill would close in June 2023, the N.C. Governor and Attorney General immediately demanded repayment of the grant. State leaders also drafted threatening letters and held a parade of press conferences — from the steps of Pisgah High overlooking the mill to the sidewalks of downtown Canton — pledging to hold Evergreen accountable for environmental cleanup on the 185-acre mill site before exiting for good.

Meanwhile, a lead character in the drama, the Pigeon River herself, may emerge as a key player in Haywood County's future. Many speculate that Canton's reincarnation in the wake of the devastating mill closure will hinge on a new identity as a riverside town.

Canton mill manager Oliver Blackwell served as Champion's chief spokesperson during the pollution battle of the 1980s.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Not on my watch

By Peggy Manning

With the mill on the line, workers rallied for employee buyout

When news broke on Oct. 8, 1997, that Champion planned to sell off the Canton and Waynesville mills, employees feared the worst: the way of life that had sustained their families and the generations before them would come to an end.

What followed was a story of grit and determination, of blue-collar pride at its finest, of the bootstrap culture that ran deep in the millworkers' Appalachian blood. In short, the millworkers weren't going to go down without a fight.

"The mill would have been shut down. Jobs would have been gone. We had a lot of employees who were close to retirement, and we were able to control our retirement package," now-retired millworker Doug Gibson said of the sentiments at the time.

A press conference announces the purchase of the mill in an employee buy-out in 1999.

In just two short months, workers launched a bid to take control of their own destiny — by trying to buy the mills where they worked and six associated packaging plants.

"Our goal is to save jobs and to give people a sense of security they have not had at Champion in a long time," Millworker Alton Higgins said at the time.

Representatives of the Smoky Mountain Local 507, the local arm of the United Paperworkers International Union, announced their intentions on Dec. 6, 1997.

Forging a deal

The union knew they needed help navigating the complex legal negotiations and raising the capital to pull off an employee buyout. So they hired the Southern Appalachian Center for Cooperative Ownership and American Capital Strategies as consultants.

An Employee Stock Ownership Plan research committee was appointed, naming six mill workers to serve as liaisons to the consultant team: Alton Higgins, Doug Gibson, Richard Haney, Daniel Gregg, Vanise Henson and Kenny Sutton.

"We feel this is the only avenue we have as employees to have a say in our future," Sutton said during the announcement of the buyout attempt.

Over the next year, the ESOP committee held support rallies and began to put together a financial package. Initially, the committee chose Sunburst Papers as the name for the proposed employee-owned company, a name that reflected the mill's roots.

Champion rejected the ESOP committee's initial bid in April 1998, but the ESOP committee immediately regrouped and doubled down.

"This is by no means the end of the ball game. As long as it is Champion's intention to sell the mills, the ESOP committee's intention is to try to buy the mills," Higgins said.

Two months later, the ESOP committee parted ways with American Capital Strategies and formed a new partnership with KPS Specialty Situations, a firm that partners with union-led ESOPs.

Meanwhile, the workforce was reduced by nearly 350, but remaining workers had to meet the same production levels.

"People are being worked to death," said James Hutchinson, then president of Local 507. "Some are forced to work their days off, and others have worked 200 hours in two weeks. That eventually will take its toll on everyone."

Behind the scenes, the committee continued to meet with KPS, and informational meetings were held with mill workers

to answer questions and share the progress of the proposed buyout.

In January 1999, the ESOP committee submitted a second bid on the Canton and Waynesville mills and the five remaining DairyPak plants in New Jersey, Georgia, Ohio, Iowa and Texas.

Finally, on March 29, 1999, the ESOP committee and KPS reached a formal agreement with Champion to buy the mill system for $200 million — consisting of $170 million in cash and a $30 million note.

Announcement of the deal referred to the employee-owned company as Carolina Paper, a decision that was made without consulting the local ESOP committee and which added to a growing sense of distrust between the blue-collar workers and the big-city financiers.

Sacrificing wages

Ultimately, just 18 months after the idea of an employee buyout was floated, the unionized millworkers held a vote on whether to accept the deal that had been negotiated: 927 in favor and 600 against.

If union members had rejected the agreement and related labor contract, the buyout effort would have ended and the mills would have gone back on the market.

The buyout agreement was officially signed on May 14, 1999, marking the beginning of a new era for the mill system. Workers realized they would have to make sacrifices, but said it was a necessary move to preserve their jobs.

While employees would get dividends in the form of profit sharing, they sacrificed a 15% cut in pay, with no raises on the table for seven years.

"Our wages will be equivalent to going back in time a few years, and we'll have no more (increases) for the next seven years. However, most of us are just glad to be working," Canton mill worker Jerry Singleton said at the time.

The name of the employee-owned company was once again changed, this time to Blue Ridge Paper Products. Ownership was divided — with 55% of the stock going to KPS and other financiers, 40% to the ESOP account and 5% going to senior management.

"The only regret I have is that we weren't able to get the majority of the stock. We could have had more say in the operation of the company," Gibson said in a recent interview.

Though the paper market was in decline and the Canton mill endured environmental problems and lawsuits, the employee-owned mill system continued to run for the next eight years.

Effects of Gulf Coast hurricanes in 2005 created crippling losses for the mill system. The cost of wood chips, coal and electricity exceeded revenue by $37.6 million, CEO Rich Lozyniak told the media. That was on the heels of the devastating 2004 tropical storms that caused massive flooding in Haywood County.

Union members vote in 2007 whether to give up profit-sharing, which set the stage for employee ownership to end. Canton workers vote it down — 299 against and 285 in favor — but it passes due to support at other Blue Ridge Paper sites.

A good run

In June 2007, mill workers voted to approve a change in their labor agreement, which relinquished the right to profit sharing in return for a lump sum of $750 each and a wage hike for the first time since the buyout.

Many workers interviewed as they left the union hall after that vote said they would only be getting back about a third of what they had invested in the company, but said they felt they had little choice but to approve the proposal.

Each employee's contribution amounted to about $5.20 an hour, for an estimated total investment of more than $112 million in sacrificed wages over the seven-year financing period, according to documents shared during the labor agreement changes.

Then, finally came the heart-breaking news that the employee-ownership would end.

On July 31, 2007, KPS announced it would throw in the towel, recoup its investment and move on. KPS sold Blue Ridge Paper Products to New Zealand billionaire Graeme Hart's Rank Group for $338 million. Workers had no say.

Those who'd been at the mill during the employee buyout in 1999 — when it became Blue Ridge Paper Products — got a $20,000 payout each for their portion of the stock ownership.

"Am I proud to have been a part of the ESOP effort? You bet I am. If I had it to do all over again, I would," Higgins said when news broke that the mill system would be sold.

Final chapter

By the end of August 2007, Blue Ridge's name changed again to Evergreen Packaging. And for a period of 16 years, the machines kept churning out products and employees kept collecting a paycheck.

Then even worse news came on March 6, 2023, when the company that had merged with Pactiv in 2020 announced plans to close the Canton mill.

Attempting an employee buyout this time around wasn't an option.

"I don't think it's even been mentioned," said Daniel Gregg, the only member of the ESOP committee still working at the Canton mill when the closure was announced.

"I'm a fourth generation mill worker and very proud of it," said Gregg, who worked at the mill for 47 years. "My dad also worked 47 years at the mill and both my grandfathers worked at the mill. My great-grandfather worked on the spur line that brought the first wood from Suncrest to the mill."

Families will no longer be able to carry on that tradition, and that is one of the biggest regrets Gregg has about the mill being sold in 2007 and now closing.

"We were led to believe that profits would be shared with the employees or that we would at least have a voice in whether the profits would be reinvested," Gregg said. "At first, management was doing what we asked and paying off the debt. But, management changed and so did priorities."

Perhaps the age and condition of the 115-year-old mill had as much to do with the closure as market conditions in the paper industry. Other than Champion's $330 million modernization project that was completed in 1994, very few upgrades have been made to the mill, Gregg and Gibson agree.

Nonetheless, they are proud of the David vs. Golliath story of triumph — one that perhaps kept the mill open longer than it would have been otherwise.

The mill workers did what no one thought could be done. They had no training or experience in corporate finance, but were able to put together a plan to buy the mill system and protect their jobs for at least two more decades.

In an ideal situation, that would have continued.

"I could have retired a couple of years ago, but I stayed on because I was hoping to train the next generation of mill workers," Gregg said.

Mill Culture

The last roll of paper to come off the #19 paper machine before the mill closure.

Pride, loyalty and unshakeable bonds defined generations of millworkers

By Becky Johnson

Paper millworkers are a special breed. They toil for their families. They shoulder the load for their coworkers. They take care of their community. And they do it all with unrivaled pride — for good reason.

"We made something out of nothing, just trees and water," said Rick Corzine, a fourth-generation millworker.

For 115 years, millworkers' very identity revolved around their job.

"When it would snow so bad, my father walked to the mill. That was his dedication. His mill provided for his family and he would do whatever it took to get to the mill," Joy Westphal recalled.

They each did their part to keep the mill humming — from the boilers to the steam plant, from the control room to chemical prep, from the wood yard to the machine line, from the fork lift loaders to the truck drivers.

"I say I made paper, though I never made the first piece," said Roland Osborne, an instrument repairman for most of his 34 years at the mill. "But the things I handled had to work or there would have been no paper."

The mill had to work, so they had to work. When drought jeopardized the water supply, when floods swamped the town, when fires and gas leaks threatened their lives — they kept the paper coming.

Woody Lipham drives his tractor through downtown Canton to get to work after a snowstorm in 1960.

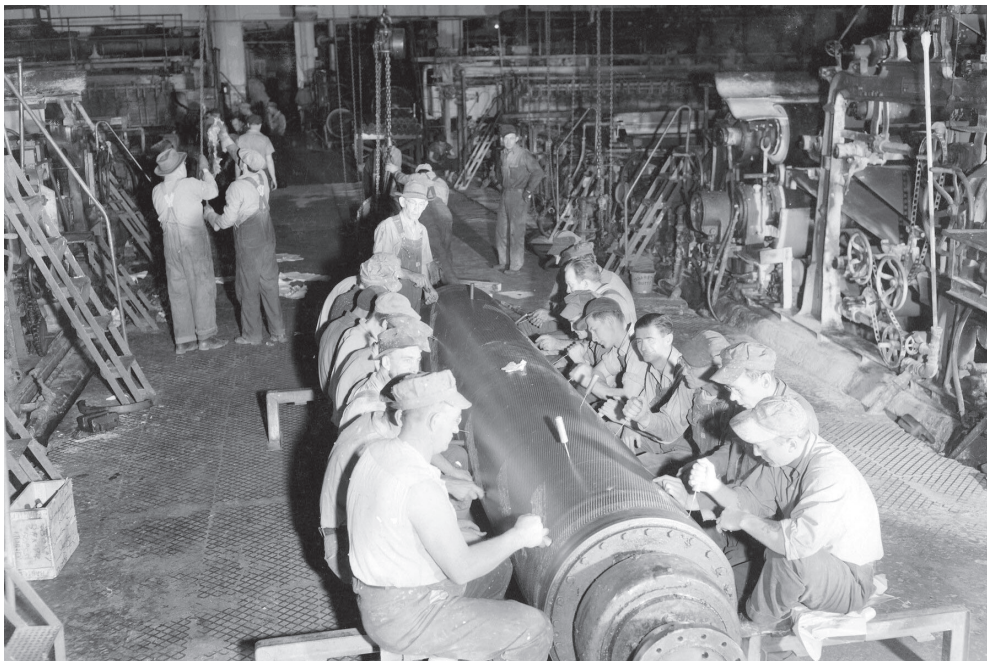
"It was nothing to work 25 straight graveyards," said millworker Dean Trull. "We had to make sure it ran. If the trucks didn't get loaded, we weren't going to make it. So we done what we had to do. Nobody had to tell us. We all wanted to be the best at what we do."

When the mill was on the chopping block in the 1990s, workers rolled up their sleeves to save their mill, buying it themselves to keep it going. Because, after all, it was *their* mill.

"There was definitely a sense of ownership. We took pride in what we were doing," said Kane Long, a fourth-generation millworker.

For Long, that pride came in the form of equipment he tended and machines he coaxed.

"They all had their own quirks and personalities," said Long, who kept a fleet of generators running, some of them dating to the '40s and '50s. "I could diagnose most problems just by going through and listening."



Shoulder to shoulder, mill hands work together to punch perforated holes on rolls, which provide circulation to help to dry out the paper rolls.

Dean Gibson was only at the mill a year, but had the same deep sense of loyalty as the old timers.

"The job gave me a sense of responsibility. It gave me a sense of being needed," said Gibson, who tested water coming into the mill before it went into the paper-making process. "There was a big burden on my shoulders testing this water, making sure it was hitting the specs."

Ed Moore, an electrician at the mill, had a lot riding on his shoulders, too.

"If something went down with an electrical problem, every hour that went by we were losing money — $13 million a day if it was the #19," said Moore, who would be under the gun to get it back on line.

Even when Pactiv Evergreen quit caring, workers still couldn't bring themselves to let go.

"Everybody did their job up through the end. It's a testament to the character of the folks that are down here," said Will Warren, a maintenance manager. "The mill has been here to provide, and they had pride in what they did. I saw it right away when I walked in the door."

Riley Jones and Dean Trull inspect a piece of paperboard for old times' sake on the final day at the mill. It came off the last roll made on the #19 machine.

Irreplaceable bonds

Millworkers were as loyal as they come, but not just to their job. They showed up day after day, year after year, as much for their fellow workers as to make paper.

"It's like a family down there. The companionship, you will never find it anywhere else," said Logan Dills, a millworker of six years.

To Trina Clark, the mill closure is a life altering blow. But it's her fellow workers she'll miss more than the paycheck.

"The mill employees band together for each other. To be honest, if it wasn't for them, I'd be lost," Clark said. "I can't tell you the number of times somebody has been injured or sick or had a family emergency, and the employees step up to take care of each other."

That bond extended into the larger community fabric. The deep-seated notion of working together for a greater good, leaning on one another to get a job done, was the glue that made Haywood County one people.

"It's the staple of our community. It's what everyone knows. When you're in high school, it's where your grandparents, your mom and dad, and everybody that's gone before you, that's where they worked," said Jessica Kiers.

The camaraderie among millworkers was in full force at a gathering in downtown Canton to witness the last whistle before the mill shut down. Shoulder to shoulder, retirees Butch Medford and Thomas Bryant somberly removed their caps and placed them on their hearts as the whistle sounded her low howl over Canton for the final time.

"Anytime you need a helping hand, you just have to ask, 'Hey, give me a hand,' and they'll be there," Medford said.

"Not just in work, in life," Bryant added.

"You dang right," Medford said.

'Til the end

Fear of losing that bond is one reason many millworkers kept working — 30, 40, even 50 years.

"It was like having a band of brothers you worked with. When you retire, that part of your life is gone," said Dennis Reed, a third-generation millworker.

Not for everyone, however. Twice a week for the past 30 years, a group of widows bound by their relationship to the mill have gathered for breakfast and fellowship at the Canton Hardee's. Their numbers have dwindled from 15 in the 1970s to five to six now, as their friends gradually passed away.

But they persist. Hardee's biscuits with sliced tomatoes and homemade apple butter neatly sitting between rows of purses are a symbol of decades of friendship. One of the oldest is Betsy Shepard, 96, who got on at the mill in 1944 when the men were off fighting in WWII.

"I told a little fib back then. I was only 17 years old, and you had to be 18 years

Retired mill workers Butch Medford and Thomas 'Boogie' Bryant pay their respects at the last mill whistle.

old to work there," said Shepard. "I needed a job, and at that time they were willing to hire me."

When the mill locked the gates in June, Ray Queen was by all accounts the oldest worker still standing. At 82, with 59 years under his belt, Queen had been at the mill more than half of its existence.

The day the mill closed, Queen lingered on the railroad tracks after exiting the chute to banter with his long-time friend Jerry Crag, trading barbs as usual about each other's age.

"He was here when they were building the place," Crag joked. "When they were layin' the first bricks."

"I made the bricks," Queen shot back without skipping a beat. It's no secret why Queen hung in so long.

"I loved to work," he said.

Besides, he wasn't about to quit before Crag, who had a mere 49 years at the mill.

"We was tryin' to out do each other no matter what," Crag said.

Ladies who worked together at the mill as far back as the 1940s stay in touch over their weekly biscuits at Hardee's.

YES, THE GIANT RATS WERE REAL

There were more tall tales in the mill than at a fishing convention. But one of the most fabled stories was as real as a 15-ton paper roll.

"They had wharf rats down in there with a 25-year pension plan going. They were bigger than a cat," said Dennis Reed, a third-generation millworker.

While taking a break on a bench one day, a giant rat came scurrying toward a group of men.

"It was as big as a monster. Jack Brown kicked at it, and it ran up his overalls. He squeezed his leg as hard as he could, screaming and doing a square dance," Reed recounted. "Afterward, he said 'I don't know if I wet myself or I squeezed the wet out of the wharf rat.'"

One of the workers, Larry 'Fuzz' Murray, used to set live traps for the rats. He'd keep them a spell, feeding them in hopes of taming them.

"One day, he went to go check his live traps, and next thing you knew he was leading a live rat through there on a leash," Reed said.

Fuzz's nickname came from his mustache though, not his pet rats. Nicknames were common within the mill, and once you got one, it stuck.

Beth Gray heard the origin story of her dad's nickname more times than she can count.

"When it come time to plant gardens in the spring, somebody asked 'Do you do a garden?' And he said, 'Nope, I had to work in the garden growing up, and I hope I never have to farm again.' When break was over, the foreman said, 'Alright Farmer, let's get back to work.' And for 40 years he was Farmer Gray, even in the mill phone book, and my momma was called Mrs. Farmer."

It's easy to guess how Thomas 'Boogie' Bryant got his nickname.

"Years ago, I was a great dancer. Whenever me and my wife got on the dance floor, everybody would step back," Bryant said.

Jokes and pranks were also part of mill life. When someone messed up, the deed would be captured in a cartoon, with copies pasted around the plant.

Once, several workers were sent to a paper factory in Charleston. But when they got there, they called back to Canton saying they couldn't find it. Turns out, it was in Charleston, South Carolina, not Charleston, West Virginia.

"Needless to say, they wished many times they'd never let that happen," retired millworker Roland Osborne recalled. "Anything you did that backfired, they'd never let you live it down."

Workers strip bark from chestnut trees, using the wood to make pulp and the bark to make extract then sold for leather tanning.

Built on the backs of millworkers

Lifting future generations is one of the mill's greatest legacies

By Becky Johnson

Thomas Seth Grogan was only 14 when he started working at the mill way back in 1914. All day long, he used a draw knife to skin the bark off acid wood, a grueling job called raw-hiding.

"He wasn't a big man, but he had an iron will. He brought his whole family out of poverty working at the mill," said his grandson, Neal Grogran, a third-generation millworker.

T.S. not only put his own three sons through college, but also a daughter-in-law, plus helped them go into business, get a masters degree, buy land to farm — you name it.

"My grandfather was the linchpin to move all his people forward," Grogan said. "It's what the millworkers did. They bought land, they bought homes, they got their kids educated and pulled them to the next level. They propelled themselves to great achievement in the American story."

Grogran followed in the footsteps of his grandfather and many uncles on both sides, eventually putting his own three kids through college.

"Everyone knew if you get on down there, you can make it. If you don't, you might make it, but you might not make it as good," he said.

When Lee Hutchinson's grandfather got a job at the mill in the 1930s, it forever changed the economic trajectory of his family.

"When the Depression came, he started at the mill for 10 cents an hour and ended up working there for 30 years. It gave my mother a middle-class standard of living and put her through college."

Gail Mull, the youngest of nine children, remembers first-hand how tough life was growing up in the Depression.

"My mother wouldn't let us peel potatoes because we took too much off. When she did it, you could read a newspaper through the peel," Mull recounted.

