

## President's Message

### *Tim Taylor*

We hope everyone is doing well and enjoying their summer! We are seeing more activities and people out and about as the COVID cases continue to decline and vaccinations increase. We are hopeful we can start having our programs again soon. We want to thank all of our members for their gracious donations and membership renewals this past Spring. Your generosity is much appreciated and will help us to continue offering services to the greater Strasburg community.

We awarded \$500 scholarships to three graduating students of Strasburg High School. They were Justin Allen Day, Ilianis Bethany Garayra-Gonzalez, and Sierra Nicole Rickard. Thanks to Joan Williams for working with the administration at Strasburg High School on awarding these scholarships.

JoAnn Guay, who has served on our Board and in the role of Treasurer will be moving back to Clarke County. It is where she and Paul raised their children, so we know they are excited to return. We want to thank JoAnn for her service on our Board and wish her and Paul the best. She always wore a smile and was great to work with. Mary Mauck Cottrill has graciously agreed to fill the position of Treasurer.

In this newsletter you will see information on completing a survey for the update of Shenandoah County's Comprehensive Plan. This document provides a vision for our County and is referenced when decisions are made for our County related to land use, development, natural resources, etc. Please take the time to complete this survey because it is important that your voice is heard.

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We are sponsoring tours of the Historic Silk Mill (current Strasburg Emporium) during the Vintage in the Valley event which is Saturday, August 28th from 10 am to 4 pm. Judge Steve Platt will lead two tours during the day at 11 am and 2 pm. Judge Platt's family owned the Mill for many years. We hope you take the time to enjoy this event and others during the Vintage in the Valley event.

Please take the time to visit our website to check out our archived newsletters and to listen to stories and interviews being shared on our podcast channel. Links to these resources can be found in this newsletter.

Everyone have a safe, enjoyable, and relaxing summer.

Sincerely - Tim Taylor - SHA President

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## **Shenandoah County 2045: A Future Together**

### **ATTENTION!**

**Take the Shenandoah 2045: A Future Together Survey Here!**

**Help shape a better tomorrow together!  
<https://shenandoahcountywa.us/future/>**

**THE CITIZEN'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE AND SHEN-  
ANDOAH COUNTY HAVE LAUNCHED SHENANDOAH  
2045: A FUTURE TOGETHER, A COMMUNITY BUILT  
PLAN FOR OUR COUNTY AND ALL THOSE WHO  
HAVE A CONNECTION TO IT.**

**The planning process will unfold over the next four years with majority of the community collaboration occurring from 2020-2022, with input in 2023-2024. As the next Comprehensive Plan is developed, we invite everyone to let us and the community know what you think about the future of Shenandoah County.**

## A Little Folk History The Strasburg Silk Mill

By  
Kathy Kehoe

*Editors Note: The Silk Mill story was originally published in the SHA newsletter Winter 2005. At that time there were still several people alive who worked there who shared their memories.*

Mattie Cameron was a quill winder at the Strasburg Silk Mill from 6:00 a.m. until 2 p.m. After work, she walked home "out towards The Branch" on the West End of town with her niece, Kathleen Robinson. At its peak, the Mill employed 125 people, all doing their part in operating the large looms. After the warmth of the Mill, Mattie enjoyed the cool winter air on her walk. Once home, Mattie went upstairs to rest and lie across her four poster bed for a nap before starting supper. In the kitchen, Mattie put on her apron, pausing at the blue crock to mash the sauerkraut by twisting the wooden kraut stomper, placing her hand on the familiar name stamp on the crock. Needing something fast, Mattie hurried down to the cellar and chose two blue quart jars of homemade vegetable soup the family had put up in late summer. Back upstairs, she took off the zinc lids and poured the soup into a large cast iron kettle, stirring it with a red trimmed white enamel spoon. Reaching for a match from the tin matchbox, she lit the kerosene stove and soon the aroma of the soup filled the air, luring the rest of the family to the table. After supper, her son would fetch a bucket of water from the spigot out back and her daughters would heat the water to add to the enamel dishpans. One pan would have lye soap and the other clear rinse water. Then she would work on the white silk dresses she was making for her daughters for May Day. The town festival was still months away, but now that her brother-in-law had given her the leftover silk from the mill, she started working on them right away.

