

“I Was Doing Something I Didn’t Even Think I Could Do”:  
Crystal Lee Sutton and the Campaign to Unionize J.P. Stevens

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## **ABSTRACT**

JOEY ANN FINK: “I Was Doing Something I Didn’t Even Think I Could Do”:

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(Under the direction of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall)

Crystal Lee Sutton played a prominent role in the labor movement’s struggle to organize southern workers in the J.P. Stevens’ textile mills in the 1970s. The movie *Norma Rae*, based on her story, vaulted her into the national spotlight. Sutton’s story provides a window into how the labor movement, second-wave feminism, and the Civil Rights Movement intersected in the southern mill towns targeted by the Textile Workers Union of America. An examination of her personal papers, union records, and media coverage reveals that gendered assumptions, racial and class hierarchies, and local, intimate networks of power and knowledge structured and informed her resistance and reactions to it. Sutton provided the union with significant support as she struggled to balance the responsibilities of worker, mother, wife, and unionist. As the “real Norma Rae,” she negotiated with multiple institutions and people for control over the meaning of her activism.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Chapter

I.	Introduction .....	1
II.	The Long Struggle to Unionize Southern Textile Workers .....	7
III.	The Union Returns to Roanoke Rapids .....	18
IV.	From Shop Floor to Front Porches .....	24
V.	Confrontation at Delta #4 Fabricating Plant .....	29
VI.	The Personal is Political in Roanoke Rapids .....	37
VII.	Being the “Real Norma Rae” .....	45
VIII.	Conclusion .....	54
Reference.....		57

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

On May 30, 1973, the J.P. Stevens textile mill in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, fired thirty-two-year-old Crystal Lee Sutton.<sup>1</sup> Before Sutton left the plant, she climbed atop a table on the shop floor and raised above her head a piece of cardboard with the word “UNION” scrawled on it, turning slowly in a circle so that all of her coworkers could read the sign. “I don’t know why I did it,” she later mused. “The only thing I figured is, it was my last attempt to tell people that they needed to join the union.” She was taken to the police station, charged with disorderly conduct, and spent the night in jail.<sup>2</sup>

If this story sounds familiar, that is because it was the basis for the most memorable moment of the Academy-award winning 1979 movie, *Norma Rae*.<sup>3</sup> Based loosely on journalist Henry Leifermann’s 1975 biography of Sutton, *Crystal Lee, A Woman of Inheritance*, the movie was a fictionalized account of the Textile Workers

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<sup>1</sup>In 1973, her name was Crystal Lee Jordan, but I have chosen to refer to her in this paper by her last name from her third marriage. Throughout the paper, I use “Sutton” or “Crystal Lee” interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup>Crystal Lee Sutton interview by Chris Fitzsimon, September 4, 2007, “Crystal Sutton aka Norma Rae discusses her life story,” *NC Policy Watch*, <http://www.ncpolicywatch.com>.

<sup>3</sup>*Norma Rae*, DVD, directed by Martin Ritt (Hollywood: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1979, 2001).

Union of America's (TWUA) campaign to unionize the J.P. Stevens textile mills. Since the day Sutton climbed on to that table and held her union sign high, her story has fascinated journalists, scholars, and the public. *Norma Rae* vaulted Sutton into the national spotlight and sent her across the country and eventually around the world. If not for that moment and the movie it inspired, Sutton might have lived out her life in North Carolina in relative anonymity. Her personal life and public action might have never entered the historical record. Instead, both her private life and public activism became the focus of intense scrutiny and debate.

Journalists focused mainly on the more sensational aspects of Sutton's story, blurring the distinctions between the realities of her life and the fiction of "Norma Rae."<sup>4</sup> Historians such as Robert Brent Toplin examined the effects of the movie on public perceptions of the women's and labor movements.<sup>5</sup> Labor historians situated Sutton's story in the struggle to unionize the textile industry in the American South but often ignored or obscured the gendered dimensions of her activism and personal life. Historian Timothy Minchin's *"Don't Sleep with Stevens!": The J.P. Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South, 1963-80* mentioned Sutton's involvement in the union's campaign but does not ask what her story can tell us about working-class women's experiences and their relationships with the union. In "The Real Norma Rae," Historian James Hodges celebrated Sutton as "an authentic and multi-dimensional working-class

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<sup>4</sup>For a notable exception to this, see Elizabeth Stone, "Norma Rae: The Story They Could Have Told," *Ms. Magazine*, May 1979, 30-32.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996). See also Edward Benson and Sharon Hartman Strom, "Crystal Lee, Norma Rae, and All Their Sisters: Working Women on Film," *Film Library Quarterly* 12, No. 2/3 (1979): 18-23, and Gay P. Zieger and Robert H. Zieger, "Unions on the Silver Screen: A Review-Essay of F.I.S.T., Blue Collar, and Norma Rae," *Labor History* 23, Issue 1 (Winter 1982): 67-78.

figure.” Hodges argued, however, that the film’s “theme of a woman’s liberation often obscured the southern labor dimension of the picture,” implying that the two struggles were mutually exclusive.<sup>6</sup>

This essay will examine Sutton’s involvement in the Stevens campaign, from 1973 through 1980, with the following questions in mind: How did she understand the meaning and implications of her union activism and public presence? How did performing the role of the “real Norma Rae” change Sutton’s life? If, as historian Alice Kessler-Harris has argued, “an individual life might help us to see not only into particular events but into the larger cultural and social and even political processes of a moment in time,” then Sutton’s story serves as a window into gender relations, labor activism, community dynamics, and the intersection of social movements in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> What were the successes and limitations of unionism in the postwar South? What connections existed between the women’s, labor, and civil rights movements? How did local networks of power and knowledge affect the way campaigns for social and economic equality played out in small towns like Roanoke Rapids

I depart from previous scholarship on Crystal Lee Sutton by using gender and sexuality as analytical tools for understanding the public and private dimensions of her relationships and experiences. As historian Ava Baron has argued, gender shapes

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<sup>6</sup>Timothy Minchin, “Don’t Sleep with Stevens!”: *The J.P. Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South, 1963-80* (Gainesville: The University of Florida Press, 2005). James Hodges, “The Real Norma Rae,” in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940-1995*, ed. Robert H. Zieger (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 251-272. See also idem, “J.P. Stevens and the Union: Struggle for the South,” in *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History*, eds. Gary M. Fink and Merl E. Reed (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 53-64.

<sup>7</sup>Alice Kessler-Harris, “Why Biography?” *The American Historical Review* 114, No. 3 (June 2009): 626. For a theoretical debate on using biography in constructing feminist histories, see Sara Alpern et al., introduction to *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, ed. Sara Alpern et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 1-16.

conceptualizations of labor, and sexual inequality “is structured into the fabric of unionism.”<sup>8</sup> Gendered assumptions shaped Sutton’s resistance to male authority in the Stevens plant and reactions – both pro- and anti-union – to her activism. Sexuality, far from being a private matter, is a “public topic and a highly political one.”<sup>9</sup> Approaching Sutton’s story with the assumption that gender, economic, and racial inequality intersect in representations of and debates over working-class women’s public activism and private lives exposes the false dichotomy between the public and private, and allows for a fuller analysis of how power operates in public discourse and daily life.<sup>10</sup>

I also draw from theoretical frameworks of space and social geography. Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and her co-authors underscored “the significance of region and a sense of place” in working-class culture in southern mill villages in *Like A Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, offering a new approach to southern labor studies that highlights workers’ agency and “family and community as arenas of conflict as well as reciprocity.”<sup>11</sup> I examine Roanoke Rapids, a town of about 14,000 people in

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<sup>8</sup>Ava Baron, “Gender and Labor History: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future,” in *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor*, ed. Ava Baron (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 8,13.

<sup>9</sup>Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, introduction to *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 10.

<sup>10</sup>My approach is influenced by historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s analysis of the “nexus between private experience and public activity” and her use of biography in *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). See especially the epilogue in the 1993 edition. For gender as an analytical framework, see Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075. For gender as performance, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>11</sup>Hall et al, *Like A Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987, 2000), 365, xxiii.

the mid-1970s, as a physical, social, and discursive location of power and conflict.<sup>12</sup> In her analysis of second-wave feminism, historian Anna Enke argued that “a spatial analysis shows that conflicts within feminism gained form and name within tangible spatial contestations over environments already laid through with race, class, and sexual hierarchies.”<sup>13</sup> In Roanoke Rapids, gendered assumptions and class and racial hierarchies rooted in local histories and affected by personal relationships shaped the terrain of battle for social and economic justice.

I begin with Leifermann’s biography, as it is the largest and most accessible source of oral testimony from the prominent figures in the organizing drive, collected just one year after the events of 1973 unfolded.<sup>14</sup> Interviews in the national and local media and labor press corroborate Leifermann’s narrative. It is not always clear, however, when he is paraphrasing ideas and sentiments that Sutton expressed to him in interviews, and when he is presenting his own interpretation of events. For this reason, I have indicated when I use direct quotations from his book and when I draw from or challenge his interpretations and paraphrasing.<sup>15</sup> Sutton’s personal papers at Alamance Community College offer new insights into Sutton’s experiences with the TWUA and its successor, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). I also look at TWUA records related to the Stevens campaign and Sutton. Oral histories collected by other

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<sup>12</sup>Robert Self, “Writing Landscapes of Class, Power, and Racial Divisions,” *Journal of Urban History* 27, No. 2 (January 2001): 239.

<sup>13</sup>Anna Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>14</sup>Henry Leifermann, *Crystal Lee, A Woman of Inheritance* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1975).

<sup>15</sup>I have been unable to find any contact information for Leifermann and I do not know if transcripts from his interviews with Sutton in 1973-75 are still available. The last person to collaborate with him on a project has lost contact with him and expressed concerns about his health.



scholars provide additional information on working-class women's experiences in the postwar South.