That changed when her dad got a job at the mill in 1943.

"He was making a fortune compared to what we used to have. That's when we finally got a wringer washing machine," she said. "Daddy would bring home 25 pounds of flour and sugar at a time from the company store."

As early as 1905, the mill was a beacon of hope for those seeking a better

life. Hundreds migrated to the county to build the mill, lay the railroad tracks and work in the logging camps during those early years.

Among them was Dennis Reed's grandfather, who packed his young family onto a train and came to Canton in search of work during the mill's construction. Reed eventually carried on the legacy as a third-generation mill worker — but never forgot his boyhood days in the mill village of Fibreville.

"We'd sit on the river bank with our BB guns and shoot the big ole foam balls floating down it," Reed said. "The river was black as coffee, and some of those foam balls were big as bales of hay."

Even back then, the children of millworkers stood out.

"You had spending money," Reed said. By the time Reed went to work at the mill, he had a lot more than spending money.

"We could buy nice clothes, we had nice cars, and we had plenty of money to go on vacations," Reed said. Thanks to the mill, all three of his children got vehicles when they turned 16.

The generosity of millworkers flowed through the community. Reed, like hundreds of others in the mill, set aside a portion of every paycheck for the Santa Pals charity helping the less fortunate.

"There wasn't a cause that arose that they didn't open their pocketbooks for," Grogan said.

Millworkers had a deep sense of obligation to those who relied on them, and that included their neighbors in need. Besides, they knew how lucky they were. Mill jobs were coveted, and competition was fierce.

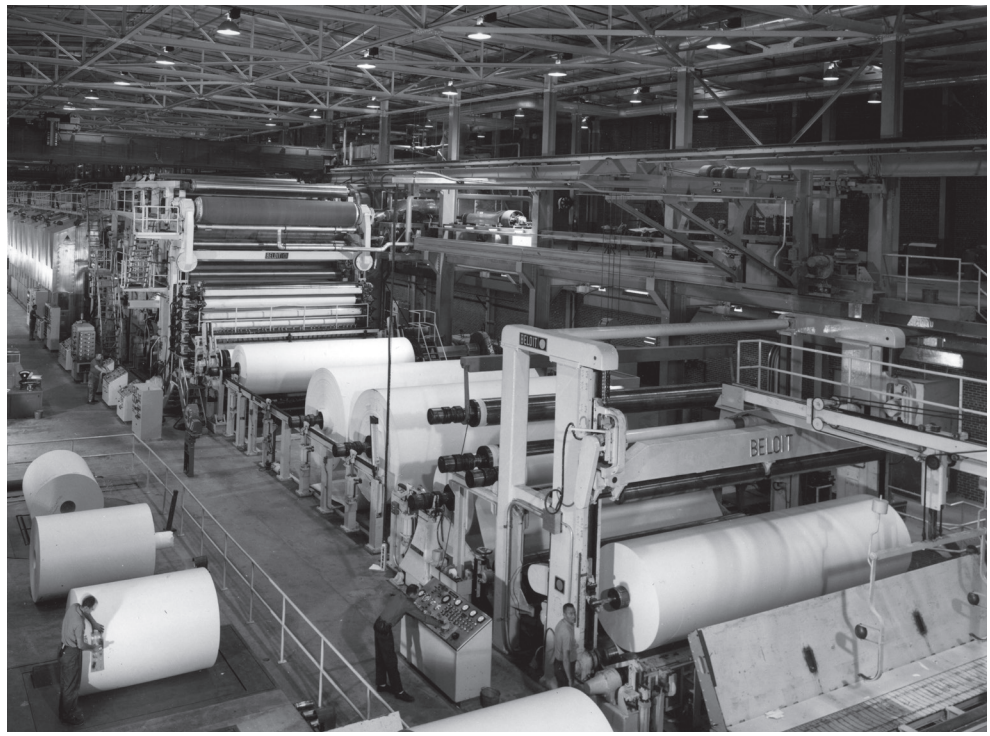
"It was the highest paying place around, so they had a huge waiting list of people waiting to get on," Reed said.

Having connections or family inside the mill helped.

"You couldn't even get an application in. You had to know somebody," said Terry Grasty, a millworker for 30 years.

Once you got on, chances are you'd ride the job off into the sunset. Bruce Lovelace worked at the mill for 51 years, up until the day it shut down. He could have hung up his hard hat long ago, so why keep working?

"Because he was generous. He liked to take care of other people," said his daughter, Rachel Smith.



The enormous #19 paper machine was the workhouse of the Canton mill, cranking out $13 million a day in paper when running full tilt. Pictured in the 1980s.

His work ethic had something to do with it, too. At 27, just a few years into his mill career, he took out a loan to buy a farm — counting on his mill wages to pay it off.

"I guess I'm not too smart. I worked here and went home and worked again," Lovelace quipped.

The story was a common one among millworkers who farmed on the side, including Grogan's grandfather.

"He would work a shift at the mill from 3-11, go home, hook up a team of horses and hang a lantern from the plow and plow all night," Grogan said. "They had been landless and that's what they all wanted — some land. That's what drove them to come to America. It's all about how you try to advance your people's cause."

Over the mill's 115 years in operation, thousands of millworkers created a better life for future generations through their blood, sweat and tears. It's one of the great legacies that will live on after the mill's closure.

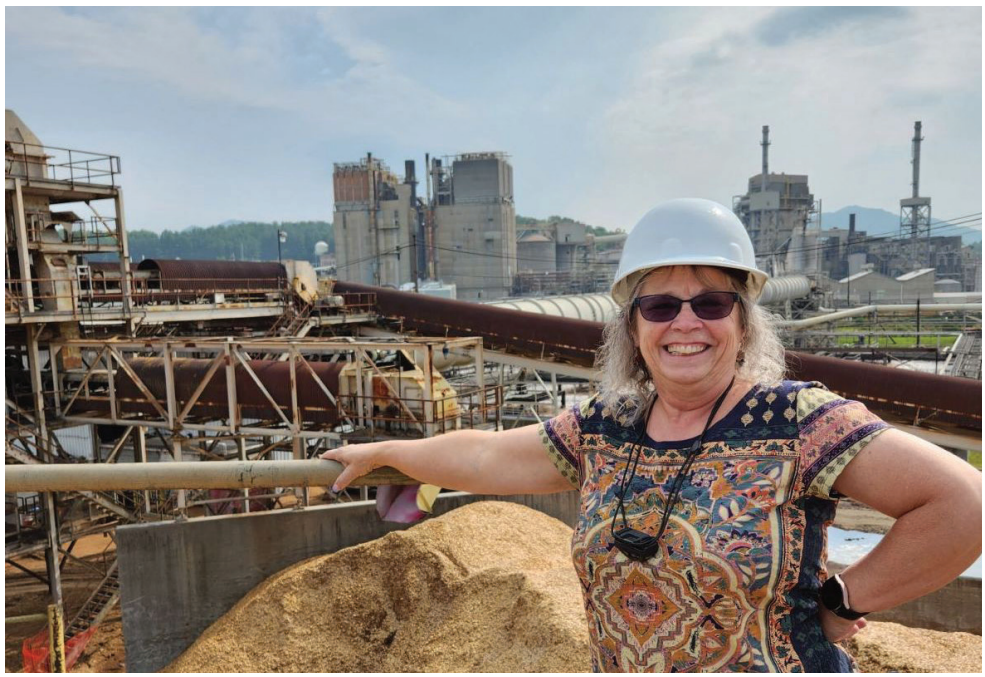
"As mountain people, we have always been resilient, we've always been willing to work," Grogran said. "Now the mill is gone, but we'll reinvent ourselves one more time. And one more time, it will be for our future generations."

Bruce Lovelace, in the hardhat, is greeted by his children and grandchildren as he exits the chute a final time on the last day of the mill.

Atta girl!

Women hold their own to keep the mill humming

By Becky Johnson



Debbie Buchanan followed in her father's footsteps to work in the Canton mill.

Debbie Buchanan wasn't sure what she'd gotten herself into when the mill called with a job offer 18 years ago.

"I cried. I didn't want the job. I was scared of going to the mill because of the big machinery — and I'm real petite," said Buchanan, who clocks in at just 4-feet-9-inches tall.

But at the time, she had two daughters in college and wanted them to come out debt free. So, at 45, she became a third-generation millworker, like her grandfathers and father before her, plus countless uncles and cousins. She was the first woman to follow in their footsteps, however.

"Dad always warned me not to work in there because it wasn't a place for women," Buchanan said.

But she had two aces in corner: her dad had been well respected in the mill, and her husband — a "very large man," she noted — worked there, too. She decided to give it try.

"I didn't think I'd make it to be honest," she admited.

Her first job working on the "broke beater" was a trial by fire. It's one of the toughest manual jobs there is. When paper got hung up on the machine or had an imperfection, it was cut free and dropped through the floor to the basement.

She wrestled those enormous sheets of "broke" paper — more than twice as wide as she is tall — into a giant mixer to be repulped.

"There would be big heaps of it, and you had to drag it around obstacles in the basement and put it in the broke beater," she said. "The broke beater would grab the paper and pull it in, and sometimes it would just sling you around. I got thrown into the railing quite a bit. Paper cuts? Yes, that's a standard."

But she was determined.

"I got stronger and stronger," she said. Buchahan worked up through the last day at mill, exiting the chute with a box of tissues tucked under arm — crying as she had 18 years ago, but this time over losing the job she loved.

For Beth Gray, also a third-generation millworker, there was never a question of wanting to work at the mill. She applied for a job as soon as she graduated from high school in 1978. Six years later, the man over the mill's hiring came over while she was eating lunch at Little Boy diner.

"He said 'Your application just got pulled this morning. Do you still want to come to work at the mill?' I said, 'Do you want me to come with you right now?'" Gray recalled.

Gray, a self-described Tom boy, had no trouble fitting in.

"I ain't never peeled a potato, but if you need the lawnmower fixed or oil changed, I can do that," she said.

Her first day, she was put to work ferrying rolls of paper around on a jitney — though she'd never seen one before that day.

"It was a good bunch of guys, they'd teach me one step at a time and watch me do it," she recalled.

Gray worked in sundry jobs all over the mill the next several years, proving her mettle. The men on the maintenance crew — an elite team that keeps the mill running — told her to put in an application for the apprenticeship program.

"They said 'We know what you can do. You won't be in there just because you're a woman. You can outwork us,'" she recalled. She became particularly good at welding.

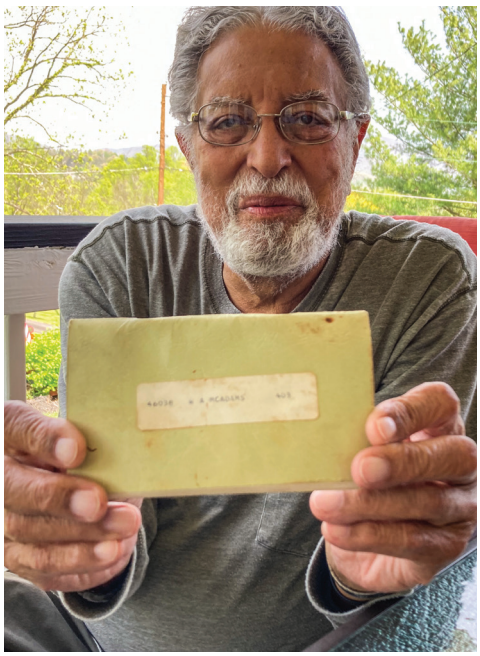
Sadly, she was forced into early retirement after two total knee replacements at the age of 50.

"They said 'We're afraid you're done.' I said 'I could at least try,' but they said no. They didn't want injuries," Gray recalled. "I guess doing all that man's work made me fall apart, but I'd go back and do it all again in a heartbeat."

Trailblazers of color

Black millworkers recount struggle overcoming racism

By Becky Johnson and Eligiah Thornton



Wallace McAdams still has his employee handbook from 1966.

When Wallace McAdams started working at the mill in 1966, Haywood County was on the cusp of integration. He made a "Black man's wage," locker rooms were segregated, and Black workers ate in their own lunch room instead of the employee cafeteria.

"As a young black man living in the South, I knew my place and that was all I knew," said McAdams. "I knew what I could do and where I could go."

Segregation had been a way of life for McAdams growing up in Canton.

"We used to go downtown and use the back alley to get a 15-cent hotdog. The kitchen was full of Black ladies, and we would just walk up, and they would serve us through the back," McAdams recalled.

By the time Ed Moore started at the mill in 1980, integration was still moving slowly. He was hired on as a "shafter," lifting heavy iron rods and guiding them through paper rolls by hand.

"Everybody on my crew was Black. That's where they put most of the Black workers when they were hired on," Moore said. But honestly, he preferred it that way.

"I didn't have to be concerned about by safety and wonder 'Is this guy going to drop this thing and leave all the weight on me?'" Moore said.

Eventually, Moore wanted a better job and applied for an electrical apprenticeship.

"In the interview, I told them if they were choosing me to fill a quota, I would rather not be chosen. But if they were choosing me because they felt I could do the job, then I was all for it," Moore said.

It must have made an impression, because Moore worked in the electrical department for another 30 years — up until the day the mill closed its doors.

The mill was hiring Black workers as early as the 1920s, giving rise to the Canton's historically Black community of Gibson Town. But decades would pass before they were seen as equals.

The late Lewis Oates became a trailblazer in the 1950s, going straight to the top and asking Champion President Reuben Robertson for a promotion.

"He said, 'Look, I'm more than a janitor. I want to work on machines. Give me the opportunity,'" recounted Oates' daughter, Dewanda Coleman. "Mr. Robertson told my dad that things were changing, and he'd do all he could. And over time, he did. My dad became a regular mill worker."

Still, racism persisted — like the time McAdams' work clothes were shredded following the integration of locker rooms. Or when Moore's white coworkers would ignore him if they ran into each other outside the mill.

But it was inside the mill where the festering barriers of color began to dissolve, as friendships and respect developed among the workers.

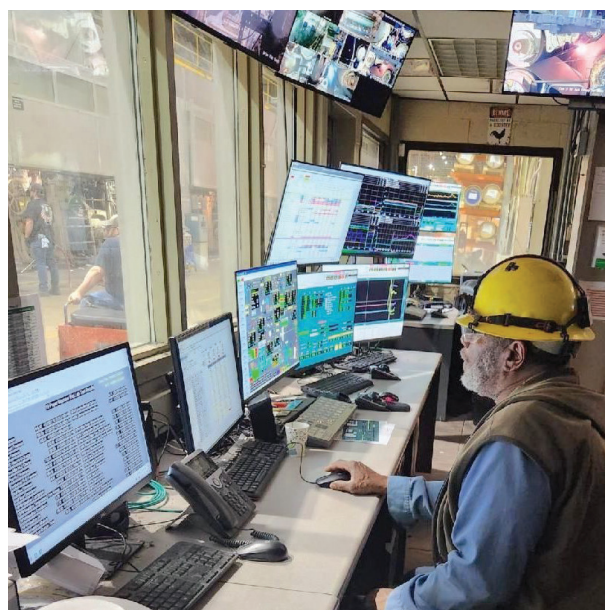
"As the years went by, it got better racially. There were times we had to entrust our lives to our coworkers. So I think that took racism out of the equation," Moore said.

For Coleman, having a father who worked at the mill was a status symbol, and helped her white classmates see her as an equal.

"We had everything everybody else had," Coleman said.

As for McAdams, his son followed in his footsteps, seeking that same quality of life for his own kids that he had growing up.

"Champion was a good place to work," said McAdams, who retired in 2004 after 37 years. "I enjoyed my job and enjoyed the camaraderie."



Ed Moore, a mill electrician, troubleshoots a problem with the #19 paper machine from a computer control room.

A century of giving: millworkers showed their generosity through Santa Pals tradition

By Vicki Hyatt

Mill employees prepare Christmas charity baskets in 1959.

One of the largest Christmas giving traditions in Haywood County traces its roots back to a paper mill crew that chipped in to deliver a food basket to a coworker, a simple act nearly a century ago that spawned a millwide campaign of generosity toward their less fortunate neighbors.

The earliest reference to the mill's Christmas basket operation is chronicled in a 1926 article from "The Log," a Champion Paper newsletter for Canton workers. That year, the company store and workers joined forces to deliver food baskets to 104 families on Christmas Eve. The baskets included a ham, a bag of flour, 4 pounds of beans, 10 pounds of meal, 3 pounds of sugar, 1 pound of coffee and a variety of fruit, nuts, candies and toys.

Each year thereafter, workers contributed to the Christmas basket fund, initially through donations and later through a payroll deduction with a company match.

In 2022, the program — by now called Santa Pals — raised $80,000 to provide food boxes for more than 500 families and a shopping spree for 475 children in need of winter coats, shoes and clothing.

Millworkers routinely took vacation time to pull off the massive effort, and for some, it was the highlight of Christmas.

"It meant everything to me. It's been my Christmas," said Puppy Scott, a key organizer for Santa Pals in recent years.

It also meant the world to recipients, like Bruce Chambers after his father died in 1979.

"My mom told us we weren't going to have a Christmas that year. Then they brought us a box. When we got it, we thought we had died and gone to heaven," said Chambers, who went on to spearhead Santa Pals after becoming a millworker.

The program was viewed by many mill employees as a way to teach their children the value of giving. School children across the county pitched in, with a contest to collect the most canned food to put toward the boxes — netting 40,000 cans of food in 2022.

And for many, the program was steeped in generations of family tradition. Jamie Galyon, who worked shoulder-to-shoulder with her mother, nephew and daughter filling food boxes last year, recalled how her grandfather, James Galyon, volunteered with the effort until he was 90.

What would become of Santa Pals — and the void it would leave for so many Haywood County families at Christmas — has been one of the many worries surrounding the mill closure. At least for now, the program will carry on. The Santa Pals fund has enough money left to pull off the effort in 2023, and Pactiv Evergreen matched the amount, ensuring 2024 would be a white Christmas, too. Scott said mill employees are working with several organizations to find a way to keep the tradition alive beyond that.

Puppy Scott (right) with fellow millworkers volunteer for the Santa Pals effort in 2022.

When the going gets tough, bring in Gail Mull.

By Vicki Hyatt

Retired Millworker Gail Mull was known for one of the most important albeit unofficial jobs in the mill: the Thursday cake baker.

Mull, thin as a rail, is proof positive that a body can survive just fine on a diet of mainly Pepsi and potato chips, with an occasional Reeses cup thrown in. She never drinks water, something she claims is best reserved for bathing. Though she's widely known for never eating cake, she loves to bake and serve them, and the term "serve" is literal.

"I won't have anyone touching my cakes," she said. "That's nasty."

Though the rule was well known, one mill employee was "stirring around" in Mull's cake, as she called it, so she slapped him on the back of the head. The blow sent him crashing into the mill manager at the time, Ted Crane, who wasn't nearly as amused by the antic as the rest of those lining up for cake.

Gail Mull, a union rep and Canton alderwoman, greets Gov. Roy Cooper at a press conference in Canton following the mill closure announcement.

Mull's second in the cake chain-of-command was Charlie Hardin, who had the honors of deciding what cake Mull baked each week. And the role carried quite a lot of power. While Hardin preferred fruit-type cakes, others would want chocolate, but what Hardin said went — as much to aggravate the others as to please Mull, she admitted.

Mull wears two hats in her retirement, serving as mayor pro-tem on the Canton town board and secretary of the local union chapter, Smoky Mountain Local 507. Since the mill closure announcement, the union became a magnet for fact-finding visits from state and federal dignitaries, and Mull became the face of the workers during those visits.

Her quick wit and one-liners captivated the entourage of visitors, whether it was the governor, congressmen or state legislators. The visits went like this: Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers made welcome remarks and provided an overview of what the town was facing, then he'd turn to Mull to talk about the implications for workers, both financially and emotionally.

