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THE PERSISTENCE OF SMOKE INTERVIEW EXCERPTS

“I guess at that time there were probably 2,000 employees in Durham. The number of people gradually became less, as demand for the product – and this was not just solely at Liggett and Myers, but it was industry-wide – the shift... the cigarette, the demand for cigarettes fell one-half, one percent each year thereafter, for a long number of years.

The great majority of people were very happy with their work and their jobs. There may have been a few malcontents, but not many. And part of that was the benefits and the salaries, the wages that were paid in the tobacco industry. ... They were the best there was in the city of Durham, along with the American Tobacco Company. I dare say they were one and a half times what anybody else was making. ... People would stand in line for hours to get a job there. ... At one time, as a matter of fact the last several that I worked, wages for some of my skilled workers, machinists and pipe-fitters, and machine adjusters and so forth, were 14, 15 dollars an hour. And I’m talking 20 years ago. That’s better than most people earned today.

The tobacco business is a cash cow. Was a cash cow. ... probably one of the most profitable industries that you could possibly get in.”

- Anonymous, former employee, Liggett and Myers Tobacco Company

“To watch North Carolina with such deep roots – I mean, my parents grew tobacco on their farm – with such deep roots in the tobacco world, and so much money and influence and heritage, pride, and amazing things that tobacco money built, from universities and hospitals, ... it’s a testament to – all that money and power, it did a lot of things for the state. And how to reconcile that with clear and very compelling evidence that’s been around for years. I mean it’s a major, major, major cause of death and disability, and cost to the state’s health systems, and the industry’s been very – nobody likes to say this in North Carolina – the industry’s been very cynical and manipulative at times, to push its agenda and its profits...”

- Joseph Lee, Tobacco Prevention and Evaluation Programs, UNC School of Medicine

“And I think, early on when I first started in benefits, this man came in to put in his request and retire. He was a little bitty man, very very quiet. So we got through all of this, and I gave him his first check ... he said, ‘Can I tell you something?’ I said, ‘Yes, what?’ He said, ‘I wanted to tell you, you’re the only person that I’ve ever encountered in this company that’s been nice to me.’ I thought to myself, ‘My God!’ That broke me up, really. Honest. I couldn’t believe it.”

- James Screws, former employee, Liggett and Myers Tobacco Company

“I was born here, ’44. Always lived here in Durham. ... I remember, after I had graduated from High School, and gone to college, and now was married and pregnant, I remember my father having to close his restaurant due to urban renewal. That was ... ’67, I guess. What I remember about it was that he was closing the restaurant down, and he was actually having a heart attack at the same time. ... I wanted to take him home, but he had all these things he had to do, he had to go to the courthouse, go to the bank, and all the business aspect of it.

And what was interesting was that it was a restaurant that primarily dedicated itself to the minority population. So when that went, along with probably a few others, there was no place for this group of people to go and eat. This was before black people as an example could go into regular restaurants, or –”

[Interviewer: So it was still segregated?] Well yeah, to some degree. Maybe it was and maybe it wasn’t. But it was. Maybe legally it wasn’t, but it was. That was a big loss, I would expect, to the black population, because it was a place for them to go and eat.”

- Diana Bello, Durham resident