Crystal Lee Sutton played a major part in the Stevens campaign but, as she pointed out, she was not the most important contributor to the organizing drive or the only one to suffer for her role. My goal is not to tell her side of the story or diminish other aspects of the campaign. Rather, I am interested in exploring the public and private dimensions of her life in order to show how gender, race, and sexuality shaped the struggle to unionize the southern textile industry. The TWUA battled powerful anti-union forces that had the support of local and state institutions and benefited from gender and racial divisions in the mill and the community. I argue that the union's success was also limited by the leadership's conservatism on issues of gender and racial equality. Sutton provided the TWUA with significant support as one of its most dedicated and visible organizers, even as she defended her personal choices and past against attacks from pro- and anti-unionists alike. Blending the struggle for unionization with the story of her private life in Roanoke Rapids in interviews and speeches, Sutton tried to deflect the power of rumor and gossip by making her secrets public knowledge. She played with gendered behavior and sexuality to subvert authority and draw attention to her cause. She forged connections between the women's and labor movement and articulated a critique of social relations that blended economic and gender inequality at a time when the two movements seemed to share little common ground. With the release of the enormously popular *Norma Rae* in 1979, Sutton moved into the national arena as the "real Norma Rae" and negotiated with multiple institutions and people for control over the meaning of her activism.

## Chapter 2

### The Long Struggle to Unionize Southern Textile Workers

The promise of cheap, unorganized labor and anti-union state legislatures in the South encouraged textile mill owners to abandon traditional northeastern industrial centers in the early twentieth century. Almost 100,000 New England textile workers lost their jobs between 1923 and 1933. By mid-century the flight of capital and industry to the South had considerably reduced the Textile Workers Union America's membership. The textile industry employed over 200,000 people in North Carolina in 1964, and only about five percent belonged to the union.<sup>16</sup> Collective resistance in the 1930s inspired by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's labor-friendly administration bolstered the organizing efforts of the TWUA and the United Textile Workers (UTW). The New Deal legislation motivated the workers' insurgency, but as historian Janet Irons has argued, the policies were meant to protect the interests of economic elites and were the vehicles for imposing on labor the very controls and speed-ups against which southern millworkers fought.<sup>17</sup> The post-World War II dissolution of the New Deal coalition of labor, civil rights advocates, and southern liberals weakened the labor movement's influence in national

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<sup>16</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens!*, 10-11.

<sup>17</sup>Janet Irons, *Testing the New Deal: The General Textile Strike of 1934 in the American South* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 2000), 71-72, 180.

politics. Within the movement, anti-communist purges in the early years of the Cold War drove out many key leaders, undermining the labor movement's ability to effectively organize workers across racial lines.<sup>18</sup> The failure of the Congress of Industrial Organization's (CIO) ambitious southern organizing drive "Operation Dixie" in 1946-1953 diminished hope for a strong union presence in the postwar South.<sup>19</sup> The TWUA had 347,000 members in 1948; in 1962, they had 135,000.<sup>20</sup> Building a constituency in the conservative South was critical to the survival of the TWUA, and the union was reluctant to give up.

In 1963 the TWUA launched an aggressive organizing campaign, targeting Piedmont manufacturers. TWUA leaders focused especially on the J.P. Stevens textile mills, the second largest textile manufacturer in the country. Stevens employed approximately 36,000 people, with over 20,000 workers in its North Carolina and South Carolina plants. A victory at Stevens, they hoped, would strengthen support among rank-and-file workers by proving that even a company as large and as staunchly and relentlessly anti-union as Stevens could be unionized.<sup>21</sup>

TWUA leaders' decision to begin a sustained organizing drive was influenced by the progress made by civil rights activists in the 1960s in opening up economic opportunities for African Americans. Before 1960, African Americans constituted an insignificant portion of the southern textile work force. The few black men and women

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<sup>18</sup>Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>19</sup>Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

<sup>20</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep With Stevens!*, 11.

<sup>21</sup>Hodges, "J.P. Stevens and the Union," 56-57.

who worked in the mills were relegated to the lowest paid and most menial jobs: janitorial work or manual labor in “the raw.” In textile manufacturing, workers gauged their position in the hierarchy of the labor force by how far away they were from “the raw,” the bales of cotton that needed to be separated and fed into the hoppers. Black men and women not only fought their way into the mills, they struggled to attain skilled positions as weavers, hemmers, and cutters. By hiring only white workers for skilled positions in the South’s largest industry, mill owners upheld the segregation of public space in Jim Crow South and ensured a racially divided laboring class. Though southern labor historians have dispelled the myth of a docile white working-class, content to reap the benefits of corporate paternalism, mill owners were often successful at manipulating racial tensions to promote anti-unionism and inhibit class solidarity between black and white workers.<sup>22</sup> After the passage of groundbreaking anti-discrimination legislation in 1964, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the number of black workers steadily increased. By the 1970s, African American workers made up nearly 25 percent of the labor force in southern mills.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>In his analysis of workers’ movement in Winston-Salem in the 1940s, Historian Robert Korstad shows how a system of “racial capitalism” used racial and gender subordination to mask the class dimensions of the economic elites’ project to ensure a low-wage labor market, attract northern industries, and undermine efforts to organize workers across racial lines. See Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism*. In a case study of the white working-class in Rome, Georgia, from 1930-1970, historian Michelle Brattain argues that textile workers actively promoted the racial segregation of labor to defend their privileges as whites. Brattain’s case study is valuable for its emphasis on the political agency of Rome’s white working class. Her use of “whiteness” as a theoretical framework for understanding how race shaped the class identity and politics of white textile workers, however, seems a substitution for what has previously been explained as “racism” in attempts to understand the failure of the labor movement in the southern textile industry. See *The Politics of Whiteness: Race, Workers, and Culture in the Modern South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup>Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens!* 60. Historian Mary Frederickson has pointed out that while Title VII provided a legal mechanism for the entrance of blacks into the textile industry, the “ground was laid for this transformation in the 1940s and 1950s,” when a shrinking labor force compelled mill owners to draw from the black labor pool. See “Four Decades of Change: Black Workers in Southern Textiles, 1941-1981,” in *Workers’ Struggles, Past and Present: A “Radical America” Reader*, ed. James Green (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 71.

While Title VII provided black workers with a legal tool to fight for better positions in the mills, persistent discrimination and all-white management put a cap on their upward mobility. Civil rights opponents used their influence in Congress to undermine the ability of government agencies to enforce Title VII. The power of Title VII rested on the ability of black workers and their allies to “make its promise come true.”<sup>24</sup> Many black textile workers viewed union membership as a way to force management to comply with federal regulations.<sup>25</sup> The decades-long grassroots struggles against segregation, disenfranchisement, and police and extralegal violence had politicized many African American men and women, making divisions over the legitimacy of unionism less common among blacks than whites.<sup>26</sup> The enforcement of federal legislation helped to dismantle the structural barriers to African Americans’ full economic citizenship, and as black men and women entered the mills in record numbers, they changed the way the labor force looked, interacted, and moved throughout the mills.

Black workers and their allies faced powerful anti-labor forces in their efforts to unionize the southern textile industry and force compliance with federal anti-discrimination and labor laws. Managers at J.P. Stevens flagrantly violated the National Labor Relations Act to suppress unionism in their mills. When the TWUA filed suits against Stevens with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in the early 1960s for

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<sup>24</sup>Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 113.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. See also Minchin, *Don’t Sleep With Stevens!*, 24. Idem, *Hiring the Black Worker: the Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960-1980* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>26</sup>Reverend G.W. Dennis, for instance, was an influential preacher and also a janitor at the Dunean plant in Roanoke Rapids and one of the first black men to join the TWUA. He was fired for allegedly knocking down a white worker with his hand truck, though the worker he supposedly knocked down would only admit that he felt that Dennis “had ‘liked to’ knock him down.” Minchin, *Don’t Sleep With Stevens!*, 33.

wrongful terminations and harassment of pro-union workers, the NLRB found Stevens guilty in twenty-one of twenty-two decisions. Though the NLRB rulings did result in the reinstatement of many key rank-and-file members, they did little to stem Stevens' more insidious tactics for isolating and intimidating pro-union employees. Stevens, for example, relied on higher-paid workers to spread rumors that unions were corrupt, radical, and allied with the black power movement. In the small southern towns where the mill was often the largest employer, Stevens could also count on the threat of plant closure to secure civic and political support.<sup>27</sup>

TWUA records indicate that in the late 1960s union leaders were eager to capitalize on the entrance of potential union members into the mills. In July 1968, TWUA Organizing Director Paul Swaity circulated a report among regional directors that analyzed the results of a survey of California voters conducted by the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor and the Los Angeles and Orange Counties Organizing Committee of the AFL-CIO. The report suggested that ethnic, racial, and generational shifts in the composition of the labor force called for "new approaches to... attract new members from among the unorganized, including women, young people, Negro and Spanish-speaking workers, all of whom are increasing rapidly in the workforce."<sup>28</sup> Swaity recognized that the demographic changes in the labor force identified in California reflected nationwide trends. He urged his staff to study the report and consider

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<sup>27</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep With Stevens!*, 27-29.