Mull's spiel seldom varied as she told of being a mill retiree, just like her father, uncles, sister and brothers, a legacy her son continued until the shut down.

"It's a family circle, and everyone in the community thought it would go on forever," she said. But Mull would inevitably go off script. During formal introductions when Governor Roy Cooper was visiting for the first time, Clyde Mayor Jim Trantham shared that he'd worked at the mill 34 years.

Accounts vary, but Mull either said "and they were glad to see you leave" or "if you could call that working."

It regaled the group in laughter, including the initially stunned Governor, but offered a quintessential Haywood moment that broke the ice.

"Leave it to Gail to bust Mayor Trantham's chops in front of the Governor," Mayor Zeb Smathers said. "You can count on Gail to be Gail."

While news of the mill closure stunned even those in the union, in hindsight, Mull realizes the writing was on the wall when the #20 paper machine was idled in February due to sagging demand and an oversupply of inventory backing up on the floor.

"I thought to myself, 'They've never shut a machine down before. This is not a good sign,'" she recalled. "But I was clueless. I thought they'd sell it."

While the mill has shut down, a skeleton crew remains, so Mull can still be found at the union hall a couple days a week — at least for a while.

"Every day, people come to the union hall," said Mull, who's always ready to swap stories or wisecracks. "We are the face of the mill. You feel their pain."

Laid-off millworkers Bryan Hooper and Nathan Long trudge to their trucks with their personal possessions on the last day of the mill in June 2023.

Mourning the end of a magnificent era

By Becky Johnson

The unraveling of the mill: a heartbreaking 'long funeral'

Since 1905, when the first bricks were molded and the first tracks were laid, generations of Haywood County workers have toiled inside the Canton paper mill.

It put food on the table and presents under the Christmas tree, sent kids to college and funded braces, paid for cars and homes and anchored the county's entire economy.

That all came crashing down March 6. News of the mill's impending closure was a tragedy so enormous, so unfathomable, the community was numb with shock.

"I just can't imagine this is really happening," Millworker Cody Bledsoe, 21, said after hearing the news. "I thought this was the job I was gonna settle down and retire from and now this. It is heartbreaking."

The grief, fear and despair only got worse as reality set in over the days to come.

"I can't stop crying," said Rachel Davis. "Someone in my family has worked at this mill since the day it opened. This mill survived the Great Depression. It survived wars. How does this happen?"

Davis can see the smokestacks from her house. To her, those are the stacks that sent her to medical school. To her children, they're the "cloud makers."

"They think all the clouds in the world are made from these stacks. My daughter asked 'well who is going to make the clouds?'" Davis said.

How to break the news to their kids was at the forefront for many parents. When Millworker Logan Dills heard about the closure that fateful night, he held off telling his kids, ages 6 and 9, until the next day.

"I wanted to think about how to say it. I didn't want them

Hundreds gather at a downtown Canton park for a community prayer in the day's following the mill closure announcement.

to worry," said Dills, 32. "I told them everything was going to be OK. Simple as that. At the end of the day, daddy is going to provide for my family, and that's that."

At Pisgah High — where "Milltown" is engrained into the school's identity and even adorns the football uniforms — carpentry and art students joined forces to create a "Milltown Strong" sign for the school's front lawn.

"I've lost sleep, parents have lost sleep," Pisgah High School Principal Clint Conner said. "It's a big deal. We're counseling everybody. It has affected everybody in this school."

Indeed, the collective grief over the closure reached far beyond the walls of the mill, far beyond the workers and their families. Two days after the closure announcement, hundreds turned out for a community prayer gathering in the downtown park across from the mill. While it was far too soon to talk of healing, the gathering made it clear: Canton would survive by relying on the strength of its community spirit.

"We are here to pray as one family," Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers declared as he climbed on a flatbed trailer to address the crowd, the mill towering behind him. "On the days moving forward, this boils down to one word, and that is faith."

The community continued to find comfort by coming together for the symbolic milestones marking the mill's final days. Hundreds turned out at the same park to witness the mill's last whistle on May 25.

Among them were retired Millworker Glenna Hodge, whose eyes welled with tears as the last whistle blew at noon for a steady five minutes.

"I've seen that smoke as long as I can remember. Other than the death of my family, this is the saddest day," Hodge said.

And again, two weeks later, the community came together once more for a send-off to workers as they exited the mill for the last time. The well-wishers — some holding handmade signs, some giving out Bibles, some offering hugs — clapped as each worker emerged from the chute and passed under a giant flag draped from the ladders of two fire trucks.

"They've cried tears, they've shed their emotions, but it's going to hit 'em when they walk through that door," Millworker Terry Littrell said as he climbed the long flight of steps to his truck, pausing to look back at the mill one last time.

Workers emerging from the chute were loaded down with possessions from cleaning out their lockers — most of them with hardhats strapped to their backpacks. Millworker Bryan Hooper carried a cardboard box on one shoulder, full of old training manuals.

"I don't know why, I'll never use

Millworkers make their way down the rows of employers at a job fair in March.

them again. I guess it's just something to remember what I've done," he said.

Because memories are all that are left now.

Final days inside the mill

The three-month span from news of the closure to workers' last day seemed like a lifetime for those inside the mill — the last roll of paper to come off the #19 machine, the last birthday cake in the breakroom, the last time steam would billow from the stacks.

"It's been a long funeral is what it's been," said Jerry Crag, who's been at the mill 49 years. "We'd say 'Well, that's the last time that turbine is going to run' as we shut it down."

The night of the closure announcement, Shelli Russell was working on a loader when she got called to the generator room for a meeting.

"It was hard to keep working after that. We were like 'What does it matter?'" said Russell, a fourth-generation mill worker. "We knew it was coming to an end. We weren't going to hear that whistle or see the smokestacks pumping out steam anymore."

TJ Carter, who was also on graveyard that night, said his own thoughts quickly turned to his children.

"My little girl is constantly saying, 'I want to do what you do when I grow up, daddy. I want to work at the mill,'" Carter said.

In the early days following news of the shutdown, emotions of sadness and loss were tangled up in anger and confusion. Aside from media reports and a one-page company memo, workers were in the dark.

"They don't have no answers. Every time you go in there it's a different story. The atmosphere is what's killing every-

HOW THE FINAL CHAPTER UNFOLDED

By Becky Johnson

Like the shooting of Kennedy, the Challenger explosion or 9/11, the evening of March 6 will forever live in infamy for the people of Haywood County — where you were, who you were with and what you were doing when you heard the the mill was closing. Nothing that seemed important yesterday seemed to matter anymore. Everything had changed.

It came as a shock even to mill managers, who learned of the impending closure in two back-to-back late afternoon meetings. As they exited, many seemed numb, their faces hollow and empty. Others had red, teary eyes.

Some had secretly texted their families and coworkers from inside the meetings, and news spread rapidly among rank-and-file workers. By the time dusk fell, a pall had settled over all of Canton.

Millworker Brandon Carter learned of the impending closure from Facebook, and like many, he didn't believe it at first.

"I thought, 'Oh somebody is just joking around or something,'" Carter recalled.

The official company memo by Pactiv Evergreen said production would cease within three months at the Canton mill, with the future of the Waynesville satellite facility up in the air. The chief product of the Canton mill was paperboard used for milk cartons, juice cartons and to-go coffee cups. It was then shipped to the Waynesville site for a waterproofing coating.

It wasn't until weeks later that Waynesville workers learned definitively they, too, would be losing their jobs — save a skeleton crew of 40 who would stay on while the company tried to sell the coating facility.

As for the Canton mill, there would be no sale, no hope of a future buyer to keep it open. Pactiv Evergreen would simply close it up.

Total job losses between the two would top 1,000 — with the vast majority being Haywood County residents. That didn't count the hundreds of contractors and suppliers who relied on the mill to survive. In all, the economic impact of the shut down was estimated at $500 million regionally.

Community, state and federal leaders swiftly reacted to address the looming crisis. The first priority was to support those being laid-off: job fairs, free resume writing-writing workshops, mental health support groups, assistance sorting out health insurance options.

Another issue topping the list was solving Canton's sewage treatment crisis. The mill treats the town's wastewater, and Canton would have just two years to the day to come up with a solution, per terms of the contract with Pactiv Evergreen.

There were myriad other environmental issues to sort out — ones that will likely take years, from possible contamination at the mill to landfills heaped with the mill's industrial waste. Meanwhile, officials moved swiftly to demand Pactiv Evergreen repay county tax breaks and a $12 million state grant that helped fund a natural gas conversion designed at improving air emissions, since closing the mill violated the terms of the grants.

Canton's future in the wake of the mill closure largely hinges on what happens to the 185-acre mill site. It's paramount to convince Pactiv Evergreen not to simply lock the gates and leave the skeleton of the mill to slowly rust away in the heart of Canton.

"They are not going to walk away without doing what they should be doing. We will be respected. These workers deserve at least that," Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers said. "When people look back on this, at least they will know we fought and stood up and raised attention to take a stand for what is right."

Cody Bledsoe had only been working at the mill a few months when news of the closure broke.

body," said Terry Grasty, a millworker for 30 years.

Millworkers did their best to sort out fact from fiction, swapping whatever tidbits of information they could get ahold of.

"Everything you hear is just hearsay. Even the higher ups don't know nothing," said Jimmy Lawrence.

Meanwhile, the lives of more than 1,000 workers were in limbo. Without a hard end date, they were held hostage. To get their severance, millworkers had to stay until the end. But with the end date shrouded in mystery, they couldn't pull the trigger on another job offer.

"It's one big secret. We don't know what's going on. One person will say one thing, the next person will say something else," Millworker Brian Holcomb said.

Finally, official layoff letters came in the mail, but by then, the exodus was well underway.

"People are walking out, and more are leaving by the day," Russell said. "They have the mentality that they got to go now and take a job offer while they can."

Many stayed, of course, especially the old-timers with more severance on the line. Or those like Dean Gibson, who only had a year on the job, but wanted to see it through.

"I'm going to ride it until the wheels fall off," Gibson said.

After production ceased in late May, workers bided their time reminiscing.

"All we've done is go from shop to shop to say our goodbyes and tell stories. It's been tough," Millworker Greg Spomer recounted of the final days.

By then, the mill felt like a ghost town.

"The mill was quiet. It was an eerie feeling," Millworker Jonathan Lovelace said.

As Lovelace swung through the mill to say his farewells, the reality finally hit him.

"It was empty. I realized maybe I'll see some of them again in passing, but chances are, I may not," he said of the coworkers who'd been like family.

After the last shift of workers exited the mill on June 8, Ray Queen lingered outside the doors, swapping barbs and tales with other stragglers one last time. Queen worked at the mill for 59 years — more than half of its existence. Shutting the mill down was the only thing that would have gotten him out the door.

"I wasn't going to leave. They'd have to run me off," said Queen. "And I guess they did."

Millworkers lashed their hardhats to a fence outside the mill on the last day.

Zeb Smathers: Mayor, protector, consoler and optimist in chief

By Vicki Hyatt

During their darkest hour, the people of Canton have turned to their Mayor Zeb Smathers for security, strength and comfort — and most importantly hope that the town will persevere through the loss of the mill.

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Smathers emerged as the leader the town so desperately needed, becoming a symbol of the grit and resolve the community would draw on in the months and years to come.

"This is a fight for our soul," Smathers said. "This is the challenge of our lives, that Hollywood moment that we will all be judged on. How we figure this out as a group will define whether your children and grandchildren will want to live out their life in Haywood County."

While Smathers called on the community to join him in rising to the occasion, he never sugarcoated the gravity of what Canton faced, nor dismissed the heart-wrenching grief.

"The shock, the numbness, literally falling back and trying to catch our breath. You then shift over to mourning and tears. And yes, there is anger," Smathers said at a press conference days after the mill closure announcement.

Smathers, an attorney by trade, is an unrivaled orator, always seeming to find the right words for the right time. Shortly after news leaked of the mill closure, Smathers paced the sidewalk outside the union hall, blinking back his own tears to console workers.

"I am numb and heartbroken for the men and women of this community who are going home to their spouses and children and are trying to find the words to say they will not have a job very soon," he said. "There is nothing I can say or do that will bring peace to that."

Smathers' political connections, reaching from the Governor's mansion in Raleigh to the Capitol building in D.C., rallied the cavalry — with a parade of heavy-hitting officials touring Canton amid pledges to help.

The community likewise rallied around Smathers. When he casually mentioned he would witness the last mill whistle from a downtown park with his family, hundreds followed suit, joining him to collectively mark the occasion.

"Some people might call us crazy, but what you are seeing is a sincere sense of community, people drawn together for something that is more than a mill," Smathers said, surveying the crowd that turned out. "It is home."

Canton was well on its way to rebuilding as the "Hometown of Tomorrow" following the tragic floods of 2021 — the second time the town was destroyed by flooding in less than two decades. Smathers convinced his town that vision is still attainable.

Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers, pictured at a press conference on the steps of Pisgah High School overlooking the mill, has given hope to the people of Canton in the wake of the mill closure.

"It doesn't matter if we are planting seeds we will never see grown. They are the seeds of the future. Those here 50, 100, 115 years from now will know the people before them met the moment," Smathers said.

Like the mill's founder in 1905 who envisioned Canton's potential — transforming it from a ford on the Western Turnpike to a bustling empire — Smathers has been a champion of hope.

"We are building the hometown of tomorrow, and we are building it on the value and character that got us here in the first place," Smathers said. "America loves a comeback story. Let's give the people of this country an example of success. This is not the end. This is the turning of a page."

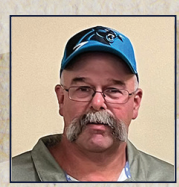
MILLTOWN WORKERS

Roll of Honor

Vasar Downey Burch
41 Years

B. Joanna Howell
43 Years

Barbara Howell
23 Years



Billy Presnell
18 Years

Calvin Worley
11 Years

Carroll "Bill" Burch
40 Years

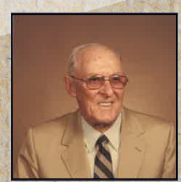
David Taylor
44 Years

Dennis A. Reed
(Santa Claus)
35 Years

Dennis Williamson
45 Years

Donald Bryson
18 Years

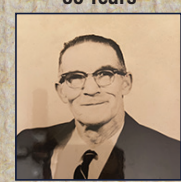
Earl James Parham
49 Years



Finley M. Cook
33 Years

Michelle Singleton
2 Years

H.B. Buchanan
38 Years



James Martin Taylor
15 Years

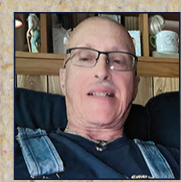
Jeffrey M. Taylor
15 Years

John H. McClarrin
38 Years

John Paul
"Johnny" Jones
44 Years

Josh Henson
16 Years

Kaleb Johnson
7 Years

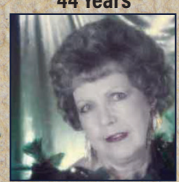


Ken Johnson
40 Years

Lee Evans
25 Years

Phil Cook
32 Years

Carroll Rickman
43 Years



Linda Trull
25 Years

Martin Worley
12 Years

Paul M. Taylor
38 Years

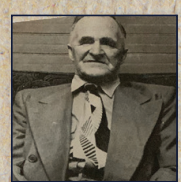
Scotty A. Rollins
10 Years

Sean Wood
18 Years

Terry Trull & Jerry
Henson
90 Years Combined

Tom Hart
35 Years

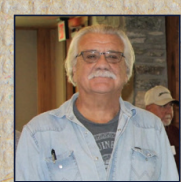
Jaquan Mason
4 Years



W. Alden Taylor
35 Years

No Photo Available

Ed Payne
45 Years

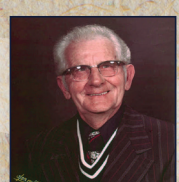


William R. Buchanan
43 Years

Carl Trull (Left)
Over 40 Years

Linden Reeves
Burch
42 Years

Dale Godfrey
38 Years



Roy Ratcliffe Medford
35 Years

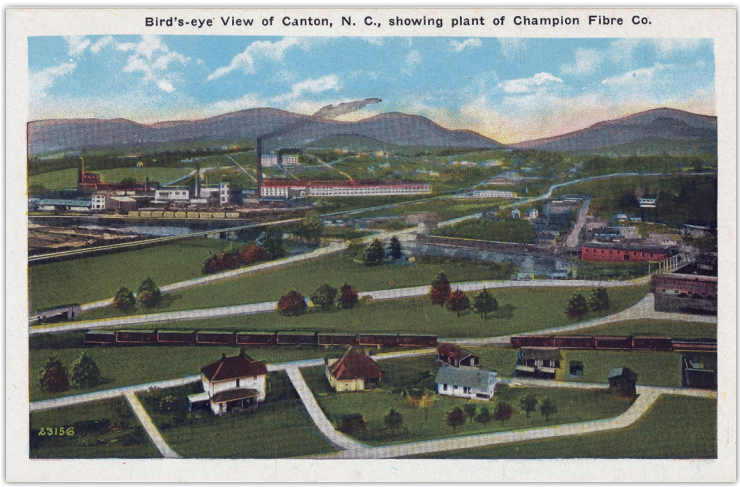
Cecil Miller
39 Years

William B. Burch
"Lightning"
46 Years

Harold "Bobby" Burch
41 Years

166 Years Total

Harold "Bobby" Burch
Linden Burch
Caroll "Bill" Burch
Boyd Burch



Ballade of the Old Home Town

By Fred Chappell

From Highland Park to Smathers Hill,
From Beaverdam across to Clyde,
The valley lie, blue-green and still,
Through mountainside and mountainside.

Through Sunburst boulders that make it spill
Its silver shining everywhere,
The Pigeon counsels, as rivers will:
Where you're from is who you are.

The smokes that soar above the mill
Are white as glaciers and as wide,
Or dark and gritty with particle
And mote that on the breezes slide
And spread a shadow pungent as dill
On knobs and hollers so near and far
That our old stain looks natural:
For where you're from is who you are.

One hundred years seem quite a spell
If you lay the decades side by side,
Yet insufficient to fulfill
The destiny those years may hide
That are to come, the years that thrill
Imagination with their power
To give fresh force to human will:
For where we're going is what we are.

My friends, I think us capable
Of following a steadfast star
That marks the zenith of our ideal:
For where we're from is who we are.

The poem was initially written to honor Canton's centennial in 1993. Fred Chappell is a native of Canton and was the N.C. Poet Laureate from 1997 until 2002.

An early photo of the mill

Canton Mill Through the Years

By Kathy N. Ross

1889

The community located around a well-known ford of the Pigeon River incorporates as Buford — then changes its name to Vinson the same year, before changing the name yet again to Pigeon Ford in 1891.

1893

Two New Beginnings

The town of Pigeon River receives a new charter of incorporation and becomes Canton, N.C. Meanwhile, in Hamilton, Ohio, Peter Thomson founds the Champion Coated Paper Company.

1905

Searching for Spruce

Spring – Thomson travels to Western North Carolina to check the available timber in hopes of developing his own source of pulpwood and building a mill rather than buying pulp on the open market. He meets Samuel Montgomery Smith, a woodsman who tells him of spruce forests in Haywood County, and they visit the slopes around the Pigeon River's headwaters. Smith sells the idea of building a log flume from these timberlands to Canton, possibly being one of the first to suggest Canton as a site for the pulp mill.

Thomson hires Waynesville lawyer George Smathers to help him acquire land he needs for timber harvest. He also meets with Canton businessmen and negotiates an informal agreement that he will receive substantial tax breaks in return for locating the mill there.

Sunburst emerges

Late 1905 – S.M. Smith purchases land in Three Forks on the West Fork of the Pigeon, where he installs a sawmill. He supervises construction of housing for mill workers, a company store and a building that will double as a school and church. Thomson names the site Sunburst.

