

## [Alma Covell]

October 10, 1939

Alma Covell (White Textile worker)

Tryon, N. C.

Adyleen G. Merrick, Writer

Dudley W. Crawford, Reviser Original Names: Changed Names:

Alma Covell Zelma Cook

Southern Mercerizing Co. Northern Mercerizing Co.

Tryon Tyden

Demus Foster Dan Sparks

Lynn Lanier

Ophelia Cordelia C[?] — N.C. [Box??]

Zelma Cook carried her athletic figure gracefully as she greeted me when I entered the porch of her sister-in-law's home, one of the many neat cottages grouped around the Northern Mercerizing Plant near Tyden. Red hair curled about her heavy featured face; bright red glistened on her nails as she extended both hands toward me in smiling welcome. She is one of a family of seven red-headed children and has spent all of her life in the mill village.

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“Come up, I guess we'll have to sit on the porch. Sister's gone to town, or I'd ask you to come in. This house belongs to Dan Sparks, my brother-in-law. He planned and built most of it himself, its awful nice, I'd like to show it to you if sister were here. I've lived with my sister Eva and Dan ever since Pa married the second time. I help her with the work, we planted all of those flowers you see in the yard. We take pride in this place. Dan says he always means to keep it looking nicer than any other mill house here.

“Pa's house is over yonder on the hill. It's a big old rambling thing, added on to as our family grew, until now, there are ten rooms. But I'm better off staying with sister. I'd rather not live at home any more since Pa married again. I guess you understand.

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“Tell you something about my life? Well, for goodness sake you'd think I was somebody important. Me tell about Zelma Cook, Lord, nothing ever happened to me to make a fuss over, one day to us mill workers is pretty much like all the others.”

From Dan Sparks' well built house on the side of the hill above the road which leads through the village and on to the hunting country, one saw first the Northern Mercerizing Company, and [aroudn?] around it on all sides, neat mill houses. Some of the houses belong to the company others are owned by the workers. All of them are well kept and invariably there are flowers and a garden. Children romped in the playground, or gathered along the roadway shouting to one another. “Well”, continued Zelma, “living here isn't bad, although I ain't planning to stay here always. Some girls would, but I'm figuring different myself.

“When we first came here I was just a baby, so I guess I've grown up, you might say, with the mill. Pa's been fussing around mills about all his life. Started when he was thirteen firing boilers in the hosiery mill at Lanier. The folks here think a heap of Pa, he's been with them twenty years. I guess he's worked at about every kind of job in that time, but he's

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superintendent 3 of the mill now. Its a right good job, too. I'm awful glad for Pa that he's doing well.

“When me first came here there were only three houses and a little furniture factory which was converted into the first mill building. Well, you can see how things have changed. We don't have a school here, the children all go to Tyden high school just over the hill. I finished there. I always hated to study, guess I was about the stupidest pupil in school, but could I play basket ball! Say, if it hadn't been for my temper that always goes with red hair, I'd have been a 'darb', but that temper got me put out of a heap of games and left out of others. I like anything under the sun in the way of athletics. I've won some prizes too. It took me fourteen years to make eleven grades, but I'm through just the same. No more school.

“We Cooks were a happy family, long as Ma lived. Ma was the best woman ever breathed. She died four years ago. Life has been hard since then.

“With most mill folks it's just fight, fuss and cuss, but we were different. Ma always tried to hold her head up and she raised us right. Pa was always particular too, he said just because you lived in a mill village wasn't any reason for you to be rough. He wanted his children 4 to have the highest manners and never allowed us to short talk any body. Pa just didn't say we had to go to Sunday School and see that we did, but he dressed and went with us. Ma did too, when she could. We went to the Community church the Company built. Our Sunday School was in the afternoon. The wife of the boss and some nice ladies came over from Tyden to teach the classes. I like every one of them. Christmas we always had a big tree. The Company did that for us. My, but it was always a grand affair. We didn't just gather and sing songs and then maybe get a bag of candy and an orange. We had toys and everything else. There were plays and songs as well, and after that, when we'd all been given our presents, we had hot chocolate and fancy cakes before we went home.