<sup>28</sup>TWUA, "Report, A Survey of Voters in the National Labor Relations Board Election," 1966-1967, TWUA #5103, Folder 12.

how “age, sex, ethnic background, [and] political orientation” affected workers’ attitudes towards the union.<sup>29</sup>

Though the TWUA sought to broaden its membership base and appeal to non-white and female workers, white males dominated the national leadership and local staff. Labor activist and current president of Workers United Bruce Raynor recalled that when he began working for the union in 1973 “the locals were led by whites, even though by that time there were lots of blacks in the plants.” According to Raynor, “There was almost no black staff. And that’s the way the union looked.”<sup>30</sup> Willie Jones, current Southern Region Organizing Director for Workers United, worked in the Cone Brothers’ White Oak Cotton Mills in Greensboro, North Carolina, in the late 1970s. Jones recalled that when she began working at the mill, the union’s leadership “didn’t reflect the people that [they] were actually representing.” She credits Raynor for a change that occurred in the early 1980s. When he took over as director of the southern region, she noted, “women got a chance and minorities got a chance.”<sup>31</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, many black workers complained that the union ignored their grievances about unequal pay and unfair treatment. Union contracts that provided departmental, rather than plant-wide, seniority agreements inhibited black workers from moving out of low-wage positions. Nevertheless, black workers overwhelmingly supported unionization, believing that collective action and worker solidarity was the best – if not only – option for improving their living and working conditions. As Minchin pointed out, when black workers

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<sup>29</sup>Swaity, “Letter from Paul Swaity Organizing Director to executive council members, regional directors, and organizing staff,” July 9, 1968, TWUA #5103, folder 11.

<sup>30</sup>Bruce Raynor, quoted in Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens!* 69.

<sup>31</sup>Interview with Willie Jones, January 15, 2010 (in Fink’s possession).

organized local unions themselves, they secured plant-wide seniority and demanded greater attention to their grievances.<sup>32</sup>

Black workers were not only underrepresented by TWUA leadership, they were excluded from the union's conceptualization of what workers looked like. The image of a white, male breadwinner dominated the union's literature in the mid-1960s. Fliers generated by the union and distributed to textile workers pictured white male workers – along with a few white women – marching for their rights and basking in the benefits of union representation. Some images played on themes of democracy and patriotism, depicting white male workers supported by Uncle Sam and demonstrating in the tradition of colonial revolutionaries.<sup>33</sup> Given that union leaders could usually rely on African Americans' support but were significantly less confident of their ability to bring in white workers, it is perhaps unsurprising that the TWUA crafted their fliers to appeal to white workers. By excluding black workers in the union's literature in the early and mid-1960s, however, TWUA leaders replicated racial and gender assumptions of who counts in the workplace in their campaign materials. While mill owners played on white workers' fears of losing the economic privileges of whiteness, these images reflected rather than challenged the unequal power relationships on the shop floor, in the union halls, and in everyday life.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker*, 241-247.

<sup>33</sup>TWUA, J.P. Stevens campaign materials 1960s, Textile Workers Union of America South Region Records 1947-1981 #5103 (hereafter referred to as "TWUA #5103), Folders 120-122, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

<sup>34</sup>In her essay on the 1914 Fulton Mills strike in Atlanta, Georgia, Jacquelyn Hall shows that United Textile Workers' organizer O. Delight Smith used photography to bolster public support for the strikers and to "foster insurgency" among workers "by showing the strikers to themselves." See "Private Eyes, Public Women: Images of Class and Sex in the Urban South, Atlanta, Georgia, 1913-1915," in *Work Engendered: Toward A New History of American Labor*, ed. Ava Baron (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 251.



The pervasiveness of the white, male breadwinner model shaped the union's understandings of gender relations and their approach to community mobilization. A 1968 fact sheet suggested that direct mailings to workers' homes "should be 'folksy' and include an appeal to the wife, too." Local staff should "address a letter directly to the wives or mothers of the workers."<sup>35</sup> By targeting working-class women as wives and mothers – not workers and unionists – the union reinforced a male breadwinner paradigm that was at odds with reality. Women constituted 45 percent of the workforce at J.P. Stevens in 1966, and their wages were often crucial to the economic survival of their families.<sup>36</sup> Although women were more likely to move in and out of wage work due to unpaid reproductive labor and domestic responsibilities, they were often leaders in strikes and organizing drives.<sup>37</sup> Yet in 1965, when Swaity insisted in a letter to TWUA General President William Pollock that the union provide forty-dollar weekly stipends to out-of-work millhands if their unemployment was a result of their unionism, he was clear about who deserved financial assistance. "If a woman dischargee has a husband working she

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<sup>35</sup>TWUA, "Fact Sheet for Organizers TWUA Staff Training Program," Sept.-Dec. 1968, TWUA #5103, Folder 12.

<sup>36</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens!*, 22-23. See also Mary Frederickson, "I Know Which Side I'm On: Southern Women in the Labor Movement in the Twentieth Century," in *Women, Work, and Protest*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 156-158.

<sup>37</sup>For women's prominence in organizing drives and strikes, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (1986): 354-382. See also Mary Frederickson, "Heroines and Girl Strikers: Gender Issues and Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century American South," in *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South*, ed. Robert H. Zieger (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 84-112, Linda Frankel, "Southern Textile Women: Generations of Survival and Struggle," in *My Troubles Are Going to Have Trouble with Me: Everyday Trials and Triumphs of Women Workers*, eds. Karen Brodtkin Sacks and Dorothy Remy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 39-60, and Hall et al., *Like a Family*.

does not get financial help,” he explained. “If a male dischargee has a wife working he may get help for a week or two to help tide him over a real hardship at home.”<sup>38</sup>

The union’s endorsement of the family wage – earnings capable of supporting dependents – did not necessarily prop up male authority in working-class families or ignore the needs of working-class women. The family wage did recognize and value women’s unpaid domestic labor, albeit implicitly, and could be defended as a method for raising the quality of life for working-class families as a whole.<sup>39</sup> The TWUA’s assumption that the primary breadwinner of the family was the *male* head of the household, however, reinforced gender inequity in pay and promotions. The family wage, moreover, was a racialized concept: white men overwhelmingly occupied the higher wage positions in textile mills that made the male breadwinner paradigm possible.<sup>40</sup>

The assumption that women were temporary members of the paid labor force, and therefore less committed to organized action, belied working-class women’s presence on the front lines of organizing drives and colored male unionists’ attitudes towards female activists.<sup>41</sup> Historian Mary Frederickson has argued that when “women unionists have asked for, demanded, or expected equality within the unions... they have faced an uphill struggle.”<sup>42</sup> Men held all of the executive positions in the TWUA, but the union did

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<sup>38</sup>Paul Swaity, Letter to William Pollock, October 26, 1965, TWUA #5103, Folder 135.

<sup>39</sup>Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 116-117.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Historian Alice Kessler-Harris has argued that the consequence of the AFL’s ambivalence towards organizing working women in the early twentieth century was “to divide the working class firmly along gender lines and to confirm women’s position as a permanently threatening underclass of workers.” See “Where Are the Organized Women Workers?” in *Feminist Studies* 3, No. 1/2 (Autumn 1975), 92-110.

<sup>42</sup>Frederickson, “Heroines and Girl Strikers: Gender Issues and Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century American South,” 104.

employ some white women as full-time organizers during the Stevens campaign. For some women workers, the presence of female organizers indicated that the union was willing to address issues that concerned women in particular: gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and the loss of seniority during absences from the labor force due to pregnancy and child care. Maurine Hedgepeth, a Roanoke Rapids worker fired for her activism in 1965, explained to journalist Mimi Conway in 1979 that though she believed in unions, she “had gotten to the place where [she] didn’t trust the men organizers because of them holding elections and then leaving.” When the union sent Virginia Keyser to Roanoke Rapids in 1963, Hedgepeth remembered that she felt that “things are going to be different this time.”<sup>43</sup>

While white women could see themselves in union staff in ways that black workers could not, the images in the literature distributed during the Stevens campaign in the 1960s rarely depicted women as workers and activists. The fliers more often caricatured women as comely and decorous wives and mothers or as sexualized objects of male desire. One TWUA flier, for instance, explained that “you get a lot more with a union” above a sketch of a unionized male worker in a hospital bed receiving care from a buxom nurse in a tight dress. Another sketch in the same flier portrays a pipe-smoking man relaxed in an easy chair while his wife knits behind him (Images 3 and 4).<sup>44</sup> Analyzing the images in the TWUA’s literature does not tell us how women understood and reacted to them. Some working-class women may have been pleased to imagine themselves as homemakers whose husbands earned enough to preclude their participation

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<sup>43</sup>Mimi Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise: A Portrait of Southern Textile Workers*, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1979), 192.

<sup>44</sup>TWUA, J.P. Stevens campaign materials 1960s, TWUA #5103, Folders 118, 121.

in the paid labor force. As with the union's relationship to black male workers, though, the images did nothing to address gender inequality in wages, job opportunities, and treatment by male coworkers and bosses.

These images excluded black women entirely, erasing their presence in the mills and their leadership in building interracial coalitions central to election victories in the late 1960s and 1970s. In Andrews, South Carolina, for instance, the TWUA struggled to unionize workers at the Oneita Knitting Mills for decades but saw little success prior to 1970. By 1971, African Americans composed 75 percent of the mill's workers, and 85 percent of the black labor force were women. That year the union "easily won" an election to represent workers in the plants.<sup>45</sup>

The TWUA saw few victories like the one at the Oneita Knitting Mills. Instead, they spent the better part of the 1960s filing lawsuits against Stevens for intimidating pro-union workers and manipulating racial tensions in order to suppress unionism. A series of victories before the NLRB resulted in the reinstatement of sixty-nine workers in the winter of 1967-68. Still, Stevens' persistent and often illegal intimidation of union supporters mired the TWUA in legal battles that siphoned resources and funds away from the organizing drive.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Frederickson, "Heroines and Girl Strikers," 98, and "I Know Which Side I'm On," 174.

<sup>46</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep With Stevens*, 57-59. Hodges, "J.P. Stevens and the Union," 58.