Now if you walk through the 1.4 acres of what was once the Strasburg Textile Mill, you will find many of those household items Mattie used in her kitchen. Now those items are antiques, on display and for sale and part of The Great Strasburg Emporium boasting "more than 200 dealers." They bill themselves as "the largest selection of antiques in the Shenandoah Valley." You'll see the blue jars, the enamel dishpans and spoons, the cast iron kettles and maybe a Strasburg crock.

Kathleen Robinson Stickley worked at the Silk Mill for eighteen years, starting out at fifty cents an hour in 1947. She worked as a "banker", she recalls, "putting cones on and tying them together, transferring to the other cone and then putting on another." Kathleen kept two machines going in this way and she recalls there were 36 cones on one side and 48 on the other. Kathleen later became a quill winder, winding thread from a spool onto a spindle that fit onto a loom that held 10-12 spokes.

There are few facts written about the Strasburg Textile Mill but a number of people contributed to this story. Commonly referred to as the "Silk Mill", several people told me what they personally remembered about working there or they recalled stories about relatives who were employees. Some of the information consists of town stories, small town gossip about the great Silk Mill Robbery, about how the union was voted out, or sometimes just simply about how loud and hot the Mill was. This article is a small collection of their memories about this significant part of their lives. Except during World War II, when the plant produced parachutes for the military, the workers made silk casket linings. Charlie Platt and his son Nathan owned the Mill. Georgianna Hines remembers that Charlie bought the Mill from Fred Bertschinger, Roy Bertschinger's father. I talked with Roy's daughter, Linda Bertschinger who remembers that her grandfather Fred was from Switzerland. The family folklore is that Fred was the only son out of 8 or 9 daughters, of a Swiss textile mill owner.

Fred's father's dream was for his only son to take over the business, but Fred's dream was to be an American cowboy and he left home to travel the Wild West. When Fred returned home to Switzerland sporting his new cowboy hat and refusing to take over the family business, his father sent him off to make his own fortune. Somehow Fred ended up in Strasburg where he married and started a mill of his own which he later sold to the Platts. An article in the Northern Virginia Daily about Charles Platt's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday states that the Platt family bought the mill in 1933. It is not known why Fred sold the mill but he later lived in Orange County which is where he passed away. We also don't know why Fred migrated to our little town, but at least we know why he chose a mill to make a living, since that was what he was raised to do. Linda says Fred had some patents on looms or parts of looms that he'd invented. Perhaps he was disillusioned by his cowboy dream or fell in love with a Strasburg blonde who could not leave her mother.

Everybody remembers that the Mill was hot and noisy. Kathleen Stickley remembers telling her Aunt Mattie on her 18th birthday, while walking home from work, that it was "the hottest day" she'd ever spent working inside the Mill. Kathleen lived on the same street with her mother, Jessie Williams Robinson, who was Mattie's sister. Sarah Kehoe Mauck and Terry Davison Schrader remember visiting Terry's Aunt Cookie (Lou Davison) at work. Kathleen told me the machines all contributed to the very loud noise level. She described the "warping machines"-- the big wheels that ran onto a loom; and the "slasher" machines that wove material. Several people report hearing loss or nerve damage: Lou Davison, Nina and Buddy Sherman and others. Nina Sherman said that "earplugs and ear protective gear were not used in those days", and that "you had to holler in there." Terry says her father, Dick Davison, didn't work there long enough to damage his hearing, because he went into business for himself in 1958. But Nina Sherman said her husband Buddy worked there as a mechanic until it closed. Nina believes that was why Buddy lost his hearing in later years. Calvin Ritenour worked at the Silk Mill for 29 years. He said that "Two girls came to work there once and they told Mr. Platt it was too loud. Mr. Platt told them, 'After a couple days, you won't even notice it.' Well", said Calvin, "They left for lunch and never came back". Calvin chuckled that a "Big thunderstorm would come up and we didn't even know it was going on `cept the lights blinkin' and fire trucks would go out and we didn't even know it." (The fire station was just down the street and the siren could be heard all over town). "You'd get used to the noise after awhile and could talk over it" said Calvin.

