

## Special Report: The Future Of A Factory Town

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Big factories built Waynesboro's economy nearly 90-years ago, and the city boomed for decades. The picture may be black and white and faded, but the memory is not.

Rudy Johnson and her sister Kitty proudly wore the uniforms of DuPont production line workers during the early days of World War II.

"I was an operator," said Rudy Johnson. "I kept the machines running."

The sisters from Scottsville took a train to Waynesboro where they stayed with an older sister whose husband and father-in-law also worked at DuPont. The factory was a part of the Johnson family.

"It was my sister and me, and I had a brother that got killed in the service, he worked there," Johnson said.

E.I. DuPont opened its Rayon factory on the banks of the South River in 1929 with 500 workers. Two years earlier, across the river, the Crompton textile plant started spinning fabrics. By the start of World War II the two factories, and a dozen others making everything from furniture and bottled vinegar to organs, put thousands of people to work in Waynesboro.

"We worked hard, because it was during the wartime," explained Johnson. "We'd get off at 8 in the morning and have to go back to work at 4 in the afternoon."

Nearly 70 years later Johnson and her three younger sisters recall the energy that surrounded the factory town.

"You didn't want to get caught on Main Street because of the traffic," said Johnson's sister Frankie Turner.

The younger Johnson sisters even vacationed in Waynesboro to visit their working sisters.

"It was a booming little town, Waynesboro was," said Turner. "They had little drug stores, the post office, 2 theaters, lots of stores."

Industry, connected by two railroad lines and eventually a pair of interstates, drove Waynesboro from a quiet valley town of 7,000 people in 1940 to a city of more than 12,000 by 1950.

"The young people would go to Waynesboro to work, because it was about the only place nearby that they could go to work," said Turner. "Those were the good days."

The factory boom continued to build.

"The factories, the DuPont, the Virginia Metalcrafters, the Crompton, the GE's, they were all here in Waynesboro," said former councilman Jack Higgs.

When DuPont celebrated 40 years in Waynesboro in 1969 the plant employed nearly 3,000 workers. A research lab was churning out new formulas for Lycra and spandex fibers. General Electric was producing electronics from a brand new multi-million dollar facility.

'Made in Waynesboro, Virginia' was a manufacturing mark noticed worldwide.

"We enjoyed prosperity like you wouldn't believe," said Higgs.

But buyouts and new technology would slowly bust Waynesboro's industrial boom. Higgs served on city council for two decades, from 1984 to 2004. During that time Genicom would replace GE, then go bankrupt and close, Crompton would abandon its South River complex, Invista would overtake DuPont, and Waynesboro's factory economy would face an uncertain future.

"We were open for a lot of things, but it was hard to get someone to come here," said Higgs. "My greatest fear is Invista leaving here."

Higgs still sees a bright future for Waynesboro without the big factories that built this city.

"I don't know whether we'll ever get back to where we'll have employers that have 3 or 4 thousand people working for them," he said. "I don't know if Waynesboro will ever get that."

Exactly one year ago the city's unemployment topped out above 10 percent. So what is the future of a factory town in a global economy?

Barbara Beaman is back in school turning the page on a new career as a nurse.

"Monday through Friday, 3 hours a day," said Beaman, who was recently laid off from Invista. "Making time to study and working it around your family or your home life. It's a big transition. I find that my memory's not as good."

Before hitting the books at Valley Vocational Technical Center's Adult Continuing Education program, Beaman spent nine years on the factory floor at Invista.

"Production worker is basically what I did all my life," she said.

Until this month last year. Beaman was one of 210 workers laid off from the Waynesboro plant; victims of the economic downturn and decrease in demand for nylon used in carpet-making.

"What am I going to do? What's out there?" Beaman asked. "That's probably the biggest question: what's out there? Factory work is just not out there anymore."

Beaman is one of five Invista layoff victims in this nursing class. They are here through the federally-funded Trade Act which pays for school, retraining, income subsidies and healthcare. They are the changing face of a factory town.

"It probably doesn't have a future as a typical factory town, because frankly, there is not likely to be such a thing," explained Robin Sullenberger of the Shenandoah Valley Partnership.

The Shenandoah Valley Partnership tracks the changes in industry and tries to attract business for the future. Since 1996 the partnership's numbers show Waynesboro has shed 2,400 factory jobs through layoffs, plant idling, and company closures.

"What we've seen recently is high-capital investment," Sullenberger said. "Which means a lot of automation and technology-driven manufacturing processes. Much lower job numbers."

At the same time, Waynesboro's economy has shifted to the west end. Big box stores, restaurants, and hotels are hiring. Sales and meals taxes replace machine and tool tax money from the factories. But these jobs pay less, with fewer benefits and city workers have seen a two-percent loss in wages.

"I don't think it would be sustainable over the next 10 years," said Waynesboro Mayor Tim Williams.

The future of a factory town could start where the South River spurred Waynesboro's manufacturing beginnings in 1927. Developers plan to turn the old Crompton textile factory into professional offices for doctors and lawyers, research space, retail, and light industry.

"I think that is the way to go; the high-tech industries, the smaller industrial 20 to 40 employees type of high-tech industry and manufacturing," said Williams.

But Mayor Williams says the city's economy and unemployment can not return to the heyday of the past without an investment from city council.

"We're going to have to make some commitments to our economic development," he said. "It's more than just words."

The Shenandoah Valley Partnership is focusing on Waynesboro's future, working with the city, state, schools, and community college to build a highly-skilled workforce that attracts new jobs.

"What Waynesboro, and they are certainly doing this, what they need to do is bite the bullet so to speak and develop infrastructure and do programmatic things that ensure a quality workforce," explained Sullenberger.

Back in class, Beaman shares her can-do spirit with her classmates. She believes education will create opportunities for a community in transition.

"I didn't get down and depressed about getting laid off," she said. "I just got out there and hit it again."

Mayor Williams says the city is actively seeking a new economic development director whose job will be to face this factory town's future head-on.

Only problem is, that director's job has gone unfilled for 18-months.

**Reported by Matt Talhelm, NBC 29 (WVIR -TV) Charlottesville, VA**