## Chapter 3

### The Union Returns to Roanoke Rapids

When the new organizing director Eli Zivkovich, a fifty-five-year-old ex-coalminer from West Virginia and former organizer for the United Mine Workers, arrived in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, in April 1973, ten years after the Stevens organizing drive began, he found the situation symptomatic of the issues plaguing the TWUA more broadly. Maurine Hedgepeth was one of twenty-three workers in Roanoke Rapids that the NLRB ordered Stevens to reinstate in 1968. Though she also received a settlement from Stevens of about \$14,000 after taxes, she felt that she lost standing among her co-workers when someone started a rumor that the back pay Stevens awarded her had “come out of the workers’ pockets.”<sup>47</sup> Hedgepeth had spent nearly four years unemployed, struggling to support three children as her husband searched for work. If her confidence in the TWUA had diminished in those years, her belief that unions were necessary to improve workers’ living and working conditions never wavered, not even when the TWUA closed its office in Roanoke Rapids from 1969-1973 to divert funds and resources to another part of the campaign. Zivkovich was informed that three other women in Roanoke Rapids who had received settlements would not support the renewed

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<sup>47</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 193.

organizing drive because of the years they spent on the textile mill blacklist without support from the TWUA. He regretted the loss of the women's support, but, he admitted, it "must have been a long time between meals for them, and I can't blame them for being bitter at the union." The other nineteen workers had moved away from Roanoke Rapids.<sup>48</sup>

When Zivkovich reopened the TWUA's office, many black workers showed immediate support. Joseph Williams brought in about sixty signed union cards just days after Zivkovich arrived. But black workers constituted about one-third of the textile labor force in Roanoke Rapids. The organizing drive needed white support to win an election. A few white male workers returned signed cards to the makeshift union office at the Motel Dixie, but only one white worker attended the first meeting on April 15. Zivkovich attributed this disparity in white and black support to the real and imagined distance between the workers, engendered by decades of segregation. A report on the campaign in Roanoke Rapids in 1964 and 1965 by Vera Rony, a union organizer for the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department (IUD), indicated that the town had not yet begun to desegregate public schools, the pool and recreation center, and courthouse washrooms. While the report professed hope that a successful union drive would change town politics and public space and boasted that the "operation was completely integrated," a comment from Rony on the union's daily meeting space is telling. "At 8:00 a.m. any morning," she wrote, "you will find in the Rebel Restaurant of the Dixie Hotel (appropriately decked out with confederate flags) the eighteen people charged with substituting hope for fear among the workers of the mills."<sup>49</sup> That the organizers in the mid-1960s could not find a

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<sup>48</sup>Eli Zivkovich quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 127.

<sup>49</sup>Vera Rony, "The Second Southern Revolution, report to Scott Hoyman, 1965," TWUA #5103, Folder 137.

location for union meetings not “decked out” with symbols of white supremacy – or perhaps saw no reason to search for a different space – speaks to how deeply the racial hierarchy was encoded into the landscape.

In 1973 Crystal Lee Sutton worked in the Delta #4 Fabricating Plant folding towels for Stevens’ gift box sets. Prior to joining the organizing drive in May 1973, her life was not very different from those of many working-class women in the postwar South. Born in Roanoke Rapids in 1940 to Albert and Odell Pulley, both textile workers, Crystal Lee was working the night shift at the mill by the eleventh grade. Her father, with whom she had a loving but sometimes uneasy relationship, was emphatically anti-union. Although Crystal Lee did not question her father when he insisted that unions brought nothing but trouble, she understood at an early age the class hierarchy that kept mill workers – “lintheads” – at the bottom and ensured a constant supply of cheap labor. Many teachers looked down on the children of mill workers and expected them to do poorly; dropout rates were high among the sons and daughters of millhands. They saw little point in graduating when their schoolwork seemed so irrelevant to their futures as wage-earners. “It was very hard to do your homework in the mill, studying Macbeth and all the crap. Where the hell has that done me any good?” Sutton recalled in an interview.<sup>50</sup> In schools dominated by the children of middle-class and wealthy families, mill children were excluded from the pre-adolescent and teen culture. By the time she reached high school, Crystal Lee had repeatedly considered dropping out of school. At her father’s insistence, she managed to scrape by in her classes though she left midday to

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<sup>50</sup>Crystal Lee Sutton quoted in Byerly, *Hard Times*, 202.

work the second shift at the mill. In 1959, she was the first in her family to graduate from high school.

There was rarely a moment in her adult life when Sutton did not hold a job: she worked at a florist shop, a local nightclub, and in several textile mills before her employment at Stevens. Throughout her young adult life, economic realities and family responsibilities thwarted her ambition and desires. In high school, she had hoped to become a beautician or secretary, but both occupations required training she could not afford. She had considered military service as a way to avoid her seemingly inevitable fate in the textile mills, but her mother's admonishment that "nothing but whores join the WACs" checked her enthusiasm. She married Junior Wood in 1959 and had her first child by the time she was nineteen. Junior died in a car accident just two years later, and Crystal Lee, widowed, lonely, and only twenty years old, got pregnant during a brief affair with a young man she used to date in high school. "Miles Simmons" was home for the summer from his undergraduate studies in Chapel Hill.<sup>51</sup> She explained to Leifermann that although Simmons wanted to drop out of school and marry her, she refused to marry him. She believed he was not responsible enough to be a father to her children and would later resent her for causing him to leave college. Later she regretted not marrying him, "just for the name, for the child's sake."<sup>52</sup>

In 1962 Crystal Lee married Larry "Cookie" Jordan, and gave birth to her third child, Elizabeth, three years later. Cookie was recently divorced and had custody of his young daughter. As he explained it to biographer Henry Leifermann, their marriage was

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<sup>51</sup>This is the pseudonym used in Leifermann's biography. Sutton apparently would not provide his real name.

<sup>52</sup>Sutton quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 37.



one of convenience. “She and I both needed somebody,” he remembered. “She needed a father for her two boys, and I needed a mother for my daughter.” Whatever romance existed during their short courtship disappeared quickly, and though Cookie was a faithful and reliable husband, Crystal Lee felt bored and isolated by her new life as a housewife and mother of four. Three years after their marriage, she had an affair with “Ira Stonehouse,” a wealthy married man.<sup>53</sup> Crystal Lee’s experiences during the affair reinforced her earlier observations of the class inequality in Roanoke Rapids. She noted that Stonehouse “had money, and he had always been used to getting what he wanted.” When she tried to end the affair, he struck her, knocking her to the floor. Afraid that he would never leave her alone and that Cookie would be unable to protect her, she told her husband about the affair and they went to the chief of police, Cookie’s first cousin Drewery Beale, to take out a restraining order. Sutton recalled how hard it was to tell Beale the details of the affair, reflecting later that she supposed “Beale thought that I was a two-bit whore.” Still Sutton insisted that whatever Beale thought of her, she deserved the same protection under law as anyone else. The police department, she asserted, was “supposed to treat a two-bit whore just the way they do a doctor’s wife.”<sup>54</sup>

Although Crystal Lee remained than satisfied with her marriage, Cookie provided her with a comfortable life and served as a father to her sons, Jay and Mark, and for that she felt gratitude and affection for him. Cookie worked in the unionized Albemarle Paper Mill. This was the first time Crystal Lee saw how workers benefited from union representation, though Cookie never talked about the union with her. If she occasionally

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<sup>53</sup>Pseudonym used in Leifermann’s biography.

<sup>54</sup>Sutton quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 83-86.

reflected that her husband seemed better off than Stevens' workers, it never occurred to her that a union could or should be brought into the mills, much less that she should be involved in any attempt to do so. Still, by the time she was exposed to the possibility of union representation at Stevens, Sutton had already formed an understanding of class inequality through her everyday experiences in the small towns dominated by the textile industry in which she grew up, worked, and raised her children. The language of fair treatment and equal opportunity rang true with her personal experiences, frustrations, and fears.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Leifermann's biography provides the most detailed account of Sutton's life prior to 1973. See also Hodges, "The Real Norma Rae," 254-255. Sutton spoke with Byerly about the ways in which her ambitions as a teenager were curtailed by her family's social and economic class. See Byerly, *Hard Times*, 202-205.

## Chapter 4

### From Shop Floor to Front Porches

When Sutton returned to work after an injury in mid-April 1973, she noticed a flier on the company's bulletin board announcing a TWUA organizing meeting. She had no previous association with the union, nor did she have any prior experience with collective resistance, but she had long harbored resentment towards J.P. Stevens for the power the company held over the mill families in Roanoke Rapids. Mill workers' children, Sutton feared, learned from their parents an attitude of resignation. "All their life, all the children ever hear is JP. The parents come home and say, 'Lord a mercy, they worked me down today,'" she explained to Leifermann. "So naturally they're going to pick it up, learn about it. And they are going to work for JP. JP wants to get the family into the mill."<sup>56</sup>

Sutton attended the TWUA meeting on May 13 and quickly immersed herself in the organizing drive. Willie Jones, who worked with Sutton as a union organizer in the early 1980s, suggests that Crystal Lee's sudden turn to unionism was not so unusual.

