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Reunion of Young Family at Museum Brings Tears and Laughter

TIFTON—There were tears. And laughter. And lots of hugs.

It was a family reunion unlike any other because half of the 200 or so people in attendance Saturday at the Georgia Museum of Agriculture and Historic Village at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College had no idea they were even related. A picture made at the H.H. Tift Cotton Mill in Tifton 105 years ago was their common bond.

Through a Georgia Humanities Council grant, Museum Curator Polly Huff and a group of English professors from ABAC brought to life a series of photographs taken by Lewis Hine, who used his camera to document the conditions of the working class in the factories and mills of the urban and rural parts of the United States in the early 20th century.

On Jan. 22, 1909, Hine took a picture of a mother and nine of her 11 children in front of their Cotton Mill village house in Tifton. That picture captured the attention of Massachusetts historian Joe Manning who sought to find the identity of the woman and her children. And he did.
On Saturday, Manning met the descendants of Catherine Young, the woman in the photo, and her children at the Museum.

“In a period of years, I was able to reconstruct the entire life of Catherine and her children,” Manning told the audience in the Museum’s conference room. “They lived through all the great events of the 20th century. They were good people. They were human beings who were part of a great story.”

That story took a remarkable turn three months after the Hine photo was made. Catherine Young took seven of the nine children in the photo to the South Georgia Methodist Orphan Home in Macon. Then she and the two oldest children returned to Tifton where they continued to work in the cotton mill. Two more children in the family had already left home and had gotten married before the photo was made.

“We don’t know what Catherine faced,” Manning, whose visit was made possible by Museum community partner South Georgia Banking Company, said. “Obviously financing the family was a problem. She made $4.50 a week, and the children made $4.50 a week.”

Young’s husband, Andrew, passed away in 1907, one year after the Georgia Child Labor Law was passed. The law prohibited children under 12 from working in mills or factories unless their mother was widowed or disabled.

“They worked six days a week from 10 to 12 hours a day,” Manning said. “This was their way of life. They had nothing better to compare it to.”
Manning showed individual pictures of each of the nine children in the photo and then went into detail about what happened to each one of them, asking relatives of each of the children to raise their hands when he spoke of their ancestor.

In the photo, all nine children were barefoot on a January day. Manning said they all overcame their hard times, each one living to the age of 65 or older except for one, who died at the age of 18 because of an illness. Catherine Young herself lived to the age of 88 before passing away in Albany in 1957.

Dr. Earl Parker, a former ABAC Professor of Biology and Botany, had never seen the photo until Manning shared it with him in 2010. In the center of the photograph and then in another picture taken the same day, there is a smiling Eddie Lou Young. She was Parker’s mother.

“I knew Mother had been in the orphan’s home but I didn’t know she had worked in the cotton mill,” Parker said. “She never mentioned it. When Joe showed me the picture, I realized she looked a lot like my younger sister at that age.”

Eddie Lou Young was eight years old when Hine snapped the photo. She lived in the orphanage for only a year before being adopted by Reese and Luella Parker who lived near Americus. Eddie Lou married Hawkins Parker on Aug. 28, 1920, and they had seven children.

When the family moved to Plains in 1941, they lived several houses away from a man who would one day be the President of the United States, Jimmy Carter.

Earl Parker was the only one of Eddie Lou’s children to get a college education. He moved to Tifton in 1972 and taught 20 years at ABAC before retiring. He never knew his
mother was raised in the cotton mill village, although he passed by its location many times. Eddie Lou was 79 when she died.

“I saw Catherine one time,” Parker said. “It was in Albany. I had no idea about this whole story. It’s just incredible.”

“The Big Picture,” a Tifton marketing and design company headed by ABAC alumnus Valerie Touchstone, helped to turn Hine’s pictures from Tifton into a traveling exhibit which has now been in many schools around the area. The exhibit will be on display in the Museum lobby through Saturday from 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Huff had tears in her eyes as she surveyed the lobby where new found relatives compared notes on their ancestors.

“This is really something,” Huff said. “The story is just so heart-warming.”

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