The Great Silk Mill Robbery is remembered by several people, including Kathleen Stickley and Calvin Ritenour. Neither of them worked there that early, but the date of the theft is believed to be sometime in the late 1930's or early 1940's. Charlie Platt was robbed of the entire cash payroll as he was carrying it from the office building on Massanutten Street to the factory building in the back, when he was hit over the head. The location was somewhere in the vicinity of "downstairs of where the Moose used to be." Calvin remembers that "they put your pay in an envelope and give it to you in cash." The robber lived in the Strasburg "high-rise", the building where People's Drug Store now stands. The building was at that time a boarding house, says Kathleen, and the robber was reportedly behind in his rent and other bills. (The upper stories of the building were removed in later years as is seen today.) After the robbery, the suspect "went around paying his bills and that's how they caught him." The Mill started using checks after that. Somewhere in the 1940's, union organizers campaigned for an employee union at the Mill, but it lost by two votes, remembers Kathleen. Calvin says the "vote was real close." Kathleen said she and her father, Luther Robinson voted against the union because they believed the plant would shut down completely and "there was no place else to work back then." Georgianna Hines said that the Mill wasn't "a big company so it didn't have a big bunch of rules. It was a small operation and couldn't afford to have a union." The working conditions of the Mill, though not up to today's standards, were considered average for that time period. Calvin tells us that he



started at 50 cents an hour in 1948 and 29 years later when the plant closed, he was making \$3.10 an hour as a mechanic. There were no vacations in the early days and the only paid holiday was once a year on Christmas day. Kathleen, as a quill winder, started at 50 cents an hour in 1946. She was making 75 cents an hour when she left in 1964 for a job at the new Aileen plant where she made \$1.25 an hour. There were three shifts: 6 a.m. to 2 p.m.; 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. and 10 p.m. to 6 a.m.

Each person I talked to remembered the names of other people who worked at the Mill, some living and some deceased. Kathleen describes the "bigwigs" as Frank Smith (Marie Williams' brother and Gloria Stickley's father), Guy and Lymon Scott and Norvell Nicklaus. Her father Luther Robinson was a foreman who worked with Harry Grim. He started in 1928 and left after Nathan Platt died. Terry Davison Schrader's father Dick and her Aunt Lou, and Mattie Cameron, mother of Patsy Rutz and Tommy Cameron, are some of those remembered. Kathleen remembers Byrd Bockey, "Jimmy's daddy" and also describes how Cecil Miller's father "cleaned the quills using a brush and bucket so they could be re-used." Buddy Sherman was a mechanic and his wife Nina a machine operator, Ada Morris worked in the office and Johnny & Georgianna Hines worked there as "warpers", Johnny as foreman. Jack Jenkins left Edinburg Aileen to work on the Mill's new knitting machine and Calvin Ritenour drove from his home in Ft. Valley each day, "when gas was a lot cheaper." And of course, there were the owner/managers, Mr. Charlie Platt, and his son Nathan.

The date the plant closed is of great debate. The year 1977 seems late, but Sarah Mauck remembers working there in 1979 when the building first began in the antique business as the Emporium. Nobody seems to remember the exact year the Mill closed. Kathleen and others report that the mill closed "when Nathan Platt died." Georgianna Hines remembers her husband Johnny worked for Fred Bertschinger when the Mill started and he was laid off when the plant closed. He was only off work for two weeks, she recalls, when she and Johnny both began work at the Front Royal Avtex on July 7, 1977. Nina Sherman is not sure of the exact year, but she says her husband Buddy retired from Chemstone at the age of 62. He left the Mill when it closed and worked eleven years at Chemstone. He was born in 1926 and is now 78 years old, she said, which would mean the Strasburg Textile Mill closed in 1977.