Sutton, she recalled, had an "open heart" and felt the pain of the injustices she witnessed

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<sup>56</sup>Sutton quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 109. Many textile workers expressed concerns that their children would follow them into the mills. When Nola Staley, a mill worker in Greensboro, N.C., active with the union and the Brown Lung Association, was asked if she wanted her children to work in the mills, Staley felt the questioner "might as well have spit in my face." See Byerly, *Hard Times*, 191.

around her. “When you look around you and see people being mistreated there’s a little something in you that wants to say something until it builds up more and more and more,” Jones explained, “and all of the sudden you explode and you start taking on the fight of people” who cannot or will not stand up for themselves.<sup>57</sup>

At the first meeting she attended with her friend Liz Johnson in a small African-American church, Sutton was one of only a handful of white workers. Zivkovich noticed the two white women in the front row immediately. As he noted in his first weekly report to his supervisors in Charlotte, the “major problem was lack of white interest.” He encouraged Sutton to come to more meetings and explained that it was “imperative to get the white people involved here.” Sutton’s presence at meetings and in the mill, wearing the biggest union pin Zivkovich had, was no doubt a boon to the campaign, which suffered not only from a lack of white support but also from the company’s intimidation of all workers, black and white, who showed any interest in or support of the TWUA.<sup>58</sup>

In order to build a successful organizing committee of workers that would drum up support from within the plant walls and in the workers’ neighborhoods, Zivkovich felt that he needed to overcome the mutual distrust between white and black workers. Despite the legal desegregation of public spaces, racial lines divided workers in the plant and in the town. One of the first black women hired at the Cannon Mills textile plant in Kannapolis, North Carolina, testified to the silence, secrecy, and physical distance that separated white and black workers. “As a race, you definitely don’t tell white people your business,” she said. “You definitely don’t do that. You only talk to the ones that, well, if

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<sup>57</sup>Interview with Willie Jones, January 15, 2010 (in Fink’s possession).

<sup>58</sup>Sutton quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 129-130. See Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens!* 39, on J.P. Stevens’ intimidation and race baiting tactics. Zivkovich quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 127, 129.

they don't got nothing to give you, you don't tell them nothing."<sup>59</sup> Sutton's husband was convinced that the black workers in the plant thought she was a spy for the company.<sup>60</sup>

Because of this history of mutual distrust and racially divided public spaces, it was especially significant that Sutton offered her home as a space for union meetings. Zivkovich could not convince any of the white churches in town to host a union meeting. He continued to use black churches until word got to him that white workers would not attend meetings there. Sutton's home became an important site of interracial organizing. Cookie noted that there would often be "twelve or fifteen cars parked at our house [and] black people standing in the front yard and all, sitting around talking."<sup>61</sup> The fact that Sutton opened her home to black and white workers equally surely went a long way towards easing any distrust that black workers felt toward her.

In the early years of the Stevens campaign, a great deal of union activity occurred in the kitchens and on the front porches of mill workers' homes. "House-calling" was a common tactic employed by organizers to establish connections within the community and to foster familiarity and friendliness, building on a long tradition of "porch culture" in which gossip, news, and favors were traded among neighbors and coworkers.<sup>62</sup> Workers' homes had also served a critical function by providing a "small, secret" space where workers could escape from company surveillance.<sup>63</sup> By 1974, the TWUA had

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<sup>59</sup>Corine Lytle Cannon quoted in Byerly, *Hard Times*, 155.

<sup>60</sup>Cookie Jordan quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 129.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>62</sup>On "porch culture," see Hall et al, *Like a Family*, 169-172, 309.

<sup>63</sup>Sol Stein, "This is the real JPS: TWUA tells the story of a textile giant," 1975, North Carolina Collection, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Ed McConville, "The Southern Textile War: Two Years After Union 'Victory,'" *The Nation*, October 2, 1976, TWUA #5103, Folder 25.

made considerable headway through legal action in combating Stevens' practice of firing pro-union workers, but mill workers in Roanoke Rapids continued to be wary. Indeed, the fact that two of Sutton's neighbors were supervisors at Stevens concerned Zivkovich, but he also took it as an opportunity to prove to workers that he "wasn't afraid of that, or of them, and... they didn't have to be either."<sup>64</sup> Sutton provided Zivkovich with the physical space and local connections he needed to engage workers and combat the climate of fear and surveillance created by Stevens' anti-union tactics.

Bringing the union into her home may have served an additional function for Sutton. By mid-May, she was at the makeshift union headquarters at the Motel Dixie before and after every shift and often brought her children with her on her days off. Hosting meetings at home may have helped Sutton balance her labor as a mother with her union activism, as many working-class women were compelled to do. Beverly Riggs, an employee at Stevens' fabricating plant in Roanoke Rapids, at first stayed at home with the children while her husband Rylan attended union meetings. Dissatisfied with receiving information secondhand, Riggs explained, "I started going to union meetings too, and we just carried the children with us. After that, I got more involved with the union than Rylan."<sup>65</sup> Literally bringing the union home with her, Crystal hoped to teach her children that they should stand up for themselves.

Sutton made her family part of her public activism in other ways by organizing a group of local children as TWUA "cheerleaders." At rallies, demonstrations, and even the

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<sup>64</sup>Zivkovich quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 130-131.

<sup>65</sup>Tom Herriman, "At the Heart of the Stevens Campaign Are Families Trying to Make Ends Meet," *Labor Unity* 62, No. 13 (December 1976): 10, at the Crystal Lee Sutton Collection, Alamance Community College, Acc. #986.87 (hereafter referred to as "CLS #986.87").

state fair, nearly thirty daughters of mill workers wore handmade uniforms and performed routines they practiced weekly. When Sutton sent the daughters of Stevens' employees marching proudly in town parades in their TWUA uniforms, she challenged the company's insistence that the union supporters in town were outsiders or dangerous radicals who did not represent the true sentiments of the local labor force. She also offered a subtle challenge to the town's class dynamics; during her own childhood, she recalled, the cheerleaders never "came from the wrong part of town, the mill village part."<sup>66</sup> For Sutton, unionizing Stevens meant more than just collecting membership cards. It was a campaign to change the way families in Roanoke Rapids related to the company and to each other.

Sutton's enthusiasm and commitment to the campaign was exceptional, but her remarkable story has often overshadowed the contributions of others, especially black workers. Joseph Williams, the African-American worker responsible for gathering more than sixty membership cards just a few days after Zivkovich held the first meeting in April, was fired in mid-May for his union activism. Countless other men and women in Roanoke Rapids risked their livelihoods simply by wearing union buttons or attending meetings. It was Sutton's dramatic confrontation with the management at the Delta #4 fabricating plant on May 30, 1973 that catapulted her into the spotlight. Because that day marked a turning point in both the campaign and Sutton's life, it is worth closely examining the event for what it reveals about the forces and assumptions that shaped and informed her activism and reactions to it.

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<sup>66</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 173. See also PBS television, *Woman Alive!*, produced and directed by Joan Shigekawa, June 19, 1974, at CLS#986.87.

## Chapter 5

### Confrontation at Delta #4 Fabricating Plant

Around the end of May, several workers informed Zivkovich that management had posted a new notice on the company bulletin board. The four-page letter addressed to the mill workers contained the usual anti-union rhetoric, but the third page reportedly implied that the union was a front for a black power movement that would take over the plant and the town. NLRB rulings in the past decade had rendered such management efforts to intimidate and racially divide mill workers illegal.<sup>67</sup> The floor bosses at Stevens were aware of the effect the letter might have on white workers, many of whom were already wary of black participation in the campaign. They also knew that the union could bring charges against them before the NLRB for posting a racially inflammatory message on company property. Supervisors kept a careful watch over employees who seemed to linger in front of the bulletin board for too long. They ordered away several employees who were known union supporters, and when Sutton tried to copy the letter on Monday, May 28, assistant overseer Dave Moody stopped her.

On Wednesday, during Sutton's usual meeting with Zivkovich before her shift, he impressed upon her the importance of getting a copy of the letter. He charged her with

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<sup>67</sup>For more on the TWUA legal campaign to combat Stevens' race-baiting and intimidation tactics, see Minchin, *Don't Sleep With Stevens!*.



this task because she struck him as someone “who if she said she was going to do something she’d do it.” He also saw this as an opportunity to test Crystal’s commitment to the organizing drive. “She appeared to be intelligent, and she appeared sincere,” he explained to Leifermann. “What I really felt was, here is a test, for Crystal.”<sup>68</sup> The fact that Zivkovich wanted Crystal to prove herself, after her daily work for the union during the past month, speaks to the level of caution union organizers exerted to keep company spies outside the inner circle of the organizing drive.<sup>69</sup> But Eli also wanted to test Crystal because he suspected that her enthusiasm for the campaign stemmed from her dissatisfaction with her marriage and boredom with her job.<sup>70</sup>

Sutton’s restlessness, including her dissatisfaction at home, did indeed motivate her political activism. When she recounted the story of her resistance in the following months to Henry Leifermann, she wove together indictments of class and gender inequality. She was thrilled by her newfound willingness to confront her male supervisors, thinking to herself, “All my life it seems like I’ve been told what to do. I had Daddy as a boss. And I had Cookie as a boss. All my life I’ve always had to get permission from a man, and I’m tired of it.”<sup>71</sup> She explained to Leifermann that as she stood folding towels in the first hours of her shift, her thoughts wavered between the persistent helplessness she felt, trapped in the mills and bounded by her responsibilities as wife and mother, and her growing bitterness towards the structural inequalities that kept Stevens’ workers economically and psychologically dependent on the mill.

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<sup>68</sup>Zivkovich quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 136.

<sup>69</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 143.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 132.

<sup>71</sup>Sutton quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 141.