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"I'll never forget how scared I was when Pa took me to the first Christmas tree there in our little church. That tree just jumped at me as I went in, it was so bright and wonderful; the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life. When my name was called to come up for my gift it about scared me to death. 'Stead of going on up like the others had, I just clung to Pa's legs and wouldn't budge. Pa had to go up with me, holding on to my hand, and was he out done. I ain't shy like that no more, folks are always saying, 'that Zelma, ain't she the boldest thing'—I 5 don't care though. I like to whoop and make a racket when ever I feel like it, a good hearty laugh ought to be a welcome sound 'stead of aggrevating a body. I got a doll that time me and Pa went up for it. I guess I'll never forget that. I kept it for years. The year after Ma died, things didn't go so good for us Cooks so I fixed up my doll and pretended it was a new one Santa Claus brought for my little sister.

"That was shore one lean Christmas. I cried most all the time, it seemed so awful. Pa had got to drinking after Ma died and he wasn't much help to me. Somehow I just couldn't seem to manage the house and Christmas and Pa too, all at the same time.

"Folks at the mill thought Ma held her head too high for mill folks, because she always kept us clean and never let us get into no fights. We had to go to school regular and we always went dressed good. Ours was the best house in the village; we had the very first bath room ever put in, and our house was furnished with the best, no cheap stuff like some folks buy. Pa always had a big garden, a cow and chickens. (The law don't 'low no hogs). There were garden flowers too, that is, as long as Ma lived. The yard don't look so good now. We usually had a plenty and some to give away, but there weren't many extras; just a good living. It's that way with most mill people, they 6 work and earn and then spend most all they make right here at the mill for food and clothes that they buy from the Company store.

"I make most of my own clothes, it saves a lot. I'm awful glad I learned how because I can copy things I couldn't afford to buy. I can cook and milk a cow. I learned all this when Ma got so poorly; she was sick a year and a half before she died. I helped all I could between

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that and going to school and never had much time to play, but I sure don't miss no bets now. I go every chance I get. I guess people talk, I know they do, but I'm certainly going to have my fling before I'm too old to care whether I go or stay at home. I never left Ma long as I could help her, and after she died I took her place and did the best I could till Pa got married again. I guess I've done my part.

“One night Pa come and said, 'I'm going off for a few days Zelma.' He gave me some money. I knew he had been going to see a girl about my age, but I didn't know he was courting and I hadn't supposed held marry her. I never asked him where he was going, seems as he didn't offer to tell me nothing. Pa got up about five thirty next morning and dressed in his best. When he left the house me and my baby sister watched to see which way he would go. Sure enough he stopped the car at Cordelia's 7 house and she come out all dressed up, and they drove off together. It made me feel all queer-like inside, but I never said anything to my baby sister.

“After breakfast I went down to the mill office and asked the big boss if he knew where Pa was going. He said, 'No, I don't, Zelma, your father asked off for a week. I guess though it was to get married.' I almost fainted, but I tried not to act like I cared one way or the other. Say, I went on home and I gave that old house the doggonedest cleaning up you ever heard of in your life! Then I washed and ironed all the clothes, mended and did every thing I saw to do. I was awful mad.

“When P Pa and Cordelia come home I was so out done I wouldn't speak to them. I had supper ready and just as soon as we ate, I washed up the dishes and left. I went down to Georgia and stayed three months. I didn't care if Pa married again, it was just the way he did it, not letting me know nor nothing. I didn't really have a thing against Cordelia either, but I thought they both acted awful onery and I just let them know it. I'm not red headed for nothing.

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“Pa kept worrying me to come home. He said he and Cordelia were sorry they had done me bad. Well, I went back for a while and we got along all right. I guess I 8 fooled Cordelia though, for excepting the time when her baby come, I never run the house no more. I got a job on WPA and I paid them board. Pa hated to have me, but I know my way around, I mean to be independent. I help out all I can beside paying board I buy things for the family. There is always need for something money can buy for them these days. I like helping them.

“What I've got in my head now is, I want to be a trained nurse. I've got a good job at the mill, but I'm not satisfied to be just a 'mill hick' all my life. I always just love to sit up with the sick and the dead; I'm strong too. I guess if I try I ought to make a good nurse, loving it like I do. I'm twenty three, so its not too late for me to get started. I'd like to do something worth while. I've had lots of fellows, but just now I'm not loving any man and I've got too much spunk to get married like some girls I know. I'd rather stay single. If the right man comes along thats just fine, if he doesn't I guess I'll manage to make out, marriage ain't like it used to be no way. ”