I am Mattie Cameron's granddaughter and I remember very little about her because she died when I was four. But I have a very vague memory of being very short, my arm extended in the air, holding my mother's hand and looking up at my Mema who was standing beside a large machine. It was very loud and she and my mother were yelling above my head. I think that memory sticks in my mind because it's the only time I ever heard my mother and my grandmother yell at each other. It was my mother, Patsy Rutz, who remembers the silk dresses her mother made her and her sister Lucy Fultz every year for the Mayday festival from left over silk that Uncle Luther Robinson got from the mill. The history of the Silk Mill still remains a part of the heritage of many families in the town of Strasburg.

## Mill Owner Slugged, Robbed Of \$2,500

Strasburg, Va., Dec. 26 (P) — Charles Platt, owner and manager of the Strasburg Silk Mill, was slapped and robbed of \$2,500 early today, Police Chief Frank Tangle reported.

Platt was bound after being struck four or five times with a weapon such as a pipe or blackjack, the chief said. Sent by ambulance to Winchester Memorial Hospital, he was conscious and reported resting easily.

The mill owner was alone in his office at about 2 a. m. working on the payroll. His attacker took about \$2,000 of the company funds and an additional \$500 in cash and Platt's wallet.

State police immediately were alerted to be on the lookout for a 1940 or 1941 model Plymouth automobile which was seen parked near the plant a few hours before the robbery.

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From the Daily Mail, Hagerstown, Md.

Dec. 26, 1947

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## A Little Bit More Folk History The Strasburg Textile Mill by Kathy Kehoe

In 2005, I started my search for folk history on the Strasburg Textile Mill with my mother's first cousin, Kathleen Robinson Stickley, who had many memories to share. She and her father Luther Robinson as well as her Aunt Mattie Williams Cameron, (my grandmother) worked at the Mill. Kathleen referred me to other past employees who were also happy to share their stories. We've reprinted that first folk history from 2005 in this newsletter. We are lucky to have been able to get so many first hand stories as most of those people are gone now. But there are still stories out there from those whose relatives or neighbors worked at the Mill. We will hear more on the Platt family business during the town Vintage Festival in August. Meanwhile, here we have a little bit more folk history on the business that employed area residents for some sixty years, from founder Fred Bertschinger to the Platt family who bought the Mill in 1933.

Commonly known as the "Silk Mill", the vast space that is now the Strasburg Emporium was filled with the high noise level of large looms. The Shenandoah County Library, in their "Shenandoah Stories" of World War II, describes how the Mill contributed to the war effort. The factory produced "silk casket linings using raw materials imported from overseas.....When WW Two began in 1941, the overseas supply of silk was cut off." So the Mill began using nylon, "which had recently been engineered by the DuPont Chemical Company.....to make parachutes, rope cord, and other war materials".

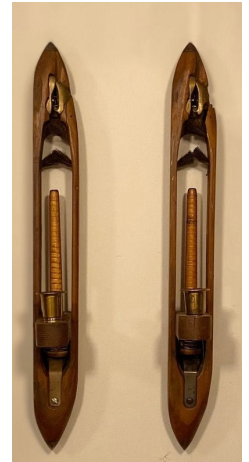
Mary Campbell Redmon shared her memories of when her aunt worked at the Silk Mill: "My mom's sister, Margaret (Bardie) Stickley, was the secretary for the silk mill for a number of years. She would sometimes take me to visit her work. The little door on King Street was the front door. On the right as you went in was the office. There was a window looking out on to the hall from the office and the door was just past that. Time clocks were in this hall. I remember seeing the punch cards with people's names on them. My aunt and the bookkeeper, Dorothy, sat in the room as you went in the office door. Nate and Charlie both had offices off of this room. Bardie would sometimes take me back into the mill. The first room had some weaving machines, and was where some inventory and supplies were stored but it was relatively quiet. In the later days there was a circular knitting machine in this room. When the sliding door opened between the first room and what they call the Dome Room now, where the looms were, the sound was unbelievable. It would take your breath away, literally. You could feel it in your chest. I think workers wore ear plugs in there. When my junior class (1966) was decorating for the prom the mill gave us yards and yards and yards of white acetate fabric which we hung from the rafters to make a draped, drop ceiling for the gym. It was lovely! Springtime in Rome was the theme! The fabric came down in places and touched the tops of our cardboard columns! That deafening noise is my most lasting memory--like being surrounded by jet engines."