At first, Sutton considered a way to discretely copy the letter and avoid direct confrontation. She enlisted the help of a co-worker, and together they plotted to memorize the letter paragraph by paragraph and sneak off to the ladies' room to copy the pieces down. This tactic, however, proved ineffective. It was taking too long, the women would forget the wording of the letter, and their frequent trips to the bathroom drew the attention of Moody and his supervisor, Ray Mabry. Crystal Lee called Zivkovich from the pay phone inside the mill, explained their difficulties, and told him she was going on her dinner break and would try another day. Zivkovich, however, pressed her more urgently, and Sutton grew frustrated with the cat-and-mouse game she was playing with her supervisors.<sup>72</sup>

As her co-workers filed into the cafeteria for their dinner break, Sutton took advantage of a rare moment when attention was diverted away from the bulletin board to copy the letter. Moody approached her, but this time she ignored his orders to stop. Moody's direct supervisor, the general overseer James Alston, joined Moody at the bulletin board. Sutton insisted that she had the right to copy the letter during her break. When Mason Lee, the general supervisor of Delta #4, ordered her to stop, she replied, "Well, Mr. Lee, I didn't know you knew my name," and continued to copy. When he threatened to call the police, she laughed and said, smiling at him, "Mr. Lee, I am going to finish copying this letter. And then, I am going to eat ... supper." Crystal Lee copied

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 141-143. In a few interviews, Sutton added that when she complained that it was too difficult and she was about to go on her dinner break, Eli purposefully provoked her anger by telling her, "you can afford to lose a few pounds and I need that letter." See for instance Byerly, *Hard Times*, 208.

the letter word for word in front of them.<sup>73</sup> When she finished copying the letter, she tucked the paper down under her bra, certain that “nobody will get it down there.”<sup>74</sup>

Sutton’s determination to copy the letter was remarkable, but her resistance reveals more than individual assertiveness or loyalty to the campaign. Sutton relied on a gendered performance of evasion and deflection, her male supervisors’ assumptions of appropriate contact between men and women, and her visibility on the shop floor to copy the letter and stand up to her supervisors. Like the “disorderly women” historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall identified in the 1929 Elizabethton, Tennessee, strike, Sutton used evasive smiles, disarming laughter, and a parody of friendly banter to resist and subvert male authority.<sup>75</sup>

In his rendering of the event, biographer Henry Leifermann suggests that Sutton was able to defy the men’s authority because “none of the three bossmen had faced such defiance in a mill hand before, and the shock of it left them stunned.”<sup>76</sup> But it is significant that this was a white woman publicly confronting a group of men. In her affidavit to the NLRB a month after the event, Sutton indicated that she had been prepared to defend herself with the clipboard she was holding if the men tried to touch her, but her supervisors never attempted to physically stop her or take the copies from

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<sup>73</sup>Sutton, quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 146.

<sup>74</sup>Sutton, quoted in Byerly, *Hard Times*, 276.

<sup>75</sup>Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in her analysis of the 1929 Elizabethton textile strike, noted that women strikers used gender identity to subvert authority, and defended their rebellion with “[m]ock gentility [and] transgressive laughter.” See “Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (1986): 354-382. For gender as performance, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>76</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 147.

her.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, when Sutton warned the men, “You better not touch me,” they drew away from her, apparently reluctant to violate the physical space that Sutton could claim as a white woman. African-American women also used notions of womanhood to subvert authority and display resistance, though they could not always rely on their gender deflecting physical violence from white men. Sutton at first adopted a playful, almost flirtatious, attitude towards the men to deflect their authority. Black women were more vulnerable to harassment and assault from white men, however, and would run the risk of bringing further unwanted sexual attention by employing Sutton’s tactic. Some black women felt bold confrontation was a risky but crucial survival strategy in the mills, while others relied on evasion and cooperation rather than direct resistance.<sup>78</sup>

After hiding the copied letter under her bra, Sutton went on her dinner break and the men did not bother her. Her supervisors may have been concerned that union lawyers would argue for wrongful termination if they threatened to fire her to force her to turn over the letter. When Crystal Lee finished her supper, she redid her makeup and returned to her workstation. She began folding towels when Moody directed her to Mason Lee’s office. In Sutton’s account, Lee never mentioned the letter. He berated her for using the pay phone on company time. Sutton refused to respond to his accusations. She put her hands over her ears and told the five men and the forelady in the room, “All of you people in here are against me. And I’m telling you, I’m not going to say anything until I

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<sup>77</sup>“Affidavit [by Crystal Lee Jordan] to Field Examiner Jack Bradshaw of the NLRB,” June 21, 1973, quoted in Hodges, “The Real Norma Rae,” 258.

<sup>78</sup>See Byerly, *Hard Times*, interviews with Annie Adams, 131-136, and “Johnny Mae Fields,” 137-142. For an analysis of African-American women’s use of gender in freedom struggles in the South, see Laurie Green’s *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

have all of your names.”<sup>79</sup> Lee shouted at her to leave the plant. Uncertain what to do next, Sutton insisted that she return to her workstation to retrieve her purse. The men offered no objections and she stormed back to the shopfloor. Her supervisors followed her, joined by a security guard and a police officer, Lieutenant Harry Vaughn. “Out of sheer frustration,” Crystal Lee scrawled one word, UNION, on a piece of cardboard. She climbed up on to her workstation and held the sign above her head. As she turned slowly in a circle, workers began raising their hands in the “victory” sign to her. Mabry ordered her to come down, but no one laid a hand on her.<sup>80</sup>

One can imagine what might have transpired if a white male worker had offered similar resistance. Violence in union campaigns was not uncommon. In March 1972, for instance, a foreman attacked a male unionist at the Wellman Mills in Hemingway, South Carolina, and in the previous February, an anti-union man drew a gun in the TWUA’s office in Andrews, South Carolina.<sup>81</sup> J.P. Stevens waged a notoriously relentless and often illegal battle against unionization; the supervisors may have been surprised by Sutton’s defiance, but it is unlikely that they were intimidated by her resolve. Their words alone did not deter her, but they were uncertain of exactly when it would be acceptable to use physical force or were perhaps unwilling to do so at all. Whether inhibited by conventional understandings of appropriate contact between men and women, or concerned with what legal action the union might take against them if they used force on

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<sup>79</sup>Sutton quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 148.

<sup>80</sup>Sutton quoted in Janet Simpson, “Little Did ‘Norma Rae’ Realize Her Deed Would Result in Fame,” *Eden Daily News*, January 13, 1983, at CLS #986.87.

<sup>81</sup>Leifermann, “The Unions Are Coming: Trouble in the South’s First Industry,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 5, 1973, Section 6, at CLS #986.87.

a woman, gendered assumptions shaped their reaction and provided Sutton with a degree of protection from violent suppression of resistance.

Sutton had sworn that it would take “the whole police department before you take me out of this mill,” but when she climbed down from the table and saw Chief of Police Drewery Beale, her neighbor and her first cousin’s husband, it was not fear of institutional authority that tempered her resistance. As she explained in her biography, she knew at that moment she would have to leave the plant with Beale because “Drewery knows things.” Beale knew from his wife that Sutton’s second son was born illegitimately. He learned of her extramarital affair when she was forced to take out a restraining order against the man in order to end the relationship. Beale’s knowledge of her sexual past gave him power over her, and she consented to leave the plant with him.

If before Crystal Lee had played coy and then defiant with her supervisors, she now felt compelled to assert her respectability. “I said to Drewery Beale, ‘I’ll tell you one thing: You’re going to open that door for me to go out of here.’ I said, ‘I am a lady,’” she told Leifermann. “Because see, Drewery knows things. He knows me.”<sup>82</sup> She also demanded that he sign a piece of paper promising to take her straight home. Beale began writing, but when he noticed the other men staring at him, he stopped and threw the paper aside. As he led her out of the plant, Sutton recalled that he said, “I’m not going to get in that car with you by myself.”<sup>83</sup> It is possible that Beale was concerned that Sutton was so unpredictable and volatile, she would attack him or attempt to run away. Or perhaps the response was intended to put Crystal Lee in her place by insinuating he would not be caught alone with such a promiscuous and disreputable woman. With the eyes of her

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<sup>82</sup>Sutton quoted in Leifermann, *Crystall Lee*, 151.

<sup>83</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 152.

coworkers fixed on her, Sutton gave a casual, almost flippant response. Laughing, she replied, “Drewery, I’m not going to do anything to you.”<sup>84</sup>

Once outside the plant, Sutton considered for the first time that Chief Beale and Lieutenant Vaughn would in fact take her to jail. She tried to appeal to Beale as kin, reminding him, “I know you. You are going to take me home.”<sup>85</sup> But when they directed her to the backseat of the police car, Sutton struggled with the two officers. She dropped her purse and gripped the chain-link gate at the entrance of the mill tightly. Vaughn pried at her fingers while Beale pulled her back from the fence. Whether the men felt free to use force on Sutton once she initiated the struggle or were emboldened in their treatment of her once away from the audience of millworkers, the two men wrenched her from the gate and shoved her into the back of the police cruiser. She was taken to the station and charged with disorderly conduct. The charges against her were eventually dropped, but the event would have far-reaching implications for the campaign, the town, and, most of all, for Sutton and her family.

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<sup>84</sup>Sutton, quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 152.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

## Chapter 6

### The Personal is Political in Roanoke Rapids

After the confrontation, news of the arrest spread quickly in Roanoke Rapids, and Sutton knew that gossip about her past would spread as well. If before the event some people had known – or thought they knew – about her past relationships, Crystal Lee’s dramatic confrontation and arrest now guaranteed that she would be the talk of the town. One week after the event she revealed to her children that they each had different fathers and that she had never married her second son’s father. She also told them about her affair. Mark was thirteen, Jay, twelve, and Elizabeth was ten. Crystal Lee assumed that sooner or later her children would hear the gossip. “I figured someone would be cruel enough to get that stuff going with the children in school,” she explained. Sutton wanted her children to hear the truth of their parentage from their mother, not a malicious or thoughtless stranger. She feared that if her children found out from others that she had kept these secrets from them, they would never again trust her.<sup>86</sup>

Later that summer Crystal Lee went a step further when Leifermann interviewed her for his story on the Stevens campaign. She laid out every detail of her personal life, including her son’s illegitimacy and her infidelity. When the article was published in the

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<sup>86</sup>Byerly, *Hard Times*, 212. See also Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 162-163.