December – By the close of the year, Thomson has purchased at least 40,000 acres on the slopes above the headwaters of the Pigeon River. In addition, he has purchased 53 acres from leading businessmen in Canton for a mill site.

Tunnel scheme rejected

At some point in 1905 – Promotor Col. Silas Jones of Waynesville meets with Thomson to argue for locating the mill along Richland Creek in Waynesville instead of Canton. Knowing the creek cannot supply enough water, Jones proposes cutting a tunnel through the Balsam Mountains and diverting water from the Pigeon's West Fork. He fails to sell Thomson on the scheme.

1906

January 6 – Thomson's planned pulp mill is chartered as the Champion Fibre Company, an Ohio corporation.

The team's in place

Thomson picks the team to construct and manage his pulp mill. Omega "Oma" Carr has invented a system of using chestnut wood for pulp and extracting its tannin to sell as a separate product; he will be superintendent of the mill, and Thomson plans to operate part of the mill on Carr's system.

March – Southern Railway and Thomson work out arrangements for the pulp mill. The railroad will supply 50 cars per day to Thomson's mill and will improve the railroad between Asheville and Canton.

Construction gets underway

March – Construction begins on Thomson's pulp mill in Canton, on bottomlands just below the town bridge. The first task is to drive thousands of wood piles into soft bottomland to provide a foundation for the massive buildings.

July 31 – The Waynesville Courier tours the construction site of the new Champion plant and describes a chain of 27 buildings to be used in the creation of wood pulp suitable for paper production. They include a pulp storage building, machine building, heater room, pulp room, bleaching site, filter screen, soda blow tanks, soda digester, lime slaking, chipping and pulp leaching operations.

More than 10 million bricks will be used in construction of the original buildings, and 5½ miles of railroad track will be laid within mill grounds. At time of construction, the mill's new digester building is reported to be the tallest building in the state at 115 feet.

Summer – Farmers have been willing to work on mill construction, but their farms take priority. Workers are recruited from across the country as well as immigrants, including many Italians and Bulgarians.

Flume scheme collapses

Late summer – Surveys along the Pigeon show inadequate drop to operate a log flume to transport timber down the river to Canton – unless the flume was built 150 feet high at the Forks of the Pigeon. It is too late for Thomson to relocate his mill. Thomson and his team decide they will have to build a railroad to Sunburst, and lawyer Smathers begins obtaining a charter and rights of way. Thomson sends his son-in-law, lawyer Reuben Robertson, to work with Smathers.

September – Canton has its first Labor Day celebration, including a parade. Many of those building the new paper mill participate.

Nov. 19 – Thomson offers $1 million of preferred stock of Champion Coated Paper, raising money to finish construction of the Canton mill.

1907

Railroad building

March – Yandle Brothers of Knoxville begins work constructing the railroad from Canton to Sunburst. At times, this work will be as dangerous as work on the mill itself, thanks to enthusiastic dynamiting. Dred Blalock's son, Ben, is killed while working in a field when dynamiting is done nearby. Another incident injures at least eight and kills one. And there is a murder, when a boss is killed by his employee, George Shelton, who escapes.

Broken deal and a company store

Thomson is hit with a hefty property valuation on the mill. Thomson had agreed not to compete with local merchants in exchange for consideration on property taxes. The tax valuation is lowered, but not enough to keep Thomson from opening a company store.

April – Canton's population has increased five-fold in a year, from 350 inhabitants to 1,680 – not counting construction workers without permanent residence.

'Mr. Champion' steps in

November – Reuben Robertson, Thomson's son-in-law, returns to Haywood County to handle matters for his father-in-law, for what he expects to be a temporary stay. He will end up staying half a century as general manager of the Canton mill.

November – A national "banker's panic" leaves Thomson short of cash for the mill project, until two wealthy businessmen come to his rescue with loans. On Nov. 7, about half the workers at the mill are laid off, and railroad construction is temporarily halted. On Nov. 21, Thomson arrives from Ohio and orders the laid-off employees back to work. The railroad work, however, will not resume for almost a year.

Workers building rail lines to the site of the new mill in 1905

A railroad trestle in through Champion's timberlands in the Sunburst area in 1920.

1908

Production begins

January - Thomson's pulp mill starts up. With the railroad upriver incomplete, Robertson and Oma Carr rely on other sources for spruce and chestnut, including local loggers and land purchased in Jackson County. They buy the Quinland-Monroe Lumber Company, which operates on the headwaters of Richland and Allens creeks, using tram cars to carry the timber to Southern Railway tracks in Hazelwood.

Carr's new process for using chestnut wood for pulp after extracting tannin runs into serious snags. It will take several years to work out the kinks. However, the process becomes one of Champion's most profitable ventures, according to Robertson's memoirs.

Fibreville rises

A village consisting of about 60 small residences is constructed for mill workers and will become known as Fibreville. It is built on land that had been part of the Patton Farm, sold by Mary Ann Patton to Peter Thomson. Thomson says he considers Patton one of the smartest women he has ever encountered.

1911

Early timberlands relinquished

Champion Fibre sells part of its timber holdings to a separate company, Champion Lumber, which begins operations at Sunburst. As historian Carroll Jones would write, "Hard as it must have been for them, Thomson and Robertson decided to exchange their ownership of the unfinished Pigeon River Railway and the timberlands surrounding Sunburst for the guarantee of a pulpwood supply from Champion Lumber." The deal includes a minimum purchase by the mill at an agreed-upon price. The lumber company will take on the burden of transporting the timber to the mill. Until the railroad is completed, this is done mostly by mule- and ox-driven wagons.

1912

Paper and pulp

January – Peter Thomson, after a visit in late 1911, announces plans to add paper production to the pulp mill in Canton. After all, the Waynesville Courier reports, much of the company's paper is sold in the South; it makes no sense to ship the pulp north for production, then ship the finished product back south.

1913

Tennessee protests

Feb. 18 – The Charlotte Observer reports that Tennessee's legislature is considering laws to prevent Champion from dumping its acid and waste into the Pigeon River, which flows into their state from Haywood. The North Carolina legislature has also considered the issue, which prompts Champion to purchase land where it can deposit some of the acid waste and conduct studies to see if anything can be made of the by-products.

"Considerable influence is being brought to bear not only by the city of Knoxville but also by the farmers of East Tennessee through which the Pigeon River passes. It is reported that all the fish have been killed in the river for over a hundred miles below this place. The waters have been discolored to a large extent also," the Observer reports.

1914

Ambulance Company organized

March – Canton and Champion leaders organize an ambulance corps, with the mill paying a third of the rent for equipment storage. This corps will be the only one of its kind in the state. The unit will be trained to treat wounds on the field and transport victims from combat. Their training will become an asset for the mill, preparing workers for accident response.

'We didn't ask for this.'

May – The first edition of The Log, the Canton mill's newsletter, is published. Multiple cash prizes are reported and given to workers for suggestions to raise production. The editor points out that subscription cost is 0 cents per copy. "Should our efforts please you, kindly tell us or send us congratulatory letters. … If they displease you, do not go gunning for the Editor, for we are not to blame. We didn't ask for this job." The newsletter also includes instructions on prevention of steam boiler accidents, reflecting an ongoing emphasis on safety.

1916

June – Canton's Ambulance Corps is called for military duty at the Mexican border. Champion promises its enlisted employees their positions will be awaiting them upon return, and they will receive full pay while in service.

1917

Job-site conflict

December – Two workers at the mill are peeling wood when they get into an altercation. When Raymond Groom strikes L.V. Shepherd on the head with a stick of wood, Shepherd then shoots Groom in the back. Shepherd flees to his native Macon County, and Groom is expected to fully recover.

A typhoid epidemic strikes Canton. In response, Champion converts the old Episcopal Mission School building on Hill Street into a hospital, the area's first.

1918

April 24 – Champion Fibre purchases 40,000 acres of timber land, mostly in Swain County, for a reported $500,000. The property holds hardwood, chestnut and spruce.

From Paper to Planes

May 2 – From the Waynesville Courier: "Five (railroad) cars loaded with about 200 army engineers arrived at Canton Tuesday and were carried to Sunburst, where they will extend the Tennessee and North Carolina Railroad a few miles into the forests so that the Champion Lumber Co. can secure quickly quantities of balsam and spruce timber which is needed by the government to be used in making aeroplanes. … Labor was so scarce that in order to speed up the supply, the government came to their rescue."

Offering a day's pay

May 20 – A fund-raising goal for the Red Cross during wartime is reached when Champion workers each pledge the pay of a day's labor to the cause.

September – The 118th Ambulance Company, now 130 strong, arrives in France to fight in WWI. The survivors will hold annual reunions through 1982.

Sept. 23 – Champion Lumber Company, which has supplied material for the Canton mill, has been in bankruptcy and is purchased by Suncrest Company. The purchase, made mostly by bond holders of the original company, includes 90,000 acres of Haywood County timber land, two villages, band mills, commissaries and two lines of railroad. The deal comes with government contracts to supply balsam for the war effort. The new company is named for the two villages, blending Sunburst and Crestmont.

Dec. 5 – The Kessawayne Lumber Co sells its railway running from Waynesville to Maggie to the Champion Fibre Co.

1920

Paper company forester

Reuben Robertson hires Walter Damtoft of the U.S. Forest Service as chief forester for the Canton mill, considered the first professional forester employed by a pulp and paper company in the Southeast. Champion Fibre constructs a railroad up Newfound Gap as the first step in harvesting 38,000 acres of virgin hardwood timber. At the same time a double band-saw mill is constructed at Smokemont N.C. to receive and process the timber. Robertson will also become a sponsor of Carl Schenck, who founded the first forestry school in North America.

Jan. 20 – Rather than transport pulp north to produce paper, Thomson has decided to produce paper at the pulp mill. "The Champion Fibre Company is pushing the work on the construction of the large new paper mill, large gangs of men working day and night on the foundations and walls." – The Enterprise.

YMCA opens

April 19 – The Champion YMCA is dedicated by Peter G. Thomson. His gift of $75,000 has funded construction of the "Y" building with the goal of improving the "cultural, educational, recreational and spiritual life" of Champion employees and the citizens of Canton.

1921

June – Members of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church gather with volunteers from Champion Papers and travel to Sunburst. They gather river rock to be used to construct a church building on Academy Street. The rocks are hauled by wagon to the railroad, where they are loaded on flat cars and transported to Canton, where they are again loaded onto wagons and pulled to the construction site. The church is dedicated in 1923.

1922

Paper production under way

June – Construction is completed on the new paper finishing plant that, when it reaches capacity, is expected to produce 50 tons a day of finished paper. Much of its capacity will be used to fill a government contract for postcard paper.

Workers along railroad tracks leading through the mill woodyard.

An early postcard showing mill employees with prized rolls of paper.

1924

Playing hardball with strikers

January-February – Workers at the Canton mill start organizing a chapter of the Paperworkers Union. The move is prompted by a 10% cut in pay and longer shifts. Some of the workers go on strike. On Jan. 14, Robertson shuts down the mill, citing low market demand for paper.

In late February, Robertson works out a tentative arrangement, restoring the regular shift schedule and wages. Robertson then rescinds the agreement when he learns union members are telling workers they have to join the union to work at the mill. He says the mill will reopen, but union members will have to surrender their membership. The governor considers sending troops to Canton, but Haywood Sheriff J. Cabe says the situation is under control. After six weeks of shutdown, Champion's mill reopens, without a union.

April 20 – Peter Thomson Jr., son of the company founder, sells his controlling interest in Champion Fibre. Robertson will remain as general manager in Canton. At full capacity, the mill employs about 1,300 men and is the second-largest pulp/paper mill of its kind in the world.

Early May –Robertson is promoted from vice president to president of Champion Fibre but retains his role as general manager in Canton. The company plans to add another paper machine to the Canton site, doubling capacity. Peter Thomson Sr. is elected chairman of the company's board of directors in the reorganization following the sale of stock and resignation of his son.Later accounts state that Thomson Jr.'s resignation is the result of a failed attempt at a hostile company takeover. Instead, his attempts guarantee the Robertsons will hold the reins for another 37 years.

1925

The Knight rides

The Champion Knight logo makes its appearance on the company's paper shipments. The Canton mill also begins producing paper from bleached sulfate pine pulp.

March – The Suncrest Lumber Co. purchases a small band mill in Waynesville from Champion along with 14 miles of narrow-gauge railroad running from Waynesville toward Cataloochee. The company plans to move the sawmill equipment from Sunburst to Waynesville, having depleted much of that region.

Nothing wasted

May – According to its exhibit at the Southern Exposition, Champion Fibre now owns 120,000 acres of virgin forest, with another 300,000 acres being harvested to feed its paper production. The Champion sawmills around Canton cut 40 million feet of timber annually. The company brags that it wastes very little. Spruce goes for airplane frames as well as paper production. Branches and trimmings go into pulp production, and bark is shipped to tanneries.

Opposing the Park

Dec. 3 – Champion purchases a full-page newspaper advertisement expressing its opposition to creation of a national park in the Great Smokies. "The proposed area, once established as a National Park, withdraws for all time and regardless of changed economic conditions one of the very large natural resources of Western North Carolina from all industrial use," the ad states.

1925

The great fire

November, day before Thanksgiving – The worst wildfire in Haywood County history sweeps across the three up-

per prongs of the Pigeon River, burning for two weeks over an estimated 25,000 acres. A spark from a logging train engine may have caused the fire. Miraculously, no deaths are reported, though there are some close calls.

1926

Suncrest goes bust

January - Suncrest Lumber Co. faces foreclosure, and a judge orders its holdings, including the Crestmont Lumber Village in Big Creek and its lands around Mount Sterling, sold at auction.

1928

Birth of Lake Logan

Champion begins buying land in and around the Sunburst logging village with plans to develop a water reservoir. With increased production on a small river, officials realize they may need an additional source of water during drought.

1931

Champion founder dies

July 10 – Peter Thomson dies unexpectedly at Christ Hospital, aged 79. Though he had been hospitalized for seven weeks, he was thought to be in recovery and was expected to be released that week.

September – Champion pays Southern Railroad $1 million annually to ship what is an average of 2,000 tons of freight a day. Champion is the largest shipper of freight on the Southern Railway line.

Depression-era expansion

October – Two years into the Great Depression, Champion announces a $1 million expansion of the Canton pulp and paper mill. Reuben Robertson describes the decision as "an expression of faith in the people and in the industrial opportunities of North Carolina and the South." Within six months, the largest book-paper machine ever built will be in operation at the Canton mill. The expansion is likely funded by payment for Champion's lands taken into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

1932

Water fills Lake Logan

The Lake Logan dam on the West Fork of the Pigeon River is completed, creating the lake as a reservoir to supply the paper mill with water during drought, and to provide a retreat for Champion officials and their guests.

During the Depression – Mill officials state they are holding their remaining forestlands as a reserve, preferring to purchase timber from local landowners to help them generate income. They are encouraging landowners to plant pine trees, particularly on poor soils, because the pines are now used in paper production

Paper, resin and turpentine

August – In a glowing report, Raleigh News and Observer owner Josephus Daniels praises Champion for keeping workers employed during the Depression, though wages were cut to do so. The Waynesville Mountaineer reports the mill consumes 60 railcar loads of pulpwood, 120,000 pounds of lime and 100,000 pounds of salt each day to produce 200 tons of paper. In addition, the mill produces commercial byproducts, including 300 gallons of turpentine, 20 tons of resin cleanser, and 200 tons of chemical pulp daily.

Sept. 5 – Champion holds its Labor Day celebration at Lake Junaluska, where Reuben Robertson can be found handing out gold coins as prizes for various competitions – including $20 in coin to the winner of the Champion Bathing Beauty.

Oct. 29 – David Kerr, operations superintendent of Champion's mill, says rumors stating the mill will close if Franklin Roosevelt is elected President are false.

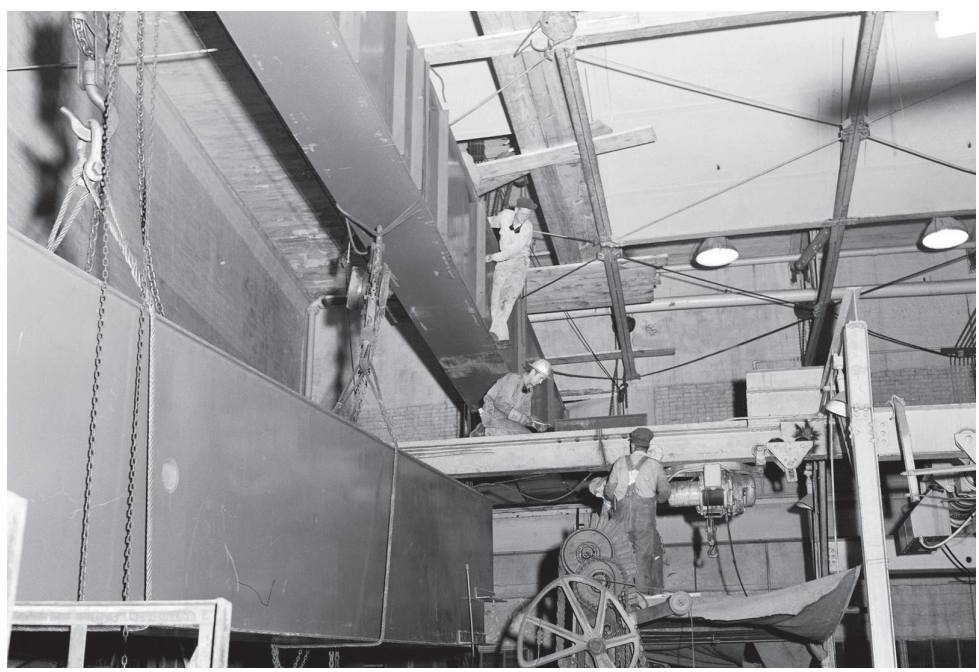
1934

June 20 – David Kerr, 61, five-time mayor of Canton and superintendent of the Champion mill, dies suddenly in his train berth while traveling to Raleigh. Kerr had arrived in Canton in 1907 to take charge of the electrical work during mill construction, becoming superintendent of operations in 1925.

1935

Old-Timers begin

Reuben Robertson organizes the Champion Old Timers, a club of mill



Workers adjust the rigging on a book-paper mill in 1947.

A bridge washed out by the Pigeon River flood of 1940.

workers, current or retired, who have at least 25 years of service with the mill.

Ohio-Canton merger

July 31 - Champion Fibre of Canton, and the closely-associated Champion Coated Paper Company of Hamilton, Ohio, announce their merger into a single company. Peter Thomson had founded both. With the merger, Reuben Robertson is appointed executive vice president. He will continue to oversee Canton operations.

December – Champion announces construction of a new plant to supplement the original plant that filters water coming into the mill from the Pigeon River. The two plants are expected to filter about 40 million gallons of water a day for paper production.

1936

April 29 – Construction of the new filtering plant goes awry when a new flush tank, being tested for leaks, rips apart at the seams, injuring one construction worker and spilling 200,000 gallons of water. About six homes are flooded. Rumors of a Lake Logan dam burst are quickly dispelled.

1939

June 5 – Ground is broken for a new post office in Canton, on a site donated by Champion Paper, thanks to the efforts of Reuben Robertson. The post office will be dedicated in April 1940.

June 27 – Alexander Thomson, chairman of the board of directors for Champion Paper and Fibre, and son of company founder Peter Thomson, dies of pneumonia.

1940

Throughout the 1940s – Champion offers free white pine seedlings to landowners and service groups, including Boy Scouts and school classes, to plant as a method to control erosion.

Expansion in Canton and elsewhere

Champion opens a paper mill in Houston, Texas, in addition to a plant in Pasadena, Texas, opened in 1937. During this year, Champion will install three new machines at the Canton mill, one to produce coated magazine paper, one for board and another for basic paper.

May 19 – For the first time in its 34-year history, there's an entire shut down of the Canton plant following a series of oil switch explosions in the generator room — but only for a day.

