

## Oral History Excerpt: James and Nannie Pharis

Background: James and Nannie Pharis were married in 1911. Both worked in the cotton mill in Spray, North Carolina as children when their tenant farming families decided to give up rural life and move to town to work for the mills.

**Interviewer:** Did he [James's father] ever talk about why they moved from the farm to town?

**James Pharis:** Because the kids felt that all we had to do when we moved to town was to reach up and pull the money off of the trees. We come down and pull some off of it.

**Nannie Pharis:** Worked for twenty-five cents a day when we started.

**James Pharis:** And that was eleven hours a day, too. I went to work after I got eight or nine years old, I worked for several years there for twenty-five cents a day, eleven hours a day.

**Interviewer:** When you all got paid, did you turn the money into your father?

**James Pharis:** Had to, it took it all to live.

**Interviewer:** When you started to work, what do remember about that, the mill, working, life?

**James Pharis:** I don't remember too much individual things. I was about nine or ten years old when I got that hand hurt right there.

**Interviewer:** How did that happen?

**James Pharis:** I was riding on an elevator rope in the mill. Me and another boy was getting the quills in the mill. He was on the bottom floor and I was on the top floor. We'd go to the spinning room to empty our quills out. The first one who would get up there would ride the elevator rope. He'd be down on the bottom floor. We'd ride the elevator rope up to the pulley and slide back down. I was riding one day and was looking round over the spinning room and my hand got caught under the wheel. That thing was mashed into jelly, all of it was just smashed all to pieces. They took me out. It happened pretty much after lunch one day. It started up after dinner, they gave forty-five minutes for dinner. They took me down to the company store—the drug store was in the front end of the company store—never even notified my people or nothing. Set me down in the front of that company store. There were only two doctors in town at that time, and both of them was out of town on country calls. I sat there until about four o'clock. Nobody done nothing in the world for me. My people was never notified. Nothing said about it. You tear yourself all to pieces then, nothing said about getting anything out of it. The doctor put a board on my hand there, had my fingers straight. One night the board slipped around the back and that thing crooked down. It's been that way ever since. Never even got straight.

**Interviewer:** Those things happened a good deal?

**James Pharis:** Oh, yes, back in them days. Nothing never said about it then.