*New York Times Sunday Magazine* on August 5, 1973, rumor became fact, and Sutton, for better or worse, emerged a local celebrity. Sutton had assumed a prominent role in the organizing drive in the few weeks leading up to her confrontation with her supervisors. After her dramatic show of union support and subsequent arrest, she became the most visible member of the organizing drive. She was certainly the most talked about it. Historians have shown how women engaged in public wage work, activism, and social reform were vulnerable to attacks on their respectability and accusations of sexual deviance.<sup>87</sup> Sutton knew she could not control how people talked about her but she was not willing to be a passive object of the town talk. She reclaimed some power in the discourse when she chose to reveal her secrets rather than be exposed by others. While she admitted that she viewed her past affairs as mistakes, she refused to show shame or fear regarding her past actions or public exposure. Her husband's comment on her decision to publicize her private life suggests that he may have been more reluctant to thrust their family into the center of union battle. Cookie seemed to understand, though, his wife's need to clean the skeletons out her closet, and was unwilling or unable to convince her to do otherwise. "She thought it would help," Cookie explained. "I thought it would help. I mean, you think about this thing, telling that story and living in this town, some people knew it, some thought it. We talked it over, and we just decided, well, it'll hurt us, it'll hurt. But it'll help too. It'll help somebody else."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>See Hall, "Disorderly Women," Enke, *Finding the Movement*. See also Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2000), Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Leacock, eds., *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

<sup>88</sup>Cookie Jordan quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 188.

Publicizing her personal life was a sacrifice for the campaign that Sutton was willing, even eager, to make. She acknowledged that it took a toll on her marriage, admitting to Leifermann that people sometimes “made smart remarks to [Cookie] about his wife because they know these things.”<sup>89</sup> In a 1974 interview, Sutton explained that the *New York Times* article freed her from the small town rumor mill because “nobody will ever have anything to hold over me no more.”<sup>90</sup> The public revelations of her past secrets gave her a sense of empowerment and freedom, allowing her to assume a visible role in the campaign and fulfill some of her personal ambitions.

After she was fired, Sutton spent long hours at the TWUA office. “The company just did me a favor,” she recalled later, “because that just gave me more time to work for the union.”<sup>91</sup> She made house calls with Zivkovich and distributed union materials at the mill gate between shifts. She continued to host meetings and informal gatherings in her home. Cookie had held his tongue when Crystal Lee brought white and black workers into their home, and now, as the union consumed more and more of his wife’s time, he took on household responsibilities men rarely expected to have to perform. Though Cookie sometimes expressed pride in his wife, he resented how the union disrupted his home and family. An argument erupted in March late one night after the children were in bed. When Crystal Lee warned Cookie that he would wake the children, he fired back, “How the hell can you talk about the children when you never see them?”<sup>92</sup> To Crystal,

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<sup>89</sup>Sutton quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 163.

<sup>90</sup>Sutton quoted in Byerly, *Hard Times*, 212.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>92</sup>Cookie Jordan quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 179.

this accusation was unfair, for her activism was motivated in part by her concern for her children's future.

The quarrels between Cookie and Crystal Lee worsened as she became more visible in the campaign and insisted on her right to place her personal commitment to the union over her domestic responsibilities. After the publication of Leifermann's *Times* article, the feminist spokesperson and editor of *Ms.* magazine Gloria Steinem and Joan Shigekawa, a television producer, asked Sutton to appear in the pilot episode of *Woman Alive!*, a nationally broadcast PBS series affiliated with *Ms.* magazine. While Cookie made dinner and did the dishes in the background, Crystal Lee explained to the camera how her involvement with the union gave her "an opportunity to be the woman I always wanted to be." She admitted that Cookie didn't approve of her involvement in the organizing drive but asserted that she "had gone into this thing one hundred percent to win." The camera followed Sutton to a union meeting where she recounted with some bitterness that people in town were "saying that it's a bunch of whores standing out, getting people to join the union." Later in the episode, she related her frustration that since she was young, it seemed to her that "the man could do what he wanted to and the woman, she couldn't do nothing, especially with your local gossip."<sup>93</sup> The interviews in *Woman Alive!* reveal how Sutton blended critiques of class and gender inequality and the success of the organizing drive with her own personal fulfillment and liberation.

Sutton was an aggressive and successful organizer. She brought in fifty union cards one week while Zivkovich and his assistant, Margaret Banks, were out of town. "There was no way that anyone could back off after talking to her," Zivkovich told

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<sup>93</sup>PBS television, *Woman Alive!*, produced and directed by Joan Shigekawa, June 19, 1974, at CLS#986.87.

Leifermann. Zivkovich referred to her as “the Mother Jones of the textile union.”<sup>94</sup> Sutton’s local knowledge was a significant resource for Zivkovich. She knew which workers supported the organizing drive but refused to show public support. She brought Zivkovich to those workers’ homes late at night – when no one would see them and the hesitant workers would be more relaxed – and he secured their promise to vote union in an election. Sutton provided information it would have taken outside organizers months to acquire, such as which family members would need to be brought to the union side before others would follow. “Eli just got to the point where... he’d say, ‘Crystal, do you know so and so?’” Cookie explained to Leifermann. “And she’d say, ‘Yeah, I know him. I know where it is. I know his wife. I know about this, and I know about this, and I know about that.’”<sup>95</sup>

Zivkovich pressured the union to fight Crystal Lee’s firing before the NLRB and also to hire her as full-time organizer for the campaign. At his insistence, the union hired her as an organizer, but with the stipulation that no one knew she was on the TWUA payroll.<sup>96</sup> Given the union’s preoccupation with crafting an image of the campaign as an indigenous movement with support from the community, one would think TWUA officials would have jumped at the chance to hire Sutton, a local woman with connections and credibility as a member of the southern textile labor force.<sup>97</sup> But as Zivkovich explained to Leifermann, Harold McIver, his supervisor in Charlotte, wanted to distance

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<sup>94</sup>Zivkovich quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 170.

<sup>95</sup>Cookie Jordan quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 171.

<sup>96</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 163-165.

<sup>97</sup>On the TWUA’s preoccupation with establishing credibility and connections in local communities, see “International Staff Conference, New York City, A Summary and Evaluation,” January 29-30, 1973, TWUA #5103, Folder 20.

the union from Sutton after her public revelations of her past. McIver was convinced a direct association with her would damage the union's moral credibility with conservative southerners.<sup>98</sup> In a 1979 interview, Sutton remarked that she felt that her relationship with the union was always problematic. It seemed to her that union officials wished she would "crawl in a hole somewhere and hide."<sup>99</sup>

McIver's concern that association with Sutton might be more of a liability than an asset was not entirely unfounded. Zivkovich explained to Leifermann that shortly after the confrontation and arrest, an NLRB investigator invited him to dinner. The first thing he did when Zivkovich arrived at his home was ask about "that stripper that got up on the table and hootchy-kootchied and all." Zivkovich was dismayed that someone allied with organized labor would speak so dismissively of a pro-union worker.<sup>100</sup> Sutton recounted in *Woman Alive!* an exchange she had with an older white female mill worker who refused to take a TWUA flier. According to Crystal, the woman said to her, "I been wanting to meet you. I sure do feel sorry for you, because of any woman that has little enough respect for herself to do what you did."<sup>101</sup> Among the pro-union workers, gossip about Sutton's past caused tension in the campaign. A rumor surfaced that Sutton had made a pornographic movie with a local police officer, and Zivkovich was compelled to dispel the gossip in a meeting with the men said to have distributed the film.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 164-165.

<sup>99</sup>Sutton, quoted in Lelia Carson Albrecht, "The Real 'Norma Rae' is Anguished by the Hollywood Replay of Her Life and Battles," *People Magazine*, Vol. 11, No. 17, April 30, 1979, 43-44, at CLS #986.87.

<sup>100</sup>Zivkovich, quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 163-164.

<sup>101</sup>Sutton, quoted in *Woman Alive!*

<sup>102</sup>It should be noted that this rumor was completely spurious.

Leifermann attributed the rumor to the workers' resentment towards Sutton; they were intimidated by or jealous of the dominant role she assumed in the campaign. Crystal Lee remembered several years later that she "sensed a lot of jealousy" and never felt that she had "fallen right in together with" the other women in Roanoke Rapids.<sup>103</sup>

The gossip and constant bickering peaked with two incidents in December. Sutton and several of the organizers had secured a permit to have a float in the town's Christmas parade, bearing the message, "Good Tidings and Merry Christmas from the Textile Workers Union of America."<sup>104</sup> The mill workers' daughters on the TWUA cheerleading squad would march along, performing their union cheers and singing carols, while the adults rode atop or walked alongside the float. Sutton recalled that the workers were excited about participating in the parade, especially the "mothers [who had never been] cheerleaders or been on a float."<sup>105</sup> On the day of the parade, however, a quarrel erupted between Cookie and one of the male mill workers over whose car would pull the float. The argument escalated and the men began throwing punches when Zivkovich stepped in and talked the mill worker into leaving. Two days later, an argument between Sutton and Peter Galladet, a TWUA organizer sent to replace Margaret Banks, forced Zivkovich to banish Crystal from the office to "keep the ship together."<sup>106</sup> Though she avoided the union office after that, she continued to devote her days and nights to the campaign.

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<sup>103</sup>Mary Bishop, "The Diary of a Union Organizer," *The Charlotte Observer*, May 7, 1978, and Mary Day Mordecai, "'My Head Runs 90 Miles an Hour,' Says Woman Labor Union Organizer," *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 19, 1974, both at CLS #986.87.