The first big floods

Aug. 12-13 – Floods strike Bethel and Canton. About 80 families are forced to evacuate their homes in Fibreville. Champion officials estimate a loss of $6,000 in wood with about $2,000 in damage to machinery. Little do they know that this is the first of two massive floods to strike in the same month.

Aug. 29 – The second record-setting flood in as many weeks storms through Cruso, Bethel, Canton and Clyde and down the Pigeon River, killing two. It produces the highest level of flood waters in the Pigeon River's recorded history. Champion's mill suffers heavy losses in wood and equipment damage. The bridge across the river at Fibreville is washed away.

Sept. 2 – President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicates the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in a ceremony at Newfound Gap. The U.S. flag that is flown during the ceremony is one borrowed from the Haywood County Courthouse — which incidentally was a gift to the county from Reuben Robertson, whose company so strongly opposed the park in its early years and who battled in court to obtain top dollar for its forest lands that would become part of the national park.

1942

Giving up the big pots

October – Champion contributes its share to the World War II scrap metal drive, donating four caustic pots that average 14 tons each. It is the second of two shipments totaling more than 100,000 pounds in scrap metal given by Canton. The children of Fibreville, not to be outdone, collect 10 tons of scrap materials. The children, along with a couple of adults, dig out pieces of the steel bridge destroyed by flood two years before, to give to the war effort.

1943

Help tan the boots

Champion asks landowners to harvest their dying chestnut trees to produce "acidwood" to tan boot leather for the country's men serving in war.

Women at war

March 11 – Champion has a multitude of male workers who have enlisted to fight in World War II – and some women. The Mountaineer announces that Mrs. Edith Lewis of Waynesville has enrolled in the Woman's Army Auxiliary Corps. "For the past seven months she has been employed at Champion Paper and Fibre Company as a sealer, doing a man's job," the newspaper states. In April 1943, Louise Milner leaves her job at Champion to enlist as a WAVE, training to become an aviation mechanic.

July – The mill has 435 former workers serving in the U.S. military.

'Shoulder an axe'

August – Champion launches a "Victory Pulpwood Campaign," asking Haywood men to dedicate time to harvesting their timber to meet the needs of the U.S. military, from rayon for parachutes to food cases. "If we can't shoulder a gun, the least we can do is shoulder an axe or a saw," company advertisements declare. Another theme: "Your axe can lick the Axis."

1944

Aug. 17 - As more women work at the plant, they also assume more of the risks. Dela Mae Wilson, 20, is seriously injured when she is caught in the No, 1 wetlap machine in the bookmill basement. She dies at a hospital about two hours later, leaving a husband who is serving in the U.S. Army.

1945

April 4 – Champion leaders report that their payroll and purchases of wood total $11 million annually, boosting the local economy. They also report on efforts to clean up the air and the waters of the Pigeon by installing new digesters and researching other production processes. The mill requires 50 million gallons of water each day to produce 265 tons of paper with a multitude of byproducts, including tannic acid, pulp and board.

Aug. 30-Sept. 3 – Champion goes all out with a dual Labor Day and War Victory celebration. All of Haywood, especially returning service members, are invited to events that include rides, sports, dances and music at Champion Park and the YMCA. The "colored" community is invited to participate in its own tournaments and to ride the rides on Thursday.

Aug. 25 – Reuben Robertson announces a planned $5 million expansion for the Canton mill, including the addition of another paper machine, a twin to the one in existence there, considered the largest paper-making machine in the world.

Champion establishes a retirement plan for its workers, in which workers contribute a third of the savings, and the pulp/paper producers contribute the remaining two-thirds.

1946

Lose two fingers and keep on working

Mill worker Luke Smathers loses two fingers in an accident. However, he continues working at Champion until his retirement in 1978. He eventually goes back to playing fiddle in the Smathers String Band, though that doesn't happen until 1968.

Survive war – to be hit by lightning

July 10 – Two Canton men, both working for Champion, are struck by lightning during the same storm. WWII veteran Fain Gragg, 39, is killed when struck while taking shelter under a tree at the Champion plant nursery in Fibreville. Leroy Mears, watchman, is hit while lowering the flag in front of the main office building. Though Mears is left unconscious for several hours, he is expected to recover.

Union soundly rejected

Aug. 19 – Champion employees vote against unionizing with the American Federation of Labor by a vote of 2,104 against versus 119 in favor

Robertson is company president

Aug. 20 – Reuben Robertson is named president of Champion Paper and Fibre Co., following the recent death of Logan Thomson, Peter Thomson's son, who had served in that capacity. Robertson continues to reside in Western North Carolina. Reuben Robertson, Jr., will assume his father's former position as executive vice president.

What a cafeteria!

Nov. 1 – Champion's new cafeteria is a thing of beauty, The Mountaineer announces. It is sanitary and modern, featuring stainless steel equipment and dual serving lines. "The interior is of a light buff glazed tile wall and brown trimming, with floors of red quartz tile which glisten under the consistent rays of fluorescent lighting…. Linen-finished Formica tables match the linen-finished face of the counters. … The Bentwood chairs are equipped with noiseless glides so that they will move easily and quietly."

1948

Mill pathway to college

Jan. 9 – The Mountaineer features Annie Queen of Henson Cove, who, after graduation from Bethel High School in 1930, went to work in the finishing department at Champion for 9½ years. With her sisters, Queen has paid for a home for her parents, then earned money to attend Berea College, followed by Yale University's Divinity School, where she will graduate in the spring.

Park wasn't such a bad idea

Feb. 10 – In a speech to the Asheville Civitan Club, Robertson concedes creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park — which Champion opposed — was beneficial. "We now think the greatest good for the greatest number of people was served by this move," he says.

April – Champion signs a $165,000 contract to install dust collectors in its two high-pressure boilers, known as "Peter G" and "Big Bill." The collectors should reduce the amount of dust and ash discharged into the air. The poor

One of the many Champion YMCA square dance teams pictured in 1959.

quality of coal used during World War II shortages is blamed for increasing the discharges in recent years. In October of 1949, mill officials will report the collectors have cut dust deposits around Canton by 90 percent.

May – Champion pledges to renovate and refurnish the reception room at the Haywood County Hospital. The company sponsored the room when the hospital was built two decades before.

May 3-4 – Champion throws open the doors of the Canton mill for an open house. Thousands tour the mill.

Tough old-timer

June – Champion worker Andy McClure is featured in The Log and in The Mountaineer. He is the oldest active employee of the Canton mill and celebrated his 76th birthday by working a full shift as a salvage and repairman. Though mill officials have offered him easier tasks, he gravitates back to harder challenges. McClure, who began work at Champion in 1907, has never had a time-lost accident.

Tallest stack?

June 11 — The Mountaineer and the Log report that Champion's smokestack is believed to be the tallest industrial smokestack in the state, at 254 feet. (Two stacks at nearby American Enka measure 250 feet.) At the time of its construction, more than 200 pilings were driven into the ground, and a concrete base 10 feet thick was constructed to support it.

Oct. 28 – A discussion on water quality during a Canton Civitan meeting leads mill officials to explain that oxygen levels in the Pigeon River are now at a point adequate for fish survival near the Tennessee line.

1949

February – Haywood gets a new Extension Service agent when Champion commits to pay a large portion of the salary. His work is to focus on the East-Fork and Cecil communities with emphasis on erosion control and forestry. Champion's funding stems from its need for a clean water supply for paper production.

Oct. 22-23 – The Champion YMCA square dance team wins the state square dance crown during the N.C. State Fair. The team's trip to Raleigh has been financed by Champion Paper.

1950

Reuben Robertson Sr. is put in charge of the North and South Carolina campaigns in President Dwight Eisenhower's program to battle Communism.

June 9 – George Smathers, well known attorney and land title counsel for Champion's Canton mill, dies. Smathers helped Peter Thomson acquire forest lands for pulp production and handled the litigation over timberland with the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. His papers will later become a valuable resource for those researching the mill's history.

July 26 – Champion Paper and Fibre announces that Reuben Robertson Sr. has been named chairman of its board of directors. Reuben B. Robertson Jr. is promoted to president.

Man of the South

October – Reuben Robertson Sr. is named "Man of the South" for 1950 by Dixie Business magazine.

1951

July – The mill shuts down its extract plant, which was once the largest plant in the world for the extraction and production of tannin. At this point, there is no more chestnut wood for the operation, as blight has wiped out the chestnut forests. Workers are moved to other jobs in the mill.

July – Champion announces a scholarship program to fund 11 scholarships for children of its employees that can be applied to five Western North Carolina colleges.

1952

Tackling Communism

Robert J. Putnam, community relations officer for Champion, is on a national anti-communism speaking circuit. By March of the next year, he will have addressed about 23,000 people, mostly in small groups. With Champion's consent, Putnam will take an unpaid leave of absence to deliver his message, then resign to devote all his time to the cause.

March – A forestry report states that Champion owns half a million acres of forest land, with another 1 million under contract for harvesting.

Lots of banquets

March – April – Champion hosts two annual banquets for "junior old-timers" and for retirees. The company hosts a multitude of banquets each year — for old timers with between 20 and 25 years of service, for senior old timers, for retirees, and for those who have completed training courses. Usually Reuben Robertson is present to hand out the awards in person.

September – Champion sponsors four weekly contests for the month, in which residents who are part of a community development club can submit an essay titled "On What I Have Done to Improve My Community During the Past Week." Each weekly winner receives a $25 bond, with a grand prize winner receiving a bedroom suite. Other essay contests will follow in October and November.

1953

March – Champion announces a 25% increase in benefits for workers on its retirement plan, adding that the increase will also be in effect for those already drawing retirement.

October – Work begins on a new library building for Canton on Park Street. Champion has donated $40,000 to the project.

1954

May 4-7 – The Canton mill holds an open house. About 8,000 people tour the mill, collect souvenirs and view the three movies Champion has produced on forestry and paper production.

October – Champion administers free physical exams to all of its employees willing to participate as part of a focus on preventive health.

October – Champion offers a profit-sharing plan to its employees dedicating 15% of the company's pre-tax profits to its workers, including a retirement plan.

1955

Jan. 2 – Champion workers set a new one-day production record, turning out 1,677 tons of pulp, paper and paperboard during a 24-hour period. In appreciation, the company distributes 2,800 cups of ice cream to its workers.

July – Reuben Robertson, Jr. accepts a position as U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, a position he will hold for two years. His father, Reuben Sr., will return to the position of Champion company president during his son's service.

Cooling tower

August – As the amount of water the mill heats is now more than can be released back into the Pigeon River, the mill constructs a cooling tower on Filter Plant Hill. The tower drops the heated water through ceramic nozzles that break it up into small streams while massive fans pull in air to cool the falling water. The tower has a capacity to cool 7,500 gallons of water/minute, lowering the temp from 125 F to 85 F.

1956

August – Champion announces plans for a major three-year expansion, including installing of a new paper machine at Canton that will increase daily paper production there by 350 tons. Currently the mill produces about 700 tons per day of paper and paperbox. Plans call for a two-story building to house the machine with space left over for a possible second machine in the future.

Closing the store

Sept. 13 – Champion announces it will be closing its Champion Employees Store in six months. The space is needed for the mill's planned expansion. The store has been paying its customers a trade dividend each year.

1957

Feb. 21 – Champion will donate $5,000 for a new library building and a bookmobile for Waynesville.

Spring - The State Stream Sanitation Committee reports the Pigeon River is

The Champion Company Store offered everything a family needed.

Hundreds line up to apply for jobs at the new Waynesville mill facility in 1959.

polluted by all of the county's towns releasing untreated sewage into the river. In addition, Champion Paper's industrial wastewater is a significant polluter, the report states.

1958

April – New federal laws are passed that make it illegal to dump untreated town or industrial waste into primary waterways – such as the Pigeon River. This law will force Haywood County towns, and Champion, to develop treatment processes for wastewater.

April 14 – Champion announces that in honor of Pulp and Paper Week, several of its wood collection sites will pay for purchases in silver dollars, to emphasize contributions of the pulp and paper industry to the economy. The mill will not make all payments in silver dollars, it explains, because transporting the coins would be far too expensive.

June 11 – In honor of Reuben Robertson Sr.'s 79th birthday, the workers at Champion inform him they have collected $10,000 — with donations still coming — to be used to establish a scholarship in his name.

1959

Mid-February – Champion's new No. 20 paper machine, one of the largest in the world, goes into production. Thanks to its three-year expansion, the mill is adding 225 new jobs. Paper production in Canton is now at 900 tons per day.

Arson and witness tampering

March 25 – Some 77 acres of Champion forest near Lake Logan burn. Three men will later be charged with deliberately burning the woodlands and will face charges of witness intimidation when witnesses start changing their stories during an August trial. The three change their pleas to guilty just before the case is to go to the jury and are each sentenced to between three and six years in prison.

Birth of 'Little Champion'

June 25 – Champion comes to the rescue when Haywood County finds itself stuck with a new, empty industrial site.

A local economic development group, Haywood Improvement Foundation, had recruited an industry for a site near Waynesville, but the company pulled out after a facility was constructed. Following three weeks of private talks, Champion announces it will assume the lease and set up production in what will become known as "Little Champion." The site will initially be used to produce a line of small business papers, but later becomes a facility to apply waterproofing coating to paperboard produced at the Canton mill for liquid packaging cartons.

Aug. 17 – Three hundred men wait in line to apply for jobs at the new Waynesville branch of Champion's paper division. Mill officials expect that number to double by the end of the day.

A lot of grease and oil

Aug. 31 – Marking the 100th anniversary of the petroleum industry, Champion provides information that its Canton facility uses 8,000 gallons of oil and 7,500 pounds of grease every month to keep its production machines operating.

1960

Treating its wastewater

Champion constructs and installs a primary waste treatment facility to treat wastewater before discharge into the Pigeon River.

February – Champion purchases the Waynesville industrial site it has been leasing and announces it will build an addition. Reuben Robertson Jr. announces a new line of production for the Waynesville plant that will produce coated paper for food containers.

Tragic losses for Champion family, and the end of an era

March 13 – Reuben Robertson Jr., 51, Champion president and CEO, is killed in a traffic accident in Hamilton, Ohio. Reports state Robertson and his wife were driving on Paddock Road when their car grazed another vehicle that had stalled. Robertson left his car to check on the other driver, and was struck by a third vehicle while walking back to his car. That third driver is charged with driving under the influence of alcohol. The news stuns Haywood County, where flags are flown at half-mast.

In fact, Champion will face multiple tragedies in the first half of 1960. Just a month before Robertson's death, two company pilots who were to fly him to Haywood County are killed in an airplane crash shortly before his scheduled visit. Robertson cancels his appearance in Haywood to be with the pilots' families. Two weeks after Robertson's death, his cousin, Peter G. Thomson Jr., son of Champion's founder, dies unexpectedly in his Asheville home. And in May, Herbert Suter Jr., 50, vice president of marketing for Champion, dies in Cincinnati following abdominal surgery.

March 17 – Reuben Robertson Sr.

steps down as chairman of the board following his son's death and is replaced by Dwight J. Thomson. Karl Bendetsen is named president, replacing Reuben B. Robertson Jr. killed days before. Though Dwight Thomson is a grandson of Champion founder Peter Thomson, for the people of Canton, this will become known as the end of an era, the end of the close relationship between the Robertson family and the people who work at the Canton mill.

December – The Log, Champion's company newsletter, publishes its last edition.

1961

Jan-Feb. – Champion cuts its work force at the Canton mill and its other facilities, due to an oversupply of paper in the national market. Together the Waynesville and Canton sites employ about 2,860 people after the downsizing. Much of the job loss has been through retirements, though some short-term employees have also been released.

February – Champion begins producing a new type of paper at its Waynesville plant, coating foodstock paper, primarily for milk cartons. In July, it announces a major expansion there with construction of a 35,000-square-foot addition for a second line to coat foodboard packaging. This occurs as Champion acquires DairyPak, a company that sells paraffin-coated milk cartons and other food containers.

April – Champion acquires the Carpenter Paper Company, which has sales outlets and warehouses in 26 western states.

April – Champion cuts its salaried (non-hourly) work force at the Canton mill by about 20 percent.

Mill to treat town sewage

April – Contracts are issued for a sewer line and pump station for the town of Canton. All towns are under pressure to develop wastewater treatment systems and to cease dumping untreated sewage in area streams. Canton, however, has an advantage over its municipal neighbors – it will tie in with Champion's treatment system, so that the mill will provide the service for town residents as it treats its own industrial wastewater.

June 26 – The new Reuben B. Robertson Jr. Service Lodge is dedicated at Boy Scout Camp Daniel Boone in memory of the Champion CEO who was killed the year before.

No more 'Fibre'

July 31 – Champion stockholders shorten the name of their company to Champion Papers, streamlining the name for marketing purposes.

1962

Union rejected

Spring – The AFL-CIO files a petition to hold union elections at the Waynesville and Canton mills owned by Champion. Workers then reject the union, with 7% at the Waynesville plant, 79% at Canton, voting against it.

From painter to VP

May 17 – Clyde native Willis Kirkpatrick has been appointed vice president of the Carolina division of Champion, a promotion from his post as manager. Kirkpatrick began work at Champion in Canton as a painter in 1924 and worked his way up through traffic, wood procurement, woods-cost accounting, general accounting and management planning.

Big job cuts

Nov. 8 – Champion announces a "modernization program" that will mean cutting the work force to 2,200 people, for a net loss of 600 jobs over the next two years. The program will add a new paperboard machine and a smelter that should cut the pollutants released into the air.

1963

May – Champion's modernization will improve waste treatment facilities and air and water discharges from the Canton mill. The process will remove 150 tons of waste solids from the water each day. Though production has increased by 35%, the mill claims, discharges into the river have decreased about 25 %.

May 28 – Canton and Champion officials sign an agreement in which Champion will treat all of the town's sewage. The mill is already treating about 65% of Canton waste, about 300,000 gallons per day. Canton will pay $360 per month for the treatment.

A millworker paints the Champion logo on one of the tanker cars in 1950.

Spring – Dan Moore, former superior court judge, takes a leave of absence from his post as legal counsel for Champion's Carolina Division to run for governor. Moore, a native of Asheville, has lived in Canton since 1958. He will be elected governor in 1964.

Another union rejection

Aug. 15-17 – In a three-day vote, the Canton mill rejects organization of a union by a vote of 1,140 against to 632 in favor.

Autumn – Nine retired Champion employees travel with six other retired papermakers to Romania, where they spend two months teaching employees in that Communist country how to boost production at a new paper mill.

1965

Robertson 'Y' dedicated

Jan. 31 – A new $750,000 Robertson Memorial YMCA building is dedicated, with attendees including Gov. Dan Moore and Champion president CEO Bendetsen. It is named for Reuben Robertson, Sr., who personally donated $135,000 for the project on top of $150,000 donated by Champion. A year later, Champion donates $30,000 and commits another 50 cents for every dollar given to pay off the debt.

March 15 – Reuben Robertson Sr. suffers an apparent stroke and is rushed to Mission Hospital. He is 85.

April – Canton's mill rejects unionization by a vote of 1,145 to 487.

Wedding ring takes journey

May – Fourteen months after his wedding ring is lost in a paper shipment, Champion packer Woodrow Fleming receives it back, after it has traveled to a newspaper press, back to a paper company, then back to a distributor before being returned to the Canton mill.

May – Champion's new 600-foot-long paperboard machine — the length of two football fields — goes into operation.

Going pink and blue

Oct 18 – From the Mountaineer: "The manufacturing area of Champion Papers, Inc. of Waynesville has just received a coat of pastel paint. The ceilings are white, while the walls are pink and the machinery "Carolina" blue. The floors are of battleship gray. Visitors remark that it is one of the most colorful manufacturing areas in the state."

Champion had its own medical department for employees, pictured here in 1959.