Mary Jane Drummond Jenkins remembered when Charlie Platt was robbed of the payroll. "Mother worked at the silk mill and I was about 12 or 13 when the robbery happened. I was old enough to remember when it happened, so it must have been in the 1940s". According to a newspaper article in the Hagerstown "The Daily Mail", it was December 1947. Mary Jane's mother, Ella Drummond worked at the laundry, which was located in the building where "This N That" antique store was located until recently (across the Emporium parking lot). Mary Jane said that her mother "washed and ironed clothes and folded the sheets and when they closed up went to work at the Silk Mill. Mama worked on the 2<sup>nd</sup> shift, from two in the afternoon until ten p.m.," said Mary Jane. "And Daddy worked six a.m. to two p.m. That's when I learned to cook the evening meal." Mary Jane's father, Hubert Drummond, worked many

years at Borden Lumber Company before getting a job at the Silk Mill. The family was unable to locate the cigar box where Hubert kept his pay stubs. Mary Jane's son Jeff Jenkins said "I wish I could find my granddaddy's four cigar boxes that were full of his hand written pay stubs. He didn't make much money back then; the net pay went from \$6.00 a week to around \$20.00 when he retired, all in little yellow envelopes about 2 inches by 3 inches." Mary Jane said her parents didn't make much money back then, but "things didn't cost much. Gas was 16 cents a gallon and you could drive a long time on two dollars worth of gas." Mary Jane's half-sister Dorothy Drummond also worked at the Silk Mill. When Mary Jane visited them, "the place scared me to death. So noisy you couldn't hear yourself talk. When I had to walk by those machines with the shuttles going back and forth, it felt like they were going to hit you. I was always so glad to leave and get out of there after a visit."

Terry Whittington Ryman, whose mother Ida Belle worked at the Mill, said, "I remember the shuttles that were used in the machines and how people made candle holders out of them." Perhaps those I remember seeing at Wayside Inn in the 70s were made from shuttles that came from the Silk Mill.

The noise level was foremost in most people's memories, but few stories were passed down through the generations. Cathy Tharpe's uncle, Gary Pence's mother, and Gayle McInturff Davison's uncle, Donnie Estep, were among those relatives remembered. Mary Shull said her mother worked there for "17 years on the night shift." while Ethel Feathers Showman said her mother worked at the Mill "for years on the graveyard shift." Sherry Brackin's mother, Ida Belle Whittington, worked at the Silk Mill from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. She ran a loom", said Sherry, "and she worked there until it closed. My mom did not drive, she rode to work with Fred Strosnider. I remember going to see her during her break."



Terri Davison Shrader, who shared her memories in 2005, added that her Aunt Lou Davison worked at the Silk Mill until it closed. "Many of the young people left for jobs at the Press", a new printing factory, "but Aunt Lou didn't want to go there," said Terri. Terri couldn't remember exactly when the Mill closed, but she does recall that: "I know it was there in 72, because Daddy and Aunt Lou came to my wedding and she had to go back home to go to work because she worked the 2<sup>nd</sup> shift on a large loom." Terri went in to see her sometimes at work and "you couldn't hear, it was so loud you couldn't hear anything. She didn't want me in there because she was afraid it would affect my hearing. Back then they didn't have ear plugs, they didn't think about ear plugs until much later and many employees lost their hearing. Daddy's hearing remained good because he left in 1958 to start his own business." Many of Terri's relatives worked at the Mill, including her Aunt Lou, John and Everett Pat Davison, and her sister Ruth Ann Davison Shipe. "And they made good money," said Terri, "They didn't have anything else back then."

