

COMPARING URBAN & RURAL LIFE

Textile mills, factories that created cloth, were often set up around “mill villages”, urban communities designed to meet the needs of all the mill workers. Workers and their families lived in the mill villages, bought their food and clothes from mill stores and children would go to the mill schools until they were old enough to work in the mill. Mills paid their workers regularly, but often paid with scrip, paper money printed by the mill that could only be used in mill run stores and businesses. Millwork offered a steadier income than sharecropping but mill workers had less independence than **rural** farmers. A mill worker’s life was governed by the clock and whistle. Still, mill villages offered residents more chances to socialize than on isolated, rural farms. Workers held dances, went on dates, and cared for each other. They created baseball and basketball teams and even brass bands, to make life in the villages more enjoyable. “It was a two-hundred headed family. Everybody on the hill, we looked after one another,” Hoyle McCorkle of Charlotte’s Highland Mill Park recalled.

Families that worked in other factories, like furniture and tobacco factories, did not have “mill villages” and lived in the city with other workers. **Urban** centers were crowded with people flooding in from the country and from outside the United States looking for work. Businesses sprang up to serve the increasing population and business profits helped build churches, schools, hospitals, and libraries. Cities were bustling places, full of technological wonders. Electricity came to cities before it came to the country. While farm lighting still came from lanterns, factories used electric lights. This allowed factories to start work before the sun came up and continue work after the sun went down. By the turn of the century, there were telephones and trolleys. People rode to work on bicycles and shopped at large stores. “Nothing stands still,” claimed the author of a Durham newspaper article in 1886. “There is very little loafing in Durham. A man who stands on the street corner and gazes at the sky is likely to be run over.”

Not everything in the city was fun and excitement. Most families, especially poor ones, lived in **tenements**, large buildings in run-down parts of the city where families shared rooms or apartments. In some cases, people were so crowded together that they slept on the floor. With so many people living on top of one another, problems like fire, crime, and disease increased. Cities needed to provide services for all these people. New York City created large reservoirs to hold the water supply outside the city and created a network of pipes to bring in water to houses, apartment buildings, and businesses. Volunteer fire departments became common, but because these volunteers often had other jobs, it took them a long time to hear about and get to a fire. Eventually, full time fire fighters were hired. Police departments were formed and soon police were on the streets night and day. Rural communities needed fewer of these services. They tended to know the people living around them and crime was less common. Fire and disease did not spread as easily when homes were further apart.

Life in the country did not stay the same during the industrial era. Although people who stayed on the farm were not able to get new products and public services that city dwellers enjoyed, improved farming tools and equipment during the 1880s made farm work a little easier. Commercial fertilizers nourished, or fed, worn-out soil. New harvesting equipment helped farmers use larger areas of land with fewer human laborers to raise more grain and other agricultural goods. Eventually, telephones helped reduce rural isolation and linked farmers to towns and cities. In 1898, the postal service began free delivery of mail to people living in the country. Farming in North Carolina was difficult, however. Tobacco had been hard on the soil and “good land” was increasingly hard to find. Families who stayed in the country had to split their farmland, as their children became adults. A sharecropping style relationship developed between farmers and storekeepers, who would loan farmers fertilizers, seeds, and new tools on credit with interest (a charge for borrowing money). As farmers tried to produce more crops to pay back their loan, crop prices fell, making it nearly impossible for farmers to get out of debt.