1966

March – Champion announces it will hire 65 college students to work the summer months to allow its regular employees to take their vacations.

Champion unionizes

May 7 – By narrow margins, employees of both the Waynesville and Canton plants of Champion vote to unionize as the Smoky Mountain Local 507. The vote at Canton totals 841 for the union, 726 against, while the Waynesville plant vote is 108 for the union, 90 against. Haywood County's second-largest industrial employer, Dayco, has been unionized since August 1944. Workers quickly see benefits from unionizing. In September, the first union contract is signed, including additional vacation time and pay increases of up to 48 cents per hour this first year of the contract, followed by 11 to 16 cents per hour for the next two years.

1967

Jan. 5 – Champion Papers receives a $700,000 federal grant for research to reduce pollution in the Pigeon River. The grant comes from the Clear Water Restoration Act of 1966.

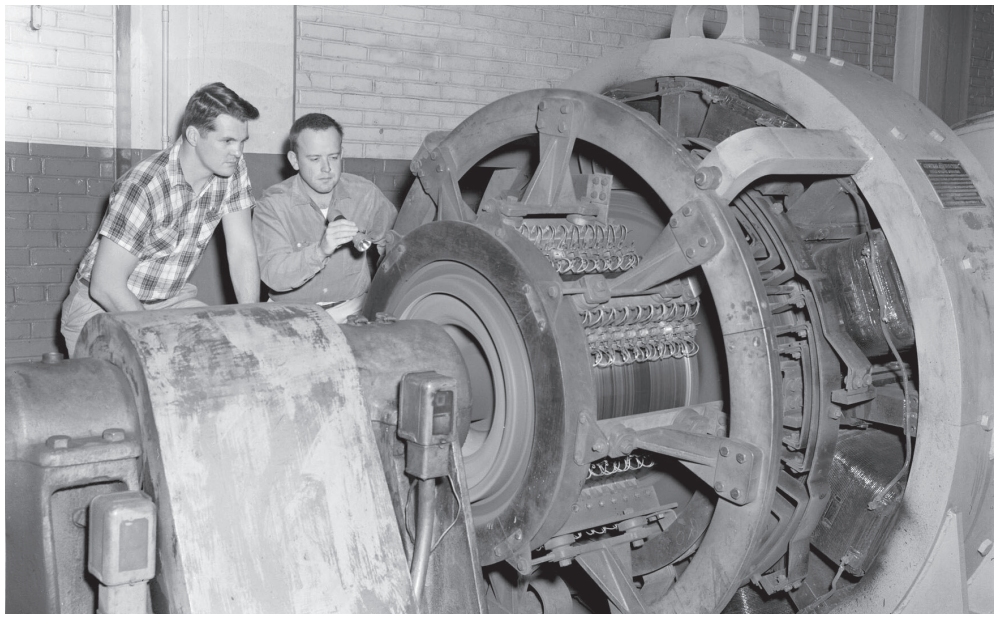
January – A small piece of metal, about half the size of a match head, causes more than $26,000 in damage when it works its way into a paper making machine.

March - Champion draws up plans for a second waste treatment facility that should greatly improve the Pigeon River. Cost of the new plant is estimated at $5 million.

August – Canton is no longer dumping raw sewage into the Pigeon River, now that its final pumping station is in place. All of the town's waste is now being treated by Champion's wastewater treatment facilities.

1968

March – The new Haywood Technical Institute is working closely with Champion Papers, which is furnishing


Ed Morgan and Darryll Cagle with the #11 machine in 1960.

one of two sawmill setups used at the college. Champion also participates in an apprenticeship program, in which the school provides instructors on the mill job site.

Late December – A fish kill at Waterville Lake is blamed on lack of oxygen, caused by the pollution from Champion Papers. The river below the mill is rated as Class E going into Waterville, considered so polluted it cannot sustain fish life.

1969

Mosquitoes can breed

March 17 – Haywood County Health Director Dr. Stuart Roberson says the county has a long way to go in fighting pollution but that Champion is doing a good job in cleaning up the Pigeon River, given that mosquitoes can now breed on the waters.

Oct. 2 – Smoky Mountain Local 507, representing hourly workers at the Canton mill, votes to strike: 1,311 for the walkout, with 174 against. No date is set, and talks are pending. Three weeks later, a strike is averted when a new contract is signed, including wage increases for hourly workers and better hospital and vacation benefits. A separate contract will be negotiated for the Waynesville plant in December.

Dec. 10 – Champion announces plans to construct a new chemical recovery unit to help clean up its air pollution.

1970

February – A report from the N.C. Division of Community Planning states that air pollution in Canton is the main reason Canton has housing problems: "The major offenders are dust, carbon and chemicals from Champion papers," the report states.

'Instant solutions not possible'

May – Champion will be investing more than $19 million to improve air and water pollution. "We are determined to improve the environment in the communities where we operate," says Harry Pedley, vice president and operations manager of the Canton mill. "Regrettably, instant solutions are not possible." Three months later, he will declare that 90% of the Canton mill's air pollution should be eliminated within 33 months.

May 1 – Ground is broken on a new town hall building for Canton, thanks in part to Champion. The company has arranged a land exchange, receiving back the site it donated for the older town hall in exchange for the present site.

July 1 – Champion announces a $3 million project to build a new warehouse and shipping facility as well as expand its converting department.

Oct. 13 – Not everyone is a fan of Champion's claims of environmental cleanup. Dr. Roy Roberts of Asheville, vice chairman of the Western North Carolina Regional Air Pollution Control Board, blasts local industries, particularly Champion, for slowness in dealing with pollution and claims the state is protecting its large industries. Speaking at the Maggie Valley Country Club, with the odor of the Canton plant strong inside the meeting room, he says "we can't stop the big polluters and we can't stop the little polluters because we can't stop the big polluters."

1971

March – Contracts are awarded for construction of a new chemical recovery unit to cut air emissions at the Canton plant. The cost of the new No. 11 Unit and its installation is estimated at $9.5 million.

Protesting for co-worker

Sept. 9 – More than 500 workers and union members at the Canton mill demonstrate along Main Street in Canton to protest the firing of fellow worker Clinton Weaver Hipps. It is the first demonstration of its kind by the union. Hipps, a 30-year employee, has not worked since July 30 due to injuries and illness. He had also missed work due to accidents in the past two years. Hipps and union officials met with mill officials but the issue was unresolved. In October, the mill reinstates Hipps.

1972

April – At an air pollution conference, Champion's community relations director says the Canton mill burns 500 tons of wood bark, 60,000 gallons of oil and 1,000 tons of coal daily.

The grand old man presides one last time

June 29 – As he has for many years, Reuben B. Robertson, Sr. presides and serves as guest of honor at the Cham-

Reuben Robertson hands over the ceremonial key to Snug Harbor, a gathering place for mill oldtimers, in 1953.

pion Old Timers. Robertson is now 93 and still serves as honorary chairman of Champion's board of directors.

Oct. 9 – After a first-round rejection, workers at Waynesville's Champion plant vote to accept a contract, 132 to 16. The company had agreed to give workers until Oct., 10 to change their minds; otherwise, it would withdraw the offer. In August, Canton workers voted to accept a very similar package with the same benefits.

Robertson Sr. dies

Dec. 26 – Mr. Champion, Reuben B. Robertson, Sr., dies at the age of 93. Hundreds stream through the lobby of the YMCA where his body lies in state the following Thursday. Robertson arrived in Haywood County in 1907 for a six-month stay and remained for the rest of his life, though he will be buried in his hometown of Cincinnati.

1973

March-April – Champion starts up its $9.45 million chemical recovery unit designed to catch and eliminate most of the particles released into the air from the mill. In April, it starts up the first of three precipitators for the coal-fired boilers at the mill, designed to remove more than 90% of the ash particles from the smokestack emissions.

Nov. 15 – Champion receives a certificate of achievement from the Regional Air Pollution Control Board for its substantial efforts to cut back its air pollution.

1974

March – Figures from the Western North Carolina Regional Air Pollution Control Board indicate Haywood County's air quality has improved with Champion's air-pollution controls.

Couple logs 80 years with the mill

September – Clyde H. Brown, and his wife, Lola Shephard Brown, retire from the mill. Together they have 80 years of service with the company, and neither ever reported a lost-time accident.

1975

July 28 – About 125 Champion employees and members of Smoky Mountain Local 507 protest outside mill offices, opposing the firing of Lawrence Newland for "unacceptable work attendance." Newland says he received a back sprain which was followed by ulcer and hernia surgery before being terminated for his absences. A second protest is held in August. There is no followup report on whether Newland is reinstated.

Sept. 18 – Members of Smoky Mountain Local 507 have voted to go on strike. In the previous month, workers have rejected two proposals for a new three-year contract negotiated by union and management committees. The vote to strike is 1,192 in favor, 175 against, easily exceeding the two-thirds vote required. The union must give Champion at least 10 days notice of a strike. The next week, a federal mediator steps in. On Sept. 30, the strike is averted when members vote to accept a three-year contract offer from Champion, by a vote of 1,098 to 332. The sticking points had been in retirement and health insurance benefits. In late October, the Waynesville plant will accept a similar contract.

1976

May 15 – Floods from storms, the worst that Haywood has seen in 30 years, force Champion to shut down production for most of the day, costing the company an estimated $600,000 in lost production. Two weeks later, on May 29, a second flood surges through, but water levels drop just in time so that Champion doesn't have to shut down operations,

1977

March – Champion sues former employee Jerry Douglas Yates in civil court, claiming Yates deliberately tried to disrupt and hinder manufacturing operations at the mill. The mill is asking for $200,000 in actual damages and $500,000 in punitive damages. In September of 1978, Champion will voluntarily drop the lawsuit, with no explanation given in the court records.

Honored by veterans

May 20 – The American Legion recognizes Champion International's Canton paper mill as its "Employer of the Year" for North Carolina. Six out of every 10 men employed by the mill are U.S. veterans.

EPA sues Champion

June – The Environmental Protection Agency files suit against Champion International for Pigeon River pollution, charging the Canton paper mill with failing to meet the timeline for compliance with the Federal Water Control Act of 1972. The EPA is seeking fines of up to $10,000 per day against Champion.

Aug. 18 – Canton leaders organize a plan to revert Canton to its 1930s milltown image, including a museum and tours of the Canton mill.

1978

Lawsuit dismissed

April 5 – The suit filed by the EPA against Champion has been dismissed in federal court, thanks to negotiations. Champion has agreed to pay a $45,000 civil penalty, the largest ever paid in North Carolina in a case of this kind. Champion acknowledges it discharged more pollution into the river than allowed, but that it had been in process of installing a new system and had warned EPA it could not meet the July 1976 deadline.

Close, but no strike

Sept. 17 – It's close, but once again a strike at Champion is averted though workers had voted to walk out. Negotiations after the strike vote result in a contract offer that is approved by a two-to-one margin.

November – Dry weather since August is forcing Champion to pull on its Lake Logan reservoir to stay in production.

1979

Champion Papers contributes $140,000 to Haywood County Hospital for equipment purchases during the hospital foundation's fund drive.

Feb. 8 – Fourteen years after construction, the Robertson Memorial YMCA is debt free. A note for the final $18,000 is burned at the YMCA annual meeting.

June – Champion is developing 25 acres on what was once known as the Reeves Farm as a landfill for the mill's solid wastes.

Canton's 66th annual Labor Day Parade in 1972.

Lizard takes train ride

Aug. 7 – Employees unloading paper from Champion's Texas plant find a lizard later identified as an Asian Monitor that had latched itself to the underside of the boxcar. The 20-inch animal is delivered to Soco Zoo. It is a native of Asia and Africa.

October – For the fourth time, salaried employees at Champion vote down union representation, this time by a vote of 60 against, 47 in favor.

December – Champion's state permit to dump wastewater in the Pigeon River expires at the end of 1979. It will operate through most of 1980 under application for a new permit from the N.C. Division of Environmental Management.

1980

Landfill woes

May 19 – The new Champion landfill at Beaverdam is not popular with neighbors, who ask county commissioners for help, complaining that heavy truck traffic is causing property damage. Odor is a problem. Champion says a new press should help control the odor, and residents concede that traffic is not as fast as it had been. By August, Champion will be constructing another embankment dike to expand the landfill.

Uncomfortable tactics

July – When much of the workforce at Champion's Courtland, Ala., plant goes on strike, Champion sends about 20 supervisory and salaried employees from its Canton mill to Courtland to prevent a shutdown. This prompts Smoky Mountain Local 507 to ask the company to "not encourage disharmony among the employees by moving people from one location to another to try to avert a work stoppage."

1981

Spring – Some fish populations, mostly suckers, have returned to the Pigeon River waters downstream from Champion, but the fish population is 22 times less downstream than in the area around Bethel, according to the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

April 14 – Champion announces a $9 million project to reduce the amount of sulfur in the air by incinerating gaseous discharges.

From mill to State House

December – Charles Beall, an inventory controller at Champion's Canton mill, is appointed to fill a vacant seat in the N.C. House of Representatives. Beall, a 43-year employee of Champion, will successfully run for election in January and begin a long political career in the state house as a close ally of House Speaker Liston Ramsey.

1982

Layoffs and salary freezes

February – About 476 salaried employees at the Waynesville and Canton plants are affected by a wage freeze enacted by Champion. Those who had received wage increases for the new year will forfeit them. The freeze is in effect until business improves, the company

N.C. Governor Jim Martin tours the mill in 1989 amid the height of the pollution battle that jeopardized the mill's future.

says, and affects its salaried employees across the country. Union workers, under a three-year contract, have not been contacted about wage concessions. However, Champion lays off 12 employees during the spring in what it says are the worst economic conditions since the 1974 recession.

1983

Pigeon River advocates step forward

An organization, the Pigeon River Action Group, emerges with the goal of improving the waters of the Pigeon River, urging Champion to clean up its wastewater discharges into the river. Its members include some Haywood County residents.

Feb. 2 – A heavy overnight rainstorm forces evacuations in Fibreville. The Robertson YMCA suffers heavy flooding in its basement, increasing the woes for an organization facing an $80,000 budget deficit from the year before. Though homes from Cruso to Clyde are flooded, Fibreville is the hardest hit, with 20 homes damaged.

Opening shots in a long battle

April – Tennessee's Division of Water Management takes the unusual step of asking North Carolina to tighten restrictions on Champion's wastewater discharges into the Pigeon River. It calls for a drastic reduction of organic substances from 8,095 pounds per day to 1,701 pounds per day. It also asks North Carolina to limit the "color units" that Champion releases into the river. North Carolina does not regulate the release of color and dyes into its waters.

July 8 – Tennessee Attorney General William Leech files a complaint against Champion, claiming the Canton mill is discharging inadequately treated wastewater into the Pigeon River. Tennessee is also asking the Environmental Protection Agency to take over responsibility for issuing the mill's discharge permits.

Early August – Champion hires 45 workers, a significant comeback from the layoffs of 18 months before.

Aug. 26 – Champion pledges $100,000 toward a YMCA renewal campaign. The company regularly contributes $50,000 each year, and the pledge will be in addition to that amount.

75th anniversary celebration

Sept 2 – In honor of its 75th anniversary, Champion hosts tours through the mill. Mary Wells Freeman recalls how Peter G. Thomson stayed at her home when he came to Canton, looking for a mill site. "Before Champion came to Canton it was just a country town with nothing," she says "Now look at all we have."

1984

February – Champion applies for a permit to replace four oil-fired boilers with one coal-fired boiler. Though coal is typically more polluting than oil, a newer coal boiler would have to meet stricter standards and actually lower the amount of air pollution the mill releases, its officials say. The switch would take three years to complete and cost $55 million.

Sept. 9 – Canton union workers again avoid a strike at the last minute by accepting a new three-year labor contract by a slim 94-vote margin.

River advocates tackle temperature issues

October – The Pigeon River Action Group, and its president, Dick Mullinix, begin drawing the attention — and ire — of Haywood County residents when they protest water temperature variations the state planned to allow at the Canton mill. The group is also protesting the state's lack of pressure on Champion to lower the color discharges into the river.

Tennessee goes to court

November – Tennessee also opposes the new state discharge proposal for Champion, filing suit in Wake County Superior Court in Raleigh asking the court to dissolve or modify the agreement.

Dec. 29 – N.C. Division of Environmental Management sets a Jan. 29, 1985, date for a public hearing in which citizens can comment on the proposed discharge agreement.

1985

Jan. 27 – The dispute over wastewater from Champion turns emotional and personal during the first public hearing on the issue, held in Canton in the shadow of the mill. Tennessee speakers repeatedly ask North Carolina to stop sending murky, odorous paper mill wastes downriver. Locals object. "What's more important, a family or a durned fish?" asks Champion employee Bruce Medford.

May 30 – Some 560 Champion "Old Timers," those who have retired from

Champion or who have 25 or more years of service, gather for their annual dinner meeting at Camp Hope on the 50th anniversary of the organization.

EPA threatens takeover

Aug. 7 – The EPA tells North Carolina environmental regulators they must take stronger steps to clean up the Pigeon River — or the federal agency will step in. EPA wants more done to remove color from the wastewater discharged by the Canton mill, siding with the request from Tennessee officials. On the other hand, EPA is satisfied with the higher water temperature limit worked out by the state and mill officials.

Injuries prompt resignation

Aug. 19 – Twenty-two workers at the Champion Mill — most of them contracted construction workers — are treated at Haywood County Hospital following a chlorine gas leak blamed on a faulty air control valve. The valve gave an incorrect reading that allowed hundreds of gallons of water into already full mixing tanks.

Four other Champion workers are also treated at the hospital Monday after inhaling chlorine gas leaked from a railroad car. The two accidents are unrelated, mill officials say. Days later, the chief of the contract workers resigns, charging that Champion failed to notify his crew that they were having trouble with chlorine leaks. Mill officials promise to investigate.

State throws permit issue to EPA

September – The N.C. environmental agency announces it will not set stricter color standards for the Pigeon River at the state line — essentially throwing Champion's wastewater discharge permit into the hands of the EPA.

Shave those beards!

Sept. 6 – As a safety measure, Champion has issued a policy requiring most mill workers to shave off their beards or mustaches. It applies to workers in any areas who are in sections of the mill with potential for exposure to harmful gas or dust. Whiskers could prevent a seal from being formed around the face in the event that a worker needs to don a respirator.

Bearded workers are unhappy. "My wife and child have never seen me without my beard," complains Rick Cagle.

October – Champion will no longer take logs for chipping at the Canton mill, relying instead on outside "chip mills."

1986

Environmental legal battles

March – Champion attorneys sought relief in federal court to operate under North Carolina's more permissive discharge permit as opposed to a stricter federal permit, but the request is denied. North Carolina has asked to participate in court battles between the EPA and Champion, to prevent the federal agency from taking over the permitting process. In April, Champion is ordered to apply to EPA for the wastewater permit, which Champion does.

April – The Tennessee Supreme Court rules against its own state, deciding one state could not enforce its water quality standards on a river that originates in another state. The Tennessee Attorney General's office files notice in July that it will appeal, meaning the case may go to the U.S. Supreme Court.

May 11 – A $1 million "ultrafiltration system" at the Canton mill has failed to remove as much color from the wastewater as expected, removing about 45% compared to the hoped-for 75%.