Many area residents made their living by working one of the three shifts at the Strasburg Textile Mill during a time when there were few places to work to support a family. Employees worked alongside their relatives and neighbors during the day, or evening, or through the night until morning. Many of those employees came to work there and stayed for "years" as their children and grandchildren remember. In today's work world, it is typical for workers to change jobs and sometimes careers, many times before retirement. But back then, there



weren't as many jobs to choose from and people felt comfortable to stay with companies that they trusted. The Silk Mill changed and adapted as the world changed, and so did the employees. They changed to a new material and adapted their looms for the war effort. In many of the memories, events and dates were marked as to "when Charlie Platt died" or "after the Mill closed." When the sewing plants came to town, many of the women left for higher pay at the Aileen plant which was air conditioned in the summer and where country music and conversations could be heard. In the late 60s, the "boat plant" came to town making Crestliner boats, and some employees left the Mill to work there. When the Mill closed in 1977, some people took the company bus to Front Royal to work for the American Visco Corporation. But for many years, the Strasburg Textile Mill was a stable and steady place to work. After the Silk Mill closed, the building was bought by Wayside of Virginia and they turned the huge space into an antique mall. Their website:

<https://www.thestrasburgemporium.com/> advertises that they are open 7 days a week and they have 60+ dealers. As people retired from the Mill, and the Platt family went on to other careers, that 52,000 square feet of space changed and adapted with the times.

It is much quieter there now. You can walk through and not hear the clacking of the looms. But if you pay attention, you just might hear the busyness, sense the activity, of the workers of long ago. You might hear a low steady hum, distant, but close, in your bones and you will know it's your ancestors or the spirit of hard work lingering in the air.

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*To Our Readers: If you have memories to add to folk histories, please contact Kathy Kehoe by emailing [strasburgheritage@gmail.com](mailto:strasburgheritage@gmail.com), calling 540-465-4185 or contacting any SHA Board Member.*

### **Board of Directors 2021**

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## The Strasburg Emporium By Shenandoah County Archives

In 1907 the Strasburg Textile Manufacturing Company opened on this site. The company manufactured various finished silk products. In 1934 Charles Platt and his son Nathan Platt purchased the company and focused on producing silk casket linings using raw materials imported from overseas. It eventually became the largest employer in Strasburg.

When World War Two began in 1941, the overseas supply of silk was cut off. This led the Platts to invest in the production of nylon which had recently been engineered by the DuPont Chemical Company. By 1942 the Strasburg plant was manufacturing bolts of nylon that was used to make parachutes, rope cord, and other war materials.

After the end of the conflict, the Strasburg Textile Manufacturing Company returned to the production of casket linings until its closure in 1977. Today, the building is still in use as the Strasburg Emporium, a popular antiques mall.

**Read more Shenandoah Stories by visiting:**

**[http://shenandoahstories.org/items/browse?  
search=World+War+Two&sort\\_field=relevance](http://shenandoahstories.org/items/browse?search=World+War+Two&sort_field=relevance)**  
**(The Strasburg Textile Mill/ Silk Mill, WWII stories)**

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<https://anchor.fm/strasburgvaheritage>**

**Oh! The stories you'll hear!**

**[www.strasburgvaheritage.org](http://www.strasburgvaheritage.org)**

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Strasburg, VA 22657

## Strasburg Heritage Association

Strasburgheritage@gmail.com

www.strasburgvaheritage.org

**Annual dues are due in February; if you are not sure if you have paid your dues, please email us.**

### **Membership Application**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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MEMBERSHIP \_\_\_\_\_ Cost is \$20.00 annually

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