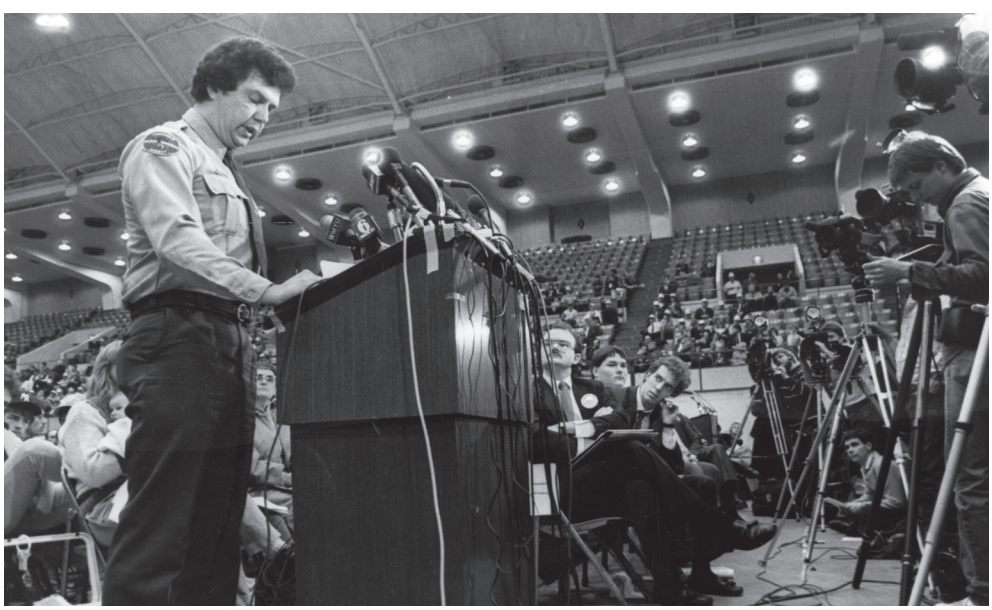
More chlorine gas injuries

July 9 – A chlorine gas spill injures 54 workers at Champion when a safety valve on a tanker car fails. All but one of the workers were employees of a construction company, BE&K, doing work for the mill. The safety valve had been installed after a similar accident injured 22 workers the previous year.

July 14 – A federal judge allows additional parties to jump into the lawsuit between Champion and the EPA. North Carolina joins lawsuit on the side of Champion while the Pigeon River Action group and the Legal Environmental Assistance Foundation enter on the side of Tennessee and the EPA.

Drought threatens production

Aug. 4 – A summer-long drought drops water levels so low in Lake Logan, and diminishes the flow of the Pigeon River to such an extent, that Champion begins laying off employees and cutting paper production 40%.



An employee of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency speaks at a public hearing amidst the height of the pollution hearings.

Mill honored for education efforts

October – Gov. James Martin presents Champion a Business Award in Education, which recognizes businesses that have set up partnerships to improve local schools. Champion is recognized for its payroll deduction plan allowing employees to pledge money for stadiums for the high schools, for matching contributions by employees to the schools' financial development program and its support of Junior Achievement and the county's dropout prevention program.

1987

January – Champion rebuilds its No.19 paper-making machine, which first went into operation in May 1965, at a cost of $15 million.

February – Champion sells its Pasadena paper mill, following the sale of its Tacoma, Washington, mill in 1985. Champion says it has no plans to sell the Haywood County mills.

Big upgrade proposed

March – Champion is proposing a $200 million modernization plan for the Canton mill, which it says will reduce the amount of color discharged into the Pigeon River. But EPA wants about eight times as much color removed as Champion says the modernization would provide.

May – Champion launches an advertising campaign with the theme Our River/Our Jobs/Your Future. The promotions range from quoting Mark Twain in a claim that the Pigeon River's death is "greatly exaggerated" to a rallying call for citizens to attend EPA hearings in Newport, Tenn.

"Our largest employer is threatened with a situation that with all its resources and good will, it may not be able to survive," the ads state.

'Big mill, little river'

May 8 – From Champion's Canton manager and VP of operations Oliver Blackwell: "We know of no technology at any price that would achieve 50 color

units as required in the permit right below the mill. We are already one of the lowest color producers in North America. The problem is, we're a big mill on a little river."

The same edition of The Mountaineer features a story on Dick Mullinix, head of the Pigeon River Action Group. Mullinix, a retired paper engineer, says a cleanup is possible. He describes threats of death and arson he has faced as a Haywood County resident taking on the county's largest employer.

May 12 - On the eve of much-anticipated public hearings scheduled for Canton and Newport, Tenn., the EPA postpones them, stating it is still reviewing technical information provided by Champion.

Union comments inflame community

Early July – Robert Croft, executive director of the county's Economic Development Commission, tells Waynesville Kiwanis that organized labor is the "biggest stumbling block to luring new industry to Haywood County." Given that Haywood County has the most unionized workforce in North Carolina, his remarks are not well received. Smoky Mountain Local 507 at Champion and Local 277 at Dayco present a statement criticizing Croft's remarks. Croft will resign as EDC director in January of 1988.

Oct. 14 – Champion announces it will add a third production line to the Waynesville plant to produce "liquid packaging," containers including juice and milk cartons.

Dioxin – another threat

Nov. 25 – The state announces it will begin testing several rivers in N.C. below paper mills for dioxin contamination. Dioxins are suspected cancer-causers that are known to suppress immune systems and impair liver functions.

Mullinix feature prompts boycott

Dec. 4 – WLOS features Dick Mullinix as "Person of the Week" in its news segments. Outrage over the choice of the Pigeon River environmentalist is so strong that several local business owners organize a protest against the TV station, and some pull their advertising. About 2,000 people sign a petition pledging not to buy products from stores that advertise with the station.

December – Having battled drought, environmentalists and the possibility of cancer-causing dioxin in their wastewater, mill officials must feel they are besieged on all sides, as contract talks with Smoky Mountain Local 507 go into their fourth month. The previous contract expired Aug. 31, and early in the month, Union members reject Champion's latest contract offer by a vote of 1,047 to 91.

December – Champion announces it will not proceed with its $200 million modernization program, given that it would not meet the standards expected by EPA anyway.

December – The EPA issues a revised wastewater discharge permit that requires a 50-color-unit standard just below the mill – the same standard Blackwell says is impossible to achieve. If Champion can convince EPA it is an impossible standard that would force closure of the mill, the federal agency would have to make concessions, state and federal leaders say. EPA says it has not been convinced.

1988

Color no big deal?

Jan 11 – A $250,000 study paid for by Champion states the color in the river has little effect on aquatic life.

Public hearing showdowns

Jan. 14 – Over nine hours, 7,500 people file through the Asheville Civic Center to express support for Champion during the first of the EPA's two public hearings on the wastewater discharge permit. Though 380 speakers sign up to speak in support of the mill, only 92 make it to the podium during the nine-hour span.

"For a people whose future is at stake, they were remarkably restrained," a Mountaineer editorial says of Haywood citizens. "They held their composure despite their anger. Not a single person, despite their thousands, got out of hand a single time."

Jan. 21 – The Mountaineer estimates 3,500 people attend the Knoxville, Tenn., public hearing, addressing the wastewater discharge permit. Many are Champion supporters who travel there by bus loads. Only 75 of those who speak support the tighter standards during the nine-hour hearing. Dick Mullinix charges that Champion is trying to frighten its community to keep from meeting standards, calling it "job blackmail."

February – Champion reduces its workforce, offering early retirement incentives to Canton and Waynesville employees, stating it wants to scale down its cut-size business paper operation and retire some equipment that has been in operation since the 1920s.

February – As the Feb. 22 deadline nears for written comments on the river pollution permit, Champion employees and volunteers conduct a phone campaign to encourage people to write letters supporting the mill.

Feb. 15 – Canton mill workers approve a new labor contract with the mill by a vote of 666 to 476. Members of the union have worked almost four months without a contract. Waynesville plant workers will approve a contract in May.

Feb. 20 – Champion hosts a "Save a Town" parade in Canton.

EPA, Champion reach a deal

March 11 – Champion and the EPA reach a tentative compromise on a wastewater discharge permit in which the Pigeon River color level would meet an 85-unit level at the state line most of the time. The agreement is met with a sigh of relief from the Canton community but still faces review by the state of Tennessee. North Carolina will approve the variance in July.

Dioxin discovered

April 12 – The EPA announces it has found traces of dioxin in fish from the Pigeon River. However, the tests are not conclusive on the level of contamination, meaning the agency will not issue a warning against eating the fish. The level in such fish, at 93 parts per trillion, is compared by mill manager Oliver Blackwell to "93 seconds in 32 thousand years."

Later testing will show a brown trout from Waterville Lake has dioxin at a level of 80 parts per trillion in its filet. The USDA warns against eating such fish when levels are more than 25 parts per trillion. Blackwell will then argue that Champion needs a workable permit so that it can proceed with its modernization, which would eliminate most dioxin contamination.

June 24 – North Carolina health officials issue a warning against consuming fish caught from the Pigeon River below Champion because of dioxin contamination. In July, the mill will release a Champion-funded study that states the dioxin traces do not come from the mill.

Environmental protestors with the Dead Pigeon River Council strut around with a fake, dead fish as a prop.

Mill employee Kermit Turner

June – Facing a second year of drought, Champion again pulls water from Lake Logan to continue production.

July 13 – North Carolina grants Champion a wastewater discharge permit with a variance that allows it to exceed the 50-color-unit standard. The EPA will sign off on the discharge permit — if Tennessee agrees.

Aug. 15 – Haywood County Health Department places signs along the Pigeon River warning the public not to eat fish caught below Champion's Canton mill, due to levels of dioxin. The international environmental group Greenpeace had placed signs along the river earlier, but residents and mill employees removed them.

Aug. 18 – At a hearing in Newport on the proposed wastewater treatment permit, Tennessee residents urge their state authorities to refuse the agreement. Some cheer when Blackwell says the mill will have to close because it cannot meet Tennessee's 50-color unit standard all of the time.

Aug. 31 – Champion now says its proposed modernization would cost $300 million, thanks to delays, increasing costs and EPA's requirement that the mill use less water.

Tennessee nixes EPA deal

Dec. 23 – Days after the Dead Pigeon River Council (formerly Pigeon River Action Group) expresses its opposition, Tennessee's governor and environmental leaders reject the proposed wastewater permit for Champion.

1989

'No way to meet standards'

Jan. 4 – If Champion cannot get a variance on the federal and EPA standards for its wastewater discharges, it will have no choice but to close the mill, Blackwell says. "There is no technology available to us today to economically achieve and keep this mill competitive and meet those strict standards," he says.

Jan. 25 – Haywood County is left reeling after Champion International's president and CEO L.C. Heist announces the company will give up fighting for a variance on its wastewater discharge permit. That means the company will trim its workforce by at least 50%, mill officials say. The announcement follows the delcaration by Tenn. Governor Ned McWhirter that his state will not agree to the variance negotiated between the EPA and Champion.

"The possibility the entire operation will have to close is very real," Heist says.

"We're watching our lives shatter," is the headline on the next edition of The Mountaineer, a quote from students at Pisgah High School.

Mill will stay open, after all

Feb. 8 – Champion announces it will keep the mill open but will need to trim 1,000 jobs over three years to meet the federal 50-color-unit standard. Oliver Blackwell states about 600 workers will likely be eligible for retirement over the next three years.

Two weeks before, Blackwell had stated, "there is some chance that part of the mill can be saved, but it will be a very small part."

Hurting the wrong team

March – A report by the Environmental Defense Fund states Haywood County is the third-largest air polluter in the state, due to emissions from Champion's Canton mill and Waynesville's Dayco Products plant.

March - Kentucky's Economic Development commission writes a letter to Champion, inviting the company to expand into or relocate to that state.

April 26 – Champion announces it may be able to keep two-thirds of its production capacity with its modernization, but still expects to cut half of its workforce in the next three years.

May 2 – Champion dodges a bullet when the N.C. Senate refuses to pass a provision that would have banned the sale of plastic-coated paperboard in North Carolina. The bill aimed to reduce nonbiodegradable packaging, and Champion makes plastic-coated paper at its Canton and Waynesville facilities, as one of the nation's leading milk and juice paper carton manufacturers. In later years, Champion will claim its milk cartons are biodegradable.

Chloroform now an issue

June – The Canton mill releases chloroform, which may pose cancer risks, according to figures from the EPA. However, Champion officials say the modernization plan will slice chloroform

levels by at least 80%.

Jun 21 – Champion officials strongly criticize EPA plans to hold two additional public hearings in August on the company's discharge permit. Champion, which is no longer trying to obtain a variance, says the hearings will only delay cleanup. The Dead Pigeon River Council is requesting the mill do additional monitoring for dioxin.

Teacher vs Haywood schools

July 20 – Former Meadowbrook teacher Rebecca White Allen is threatening to sue the Haywood County school system, alleging she was forced to resign over posters she put up about the mill's pollution of the Pigeon River. School Superintendent Charles McConnell removed the posters, claiming he did so "for the safety of the students and teacher." On July 22, Allen receives the 1989 Dr. Marketta Laurila Free Speech Award in Asheville.

Top chloroform discharger

Aug. 11 – Reports show Champion has released more cancer-causing chloroform into the atmosphere than any other company in North Carolina. Blackwells says modernization would eliminate those discharges.

Aug. 24 – The EPA holds another seven-hour hearing at the Asheville Civic Center regarding the proposed wastewater discharge permit. About 80 people speak. Some 400 people attend, compared to the 7,500 18 months before. U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms asks the EPA to end the controversy over the permit, saying he wants North Carolina and Tennessee to "put aside the rancor."

No. 13 goes down for good

Sept. 1 – Champion's No. 13 paper making machine is shut down. The machine is one of six paper-making machines at the Canton mill. It is too old to modernize, and its shutdown will eliminate about 60 jobs, mill officials say. However, those job losses have been absorbed through retirement and transfers.

Sept. 11 – After an environmental group claims dioxin is found in Champion's bleached milk and juice cartons, the company makes production adjustments to cut that level by 90%. The Food and Drug Administration had said the dioxin levels found in the cartons were too low to pose a cancer risk.

Sept. 15 – Champion joins 13 other paper manufacturers suing the EPA to block federal regulations regarding dioxin. The paper industry claims EPA doesn't have the authority to issue dioxin requirements unless paper companies are violating the Clean Water Act.

Champion finally gets permit

Sept. 25 – After four contentious, emotional and bitter years, Champion receives its wastewater discharge permit from the EPA, with three years to meet the standards. Mill officials promise a "transformed" Pigeon River. They continue to state about 1,000 jobs will be lost as a result of the permit standards. This is the first permit to set a dioxin standard for a U.S. paper mill and is expected to serve as a model for other permits.

Blackwell retires

Oct. 2 – After 33 years of service with Champion, Oliver Blackwell, vice president and operations manager at Canton, retires. He is replaced by James Ross Kilpatrick.

Oct. 10 – An unknown amount of calcium oxide lime, or "quick lime," is released into the atmosphere by Champion and damages a number of vehicles before the mill discovers a failed safety mechanism that caused the release. Residents around the mill complain about the white substance that is sticking to their vehicles.

Oct. 20 – The Dead Pigeon River Council, unwilling to concede defeat, files a legal motion with the EPA asking it to review and change terms of the newly issued permit.

1990

Jan. 24 – Forty-one employees of the Canton mill have transferred to the Courtland, Ala. paper mill in expectation of layoffs in Canton. The families report they have received a warm welcome.

Jan. 24 – Champion reports on a plan to control dioxin levels in the Pigeon River as part of its wastewater permit. Environmental supervisor Paul Wiegand says "We are way ahead of dioxin control programs that EPA would like us to do. We're real proud of that. We understand the public is concerned about dioxin. We understand it is an important issue."

Environmental protestors disregard a no trespassing sign. protestors disregard a no trespassing sign.

Millworker David Goodson

February – The Canton Area Historical Museum is organized to preserve and display artifacts depicting the history of the community. It will be housed in the old library on Park Street.

'Job loss less than expected'

March 28: "Champion to modernize; job loss less than expected," The Mountaineer declares. Mill officials now say the mill will continue with a planned $250 million modernization "and keep about 80% of its workforce in Haywood." The job losses required to meet the standards of the wastewater permit will total about 300, far less than the 1,000 jobs predicted the year before. In fact, by May the mill will have hired an additional 30 people to replace workers leaving for retirement, illness and vacations.

April 16 – To mark Earth Week, Champion donates 4,000 white pine seedlings to Haywood elementary students for planting. It also contributes 2,000 sourwood, dogwood and sugar maples to high schools, churches and other organizations and gives 42 trees to the Canton Beautification Commission.

Teacher, school system settle suit

May 25 – Rebecca White Allen reaches a settlement with the Haywood County school system in her lawsuit claiming her free speech rights were violated when Superintendent Charles McConnell removed her posters on the Pigeon River/mill controversy.

Aug. 30 – Champion holds a ceremonial ground-breaking for its $250 million modernization program. The project is expected to cut the mill's water usage by 35%.

Aug. 31 – Canton mill workers accept a five-year labor contract by a vote of 588 to 383, despite rejecting the same proposal earlier in the month. Union workers at the Waynesville plant reject the offer, but approve an almost identical one in September.

'Most dedicated champion' dies

Nov 12 – Oliver Blackwell, who led the Canton mill through the Pigeon River wastewater controversies of the past five years until his sudden retirement in October 1989, dies at age 62 of cancer. Champion employee/county commissioner Jack Chapman says, "I think had it not been for Oliver … the company might have pulled the plug on this plant."

Blackwell's widow reveals that privately, her husband had campaigned at the company's Stamford, Conn. headquarters for the modernization project and for cleaning up the river. "He would have preferred that Stamford went ahead with this modernization three years ago. And he told them, too," she says. "But when he spoke publicly, he knew he had to speak for the company. … He had all the respect in the world for the people in Tennessee. They just disagreed. …. He was the most dedicated champion that Champion ever had."

1991

Lawsuits begin

Jan. 4 – Residents in east Tennessee file a $5 billion lawsuit against Champion. J.A. and Joan Shultz, who claim to represent up to 2,600 residents of Cocke, Sevier and Jefferson counties, contend discharges into the river have damaged their properties and health. By late March, about 200 families have withdrawn from the lawsuit.

January – Champion, like most paper companies in North Carolina, is asking the state to change its limit on dioxin discharges, saying the requirement is too strict. The mill contends research shows dioxin is not as potent as researchers believed when the standard was set.

Judge with a baseball bat

April 16-17 – EPA Administrative Law Judge Thomas Yost presides over a two-day hearing on Champion's wastewater discharge permit. At one point Yost brandishes an aluminum bat, reminding both parties that he is "sitting in the high chair."

May 10 – Environmentalist Dick Mullinix is seriously injured when his Volkswagon Beetle plunges off Panther Creek Road near his home. Mullinix will undergo hours of surgery to repair injuries to face and upper body, but will survive.

July 30 – Champion gives Haywood Community College $50,000 for its new student center auditorium.

First EPA fine

August – The EPA fines Champion $60,000 for five incidents in August 1990. The incidents include two accidental releases of foam into the Pigeon River and a release of untreated wastewater that killed about 270 fish.

Oct. 19 – A boiler malfunctions at the Canton mill, shooting coal-based black soot that rains oily drops over a six-block radius in north Canton. A report is filed with the Western Regional Air Pollution Control Agency, whose spokesman says the soot poses no environmental or health risks.

YMCA closes for good

Nov. 15 – The YMCA, long supported by Champion, closes amid financial problems and controversy over its administration.

Co-workers help tree grower

November – When Champion worker

Charlie Lacovella gives a scientific demonstration in 1990.

and Christmas tree grower Bruce Hannah injures his foot in a chainsaw accident, eight of his fellow mill workers show up at his home to cut and bale 200 trees to fill an order.

1992

'Red water' charge

March 11 – The Dead Pigeon River Council accuses Champion of using "red water," a waste product of explosives manufacturing, for a year after it was banned in 1986. The group claims the sludge at the base of Waterville Lake, near the state line, contains not only dioxin but red-water chemicals. Mill officials state they had a permit to use red water, that the material was not released into the Pigeon but recovered on-site.

Mid-May – Champion buys the YMCA building for $390,000.

September – Tennessee residents' lawsuit against Champion goes to trial but ends unresolved when a jury fails to reach a verdict. In March, a U.S. District judge had dismissed claims of personal injury and emotional distress but allowed the suit to proceed on charges nuisance and trespass. In December, Champion will reach a settlement with Tennessee property owners, agreeing to set up a $6.5 million trust fund for community projects in Cocke, Sevier and Jefferson counties. This settlement is later changed by a judge, so that the money will be distributed to the plaintiffs, after deducting lawyer's fees. The payouts take years to distribute.

Dec. 30 – Champion warns it will begin cutting its workforce by 300 to 400 positions the following year as the result of modernization and environmental improvements.

1993

March 5 – Champion has dropped its water use to 35 million gallons per day down from 45 million at the start of modernization. In the next year, that should drop to 29 million.

March 13 – The mill suffers a setback when its new $119 million fiberline ruptures, with both a horizontal and vertical split. Because the line processes pine pulp, the mill has to purchase that processed pulp from elsewhere until the problem is analyzed and corrected. The line is back in operation on April 10.

Bucket-brigade protest

March 27 - About 300 environmentalists come from Western North Carolina and Tennessee to protest Champion's wastewater discharge permit, which is being considered for re-issue. Most of the protestors are college-age and arrive via Cocke County, Tenn. The protestors say Champion should be required to meet the 50-color-unit standard as the wastewater leaves the mill. Protestors form a bucket brigade, dipping water from the river below the mill and dumping it across Champion's fence line, shouting "Take it back."

Few Champion employees witness the protest. David Craft says workers had "better things to do — like running the mill." The Canton Papertown Association offers complimentary Girl Scout cookies and drinks, which protestors refuse.

Color variance granted

May 12 – N.C.'s Environmental Management Commission grants Champion a color variance for the next three years, meaning the mill will have to meet the 50-color-unit standard for the Pigeon River at the state line.

June 30 – The first of the expected 300 to 350 job losses begin at Champion when 15 hourly employees receive severance pay. Eight outside contractors are also discharged. The union has helped negotiate the terms of the job losses. David Craft says some of the reductions are

Champion officials tour progress on the $250 million modernization project in 1991.

Blue Ridge Paper Products is born in 1999 after the employee buyout of Champion.

"driven by the need to operate the mill as efficiently as possible" rather than by modernization.

July 26 – Champion installs a new fiberline, which should make a marked difference in the color of the Pigeon River. The new process will eliminate the use of chlorine in the bleaching process and reduce the trace amounts of dioxins going into the river.

Nov. 23 – Canton's Town Board names a stretch of road between N.C. 213 and U.S. 19-23 "Blackwell Drive," in honor of the late Oliver Blackwell.

1994

Building nests for purple martins

March – Champion employees prepare for the return of their purple martin colony. Each winter, employees remove the nesting gourds for cleaning and repainting. About 45 pairs used the site in 1993. The mill is hoping to fill 56 nests this year.

April 22 – As a cost-cutting move in a tough and recessed paper market, Champion announces it will not open Lake Logan for the summer. Normally the lake is used to entertain company customers and for meetings. It is the third time the lake property has been closed for monetary reasons, the most recent in 1982.

Whitewater and Olympic sponsor

June 11 – Champion sponsors the "Whitewater Shootout," competition on the Pigeon River, and promotes the Olympic U.S. Canoe and Kayak team that it sponsors. It will sponsor the event again in 1995.

Celebration…

June 14 – Champion holds a dedication ceremony for the modernization project. Total modernization cost: $330 million. "Four years ago Champion made a commitment to the people of this region," says Champion CEO L. Heist. "We have kept our promises. Today the Canton mill is among the most technologically advanced bleached kraft pulp mills in the world."

… and layoffs

June 17 – Champion announces it will eliminate some 310 positions at the Canton mill after two years of financial loss. Instead of reducing the workforce to 1,438 by 1996, the accelerating cuts will reduce the workforce to about 1,240 by the end of 1995. In October, the United Paperworkers' Local 507 will file a complaint charging that the mill unfairly changed the terms and conditions of employment under its labor agreement.

1995

August – Champion is named "Company of the Year" by American Papermaker magazine, following a recovering market in the paper industry. The magazine praises Champion for environmental stewardship, investment in technology and employee development.

September – University of Tennessee Press releases "Troubled Waters – Champion International and the Pigeon River Controversy" by Richard Bartlett, a 300-page volume telling the story of the Pigeon River, its communities, and the relationship with Champion.

Sept. 22 – A formula is developed to determine how some $4 million in class-action payments will be divided among the 3,000 Tennesseans who filed suit against Champion International alleging damages from pollution in and along the Pigeon River.

1996

Fog tied to Champion?

Jan 15 – Heavy fog causes a 46-vehicle accident on Interstate 40, killing one man and sending 16 others to Haywood County Hospital. This stretch of I-40 is considered one of the most fog-prone highways in the state, and many question whether Champion's discharges contribute to the fog problem. Champion denies it.

Jan. 25-26 – A vintage car show, visits by NASCAR driver Robert Pressley, and significant bonus checks are part of a two-day celebration at the Canton mill honoring the fact the site exceeded its production goals for 1995. Reports say the company's net earnings for 1995 are its highest ever.

You can eat some fish

March – Lower dioxin levels prompt Tennessee officials to ease their eight-year ban on consuming fish from the Pigeon River in Cocke County. The revised advisory states children, nursing mothers and pregnant women should avoid eating carp, catfish and redbreast sunfish from the river, while others should limit their consumption of those fish to one meal per month.

April – Champion announces plans to use a new Bleach Filtrate Recycling technology to eliminate wastes previously treated and discharged into the Pigeon River. Critics say they fear the process will trade water pollution for air pollution.

'Better – but not right'

June 6 – About 130 people show up at Tuscola High School to speak during a hearing on renewal of Champion's wastewater discharge permit – a far cry from the thousands who attended less than a decade before. The majority of speakers, many from Tennessee, urge

the state to tighten discharge restrictions. Critics say while Champion has vastly improved its system, too much color is still being discharged into the river, and the water temperature is too warm for native fish to thrive.

Mill named state's 3rd-ranking polluter

June – EPA's Toxic Release Inventory says Champion's Canton mill released the third highest levels of toxic materials into the air, water and land of any company in the state in 1994. The majority of the toxins were released into the air, according to the report.

Tennessee wants improvements

Dec. 3 – Tennessee officials will oppose issuing a wastewater permit for Champion, wanting tougher standards. School children attend the news conference, some carrying signs that state: "We'd like to swim. We'd like to eat. Come on government, move your feet."

Dec. 11 – N.C. approves a five-year permit for Champion's Canton mill with some revisions that are tougher than the existing permit, including a reduction of solids in the wastewater by more than 70%.

1997

February – Two hundred landowners along the Pigeon River file a class action lawsuit against Champion in Tenn. Circuit Court.

Feb. 18 – Champion holds a private meeting with community leaders, barring the press and saying it wants to clear up rumors and discuss the mill's need to cut costs.

Boycotts threatened

April – Tennessee legislators are considering a boycott of Champion products to protest proposed variances on its discharge permit for the Pigeon. N.C. legislators are threatening an ABC-store boycott of Tennessee whiskeys.

May 23 – For the first time in many years, Champion opens the mill for community tours, inviting 13 community leaders. Tour leaders are Snug Harbor members. In the next two months, more than 150 people, including two school groups from Tennessee, will tour the mill.

Champion mills for sale

Oct. 8 – Champion announces plans to sell its operations in Canton and Waynesville. Champion also plans to sell its newsprint business, a paper recycling business and specialty papers produced in New York. Leaders say the decision has nothing to do with environmental controversies surrounding the Canton mill.

Union votes to try to purchase

Dec. 6 – Officials with Smoky Mountain Local 607, the local chapter of the Paperworkers International Union, announce their members have voted overwhelmingly to attempt to buy the Champion mill. The union votes to retain America Capital Strategies, a Maryland Company specializing in employee buyouts.

States, mill reach permit deal

Dec. 22 – A new agreement is reached on the wastewater discharge permit for the Canton mill, ending appeals from Tennessee groups. While Tennessee wanted the mill to meet the 50-color-unit standard just below the mill instead of at the state line, a compromise was reached for the standard to be met at a testing station along the river near Fines Creek. The N.C. Department of Environment Health and Natural Resources calls it the toughest permit of its kind in the country.

1998

Funding the purchase

Week of March 9 – Haywood and Buncombe commissioners agree to provide $150,000 to help employees proceed with a buyout of the Canton and Waynesville mill, with Haywood providing two-thirds of the amount. Many support the move while others question whether it is right to use public money to fund a private-enterprise effort.

March 27 – Canton Mayor C.W. Hardin and Clayton Davis with the N.C. Department of Agriculture announce that Sunburst Papers will be the company name for the two Haywood County paper mills and six smaller packaging plants if an employee buyout is successful. The two men chair the "Back the Buyout" support committee.

April 17 – Employees trying to buy the mills ask Champion stockholders to support the effort. Champion had announced the day before that all bids so far had been rejected.

Lake Logan property on the market

Late May – Champion announces intentions to sell its Lake Logan property. Community leaders organize the Save Lake Logan Committee, saying the county needs to protect its water resources. In September, the committee asks Champion to delay the sale.

1999

The deal is made

March 29 – Leaders of the employee buyout and Champion International reach a formal agreement to buy the Canton system for $200 million, including $170 million in cash and a $30 million note. Under the arrangement, the employee-owned mill will also own Lake Logan and five feet of shoreline around it, to ensure an adequate water supply, though Champion still intends to sell the surrounding lands.

Blue Ridge Paper is born

April 29 – Union members of seven plants owned by Champion approve an employee buyout and a seven-year labor contract, with just over 60% voting for the deal. Under the employee ownership plan, employees will give up 15% of their wages and benefits for the next seven years. As profits are realized, that investment is to be returned to employees as stock. The new company will be known as Blue Ridge Paper Products. The only sour note is that salaried employees complain they cannot vote on the agreement, as the vote is restricted to union members.

Bell returns to Snug Harbor

June 18 – Champion's Old Timers Bell is presented to Snug Harbor, the gathering place for mill retirees. The bell was used to call employees to work during the early days of construction of the Canton mill in 1906. The bell, used before the

steam whistle was in place, was given to the Old Timers Club in 1955 by Reuben Robertson, but had been returned to the mill's main office years later.

Sept. 13 – Blue Ridge Papers revives the practice of hosting tours through the Canton mill. Attendees must be at least 12 years of age.

Oct. 1 – The U.S. Senate approves $2 million to help the U.S. Forest Service acquire land around Lake Logan, though the bill must pass the House. In addition, the effort has a commitment of $1 million from the N.C. Heritage Fund and $3 million from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund.

Despite sacrifices, mill workers give generously

December – Though employees have taken a significant pay cut to purchase the Canton and Waynesville mills, they contribute more than ever to their Christmas basket program. The program is headed by Bruce Chambers, who was 6 years old when his father died and his family received a Christmas basket from the mill. Chambers has worked with the Santa Pal and Christmas basket program for the 20 years he has been at the mill. The effort follows work since October to help N.C. victims of Hurricane Floyd.

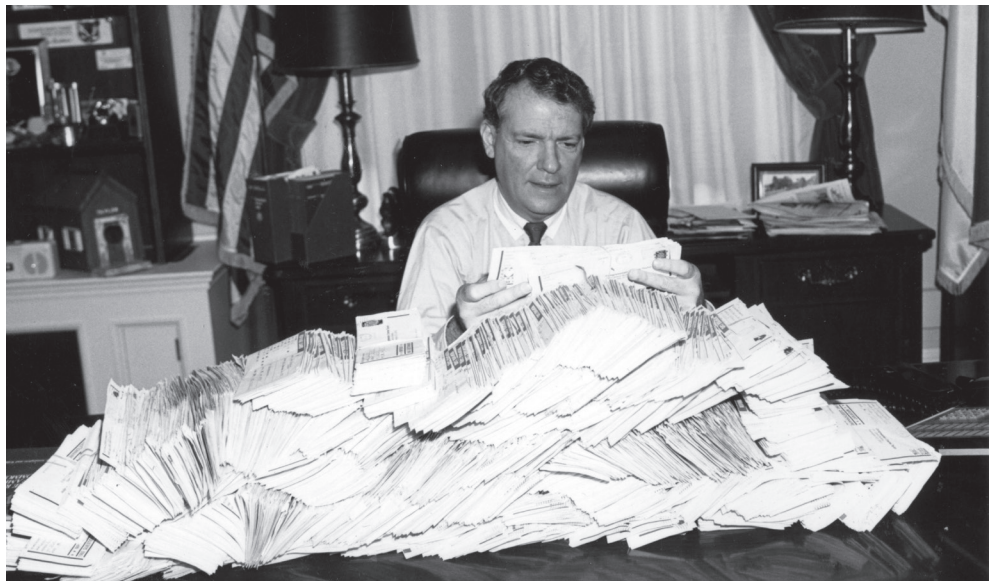
2000

Lake Logan is saved

Jan. 11 – The Conservation Fund will buy 4,427 acres around Lake Logan for $10 million, ending a 20-month effort to save the land from development. The effort, led by Bob Brannon, chairman of the Save Lake Logan committee, is a complex one where most of the land will go to the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission and the U.S. Forest Service, along with 300 acres to the Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina for a retreat center and a small tract adjacent to Camp Daniel Boone to the the Boy Scouts.

Tax scare raised and avoided

April – Canton and Haywood County governments warn they might have to increase property tax rates after Blue Ridge Paper claims the tax value of its property is half of what it had been under Champion, which would mean $1 million less in local taxes from the mill. Blue Ridge officials say the reduction is due in part to equipment not included in the buyout from Champion, while other equipment is obsolete. In May, an agreement is reached that involves no drastic cut in tax valuations.



Congressman Charles Taylor is swamped with letters from Haywood County constituents in the "Save Lake Logan" campaign.

May 31 – The employee owners of Blue Ridge Paper Products celebrate the one-year anniversary of their buy-out, with their financial partner, KPS Special Situations Fund, footing the bill for a celebration picnic at the Haywood County Fairgrounds. Employees have already received profit-sharing checks.

Haywood native comes CEO

Dec. 1 – Blue Ridge Paper goes through a management shakeup following the resignation of its first chief executive officer, Gordon Jones, who cites "philosophical differences over the company's direction." George Henson, who has been in charge of the Canton mill, becomes president and CEO. Henson is a third-generation employee of the mill and native of Haywood County.

2001

Dick Mullinix dies

Jan. 27 – Environmental advocate Dick Mullinix dies at the age of 92. Despite his predictions that he would never live to see the Pigeon River cleaned up, Mullinix does live to see significant improvements to the waterway.

EPA honors Blue Ridge

March – The EPA awards Blue Ridge Paper status in its National Environmental Performance Task Program for going above and beyond environmental requirements. In July, the mill announces a collaboration with the Clean Water Fund of N.C., the Dead Pigeon River Council and other environmental groups on a study to improve water quality. "Blue Ridge seems much more committed to cleaning up the river than its predecessor was," says Bob Seay, a member of the DPRC.

August – Blue Ridge employees and Local 507 raise $5,000 to send 4-year-old cancer patient Ashley Spann to Disney world through Make a Wish Foundation.

Permit battle resurfaces

September – The friendly words of March dissolve as the Dead Pigeon River Council and other Tennessee environmental groups again prepare to challenge Blue Ridge Paper on its wastewater discharge permit, claiming the tiny reduction in pollution in the new permit "isn't even worth talking about." Blue Ridge Paper's environmental director says the permit demands are "substantial."

Sept. 6 – A public hearing on renewing Blue Ridge Paper's wastewater discharge permit draws about 100 people, with the majority of the 40 speakers praising the environmental efforts of the mill, while 600 students from Cocke County, Tenn., sign petitions asking for a stricter permit.

Oct. 9 – The town of Canton agrees to lease Champion's former landfill site, an 18-acre tract in Beaverdam, for a recreation field complex.

Oct. 12 – N.C. Environmental Management Commission announces Blue Ridge Paper must reduce the amount of color discharged into the Pigeon River by 18 to 33% over the next five years, slightly tightening the restrictions on its wastewater permit. The needle is moved once again on water testing, which now must be done less than a half-mile from the mill rather than the Fines Creek testing station 20 miles downstream.

2002

Job training prevents disaster

April 8 – Blue Ridge employee Ron Boydston is credited with preventing an environmental disaster when he sees fuel leaking from a gas pump at Ray's Grocery. He shuts the valves on the tanks and uses a shovel to dam up the flow of fuel heading toward the Pigeon River. He credits his training at Blue Ridge for the response.

April 28 – A Habitat for Humanity house is dedicated for Scott and Christine Rector, built by Blue Ridge Paper employees, family members, union members and retirees. The mill donated the lot for the house.

September – Blue Ridge Paper begins a $14 million project to upgrade four of the Canton mill's five coal-burning boilers and reduce air pollution emissions by half over a three-year period.

Henson retires

October – Mill CEO George Henson announces plans to retire Dec. 31. He will be succeeded by chief financial officer Rich Lozyniak.

October – Though the permit is less than a year old, 12 environmental groups are asking the EPA to re-examine Blue Ridge's wastewater discharge terms, saying they are too lenient.

2003

Jan. 6 – Tenn. environmental officials remove the last signs warning children and pregnant or nursing women not to eat catfish, carp or redbreast sunfish out of the Pigeon River due to concerns about dioxin levels from the Canton mill.

Feb. 7 – Blue Ridge announces it will close its liquid package production facility in Morristown, N.J., at a cost of 115 jobs, citing declining demand.

Another lawsuit

April 15 – About 300 landowners along the Pigeon River in Tennessee file a class action lawsuit against Blue Ridge Paper, claiming discharges since June of 1999 have diminished the quality of the waters and environment.

December – Blue Ridge Paper completes a refinancing packaging that should help it operate in a market "characterized by the lowest paper prices in over a decade," according to its financial officer.

2004

Jan. 7 –Twenty-eight people speak in a hearing on a federal air quality permit for Blue Ridge Paper.

Layoffs loom

Feb. 4 – Blue Ridge announces it will cut its workforce by 100 jobs, 85 of those at the Canton mill. A tough market and rising health care costs are forcing the move. The Canton mill currently employs about 1,100.

May – The mill adds a clinic and pharmacy to its operations in hopes of cutting rising health insurance costs.

July 27 – The mill has its first fatality in more than 12 years, when 65-year-old Thomas James Davis falls from a platform while working on a paper winder on the No. 19 paperboard machine.

Devastating floods

Sept. 7-8 and 16 – Two floods, both of them setting records, sweep through Haywood County and the Canton mill, forcing shutdowns at the mill. The floods shut down the mill's wastewater treatment system, meaning raw wastewater from the mill and the town of Canton is discharged into the Pigeon River. The mill ceases operations, which will not resume until the treatment system is back online Sept. 24. The mill will not be fully operational until Oct. 4.

The operational shutdown result in $9 million in losses, with an estimated $32 million total in damages. The company's insurance covers $20 million, leaving about $12 million for the company to carry, though the federal government provides $1.5 million and the state provides $4.5 million to help repair the wastewater treatment plant. About 1,000 motors on company machines were ruined in the floods.

Dec. 8 – Blue Ridge Paper receives the Seven Seals Award for its support of soldiers, particularly members of the local National Guard who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. While not required, Blue Ridge pays the difference in salary that employees get while in service compared to what their wages would have been at work, something Champion had also done before the buyout.

2005

Air quality improvement project

May – Blue Ridge Paper announces an $8.2 million project to improve air emissions 15% more than what the EPA requires.

Promoting milk – in cartons

May 23 – Blue Ridge Paper gets into dairy marketing — promoting its milk cartons in the face of growing competition from the plastic bottling industry. Not only are the cartons now biodegradable, they are cheaper to produce, mill officials say. The campaign also aims to promote child nutrition by emphasizing milk over soft drinks and sodas.

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