<sup>104</sup>Byerly, *Hard Times*, 214, and Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 175-176.

<sup>105</sup>Sutton quoted in Byerly, *Hard Times*, 214.

<sup>106</sup>Zivkovich quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 174-176.

Despite her uneasy relationship with the TWUA and conflict with some local unionists, Sutton continued to contribute to the campaign, even as her participation took an increasing toll on her marriage. In March 1974, Crystal and Cookie, their relationship strained since her full-time immersion in the campaign the previous summer, ended their marriage, and Crystal and the children moved to Burlington. She was unable to find work and moved back to Roanoke Rapids in time to witness the election victory in August 1974; in a 1,685 to 1,448 vote, the TWUA won the right to represent the Stevens workers.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup>Minchin attributes the Roanoke Rapids victory to a combination of factors: workers confidence in the union was bolstered by the NLRB rulings, reinstated workers reinvigorated the campaign once they were back at work, and the failing profit-sharing plan united black and white workers behind common economic interests. Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens!* 73-74.

## Chapter 7

### Being the “Real Norma Rae”

The election victory opened the next chapter of the TWUA’s battle with J.P. Stevens: the struggle to secure a bargaining contract. Stevens evaded and stalled negotiations with the union, diminishing much of the excitement and confidence of the election victory in Roanoke Rapids. In 1976, the TWUA merged with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America to form the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union of America (ACTWU). Union officials implemented a new strategy to force Stevens to bargain in good faith. They began an aggressive nationwide boycott with a catchy slogan: “Don’t Sleep With Stevens!” This new strategy depended upon the union attracting allies and publicity at a national level.<sup>108</sup>

In 1979, a fictionalized account of Sutton’s story formed the basis of the Academy-award winning movie *Norma Rae*. Producers Tamara Asseyeu and Alex Rose read about Crystal Lee in Leifermann’s *New York Times* article and biography and were attracted to the story of a feisty, independent woman’s personal growth and dramatic resistance to male authority. They chose Martin Ritt, a liberal filmmaker with socially conscious and labor-friendly films such as *The Great White Hope* and *The Molly*

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<sup>108</sup>Hodges, “The Real Norma Rae,” 262. Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens!* 76-77.



*Maguires* to his name, to direct the film.<sup>109</sup> *Norma Rae* was a blockbuster hit, and in response, the union sought to reestablish ties with Crystal Lee Sutton, who had been struggling to find work and support her family for the past five years. ACTWU was eager to capitalize on the publicity that the movie's positive and sympathetic portrayal of the battle to unionize a southern textile plant brought to their struggling campaign.<sup>110</sup>

In 1979, Sutton lived in Burlington with her third husband, Preston Sutton, and worked as a maid at the local hotel. The film's producers had contacted her a year earlier with an offer to buy the rights to her story for \$25,000, but Sutton refused the offer, believing that by doing so, she could prevent them from using her story without her approval of the script. The producers secured rights from Leifermann to use his biography instead. Crystal Lee had hoped at the time that Barbara Kopple, director of the 1977 Oscar-winning documentary of a Kentucky coalminers' strike *Harlan County USA*, would make a documentary of the Stevens campaign with actress Lily Tomlin playing Crystal Lee. Sutton was disappointed that the film obscured the role of the countless other supporters who had sacrificed their time and often their jobs for the campaign, especially black workers like Joseph Williams. *Norma Rae*, she maintained, "failed to get the message across... to show people in the South how much they needed a union."

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<sup>109</sup>Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, 204-209.

<sup>110</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens!* 105-109.

<sup>111</sup>Mary Bishop, "The Diary of a Union Organizer," *The Charlotte Observer*, May 7, 1978. "Statement to Eli and Labor Board ref. J.P. Stevens," 1980. Anicia Lane, "Fact and Fiction: Crystal Lee Sutton Insists She Is Not 'Norma Rae,'" *Signal* 10, April 8, 1980. Author unknown, "Crystal Lee's Norma Rae," *The Real Inquirer*, February 9, 1980. C.S. Crawford, "Life on Film? One-time organizer, Crystal Lee says movie is based on her life," *Greensboro Daily Times*, April 18, 1979. at CLS #986.87.

Sutton also disliked the movie's portrayal of her character as a promiscuous and directionless unwed mother whose romantic interest in the union organizer motivated her activism. It is telling that in the movie the scenes that demonstrate Norma Rae's personal growth hinge on her sexuality: her prior promiscuity, the sexual tension between her and Reuben Warshowsky (the union organizer), and her revelation about her past to her children. Indeed, these were the very scenes that Sutton found so troubling. But Ritt believed that if he cut those scenes, "there would be no growth to the woman, and if [Sutton] has the decency at this point to see the film, [she will see that] she comes off like Saint Joan."<sup>112</sup> Warshowsky, by contrast, had to be de-sexualized, according to Ritt, to protect "the whole moral fiber of the film." He precluded any sexual intimacy between Norma Rae and Warshowsky so that it would not seem to audiences that the organizer "was going from one town to another, screwing every dame he made a connection with."<sup>113</sup> The audience needed to see Norma Rae's sexuality in order to understand her commitment to the campaign but could not see Warshowsky's in order to believe his.

Ritt thought that Sutton disliked the film because she was embarrassed by the revelations of her personal life and sexuality. "She's obviously no longer the free spirit [portrayed] in my movie," Ritt said. "She's turned into a middle-class bourgeois woman who doesn't want anyone to know about her life."<sup>114</sup> Ritt misunderstood Crystal Lee's apprehensions about the film. She did not resent that her private life was made public. She had already done that much in countless interviews and the biography. She disliked

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<sup>112</sup>Martin Ritt quoted in *Variety Magazine*, February 28, 1979, at CLS #986.87.

<sup>113</sup>Ritt quoted in Lyn Goldfarb and Anatoli Ilyashov, "Working Class Hero: An Interview with Martin Ritt," in *Martin Ritt: Interviews*, ed. Gabriel Miller (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 87.

<sup>114</sup>Ritt, quoted in Albrecht, "The Real 'Norma Rae' is Anguished."

having no control over how the intimate details of her life were used. She explained in an interview that it was not “that I didn’t want a movie made about my life... I just wanted the movie to show life as it really is, as it was lived at that time.”<sup>115</sup> Sutton expressed a strong sense of ownership over her story and her persona as the “real Norma Rae.”

Whatever misgivings Sutton had about the film, she was eager to work once again for the Stevens campaign. ACTWU hired her in November 1979 and sent her on a speaking tour in 1980 that generated much positive publicity for the union’s campaign, especially for the “Don’t Sleep with Stevens!” boycott. According to Gail Jeffords, a public relations agent hired by ACTWU to manage Sutton’s public engagements, Sutton’s tour reached a potential audience of seventy-five million people through fifty-seven newspaper feature stories, sixty-three local television appearances, and thirty-nine radio appearances.<sup>116</sup> In her new role as the “real Norma Rae,” Sutton took advantage of every opportunity to emphasize that the fight to unionize Stevens was not over and the textile workers’ struggle encompassed much more than the movie acknowledged. She spoke of Stevens’ discrimination against African-American and female workers, about the terrible conditions in the mills, about brown lung disease, and about the way that mill workers, locked in a labor and social system that favored the wealthy and powerful, saw the union as the only way that their children might have a better life.

When interviewers raised questions about her sexual past, Sutton’s replies were similar to those she gave in interviews before the release of the movie. “I’m not worried

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<sup>115</sup>C.S. Crawford, “Life on Film? One-time organizer, Crystal Lee says movie is based on her life,” *Greensboro Daily Times*, April 18, 1979, at CLS #986.87.

<sup>116</sup>Gail Jeffords to Murray Finley et al, “Final Media Report on Media Coverage for Crystal Lee Sutton,” June 30, 1980, in ACTWU Papers, quoted in Hodges, “The Real Norma Rae,” 267.

about [audiences] knowing about the sex and all back then,” she explained in an interview for *People* magazine in April 1979. “I’ve told my children you can be sorry for some of the things you’ve done, but not ashamed. I’m never ashamed.”<sup>117</sup> After the release of the movie, with its focus on the sexual tension between Norma Rae and Warshowsky, Sutton also emphasized the platonic nature of her relationship with Zivkovich. She said that she loved Zivkovich “like a father” and learned from him to “show respect, never fight, and fear nobody but your Lord Jesus Christ.” She reminded audiences that the scene with Norma Rae and the organizer swimming naked in a local pond was fictional. “The real organizer,” she added, “was an older man with a wife and three beautiful children.”<sup>118</sup>

Sutton provided the union with a way to connect the movie’s theme of a woman’s liberation from her emotional dependency on men with the ongoing struggle for economic justice in the southern textile industry. Crystal Lee explained in interviews and to her audiences that her involvement in the organizing drive changed her mind about women’s roles in the home and in public life. She described how she had to let housework take a backseat to her commitment to the campaign and the strain that put on her relationship with Cookie.<sup>119</sup> Sutton spoke before women’s rights organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), who supported the boycott of Stevens’ linens and towels.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup>Lelia Carson Albrecht, “The Real ‘Norma Rae’ is Anguished,” *People* 11, No. 17, April 30, 1979, 43-44.

<sup>118</sup>Author unknown, “Crystal Lee’s Norma Rae,” *The Real Inquirer*, February 9, 1980, at CLS #986.87.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid.

<sup>120</sup>Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens*, 97.

Being the “real Norma Rae” not only gave Sutton the opportunity to bring the plight of the southern textile worker to the nation’s attention, it also provided her with an outlet for her personal ambition, passion, and larger-than-life personality that had irritated some of her fellow activists in Roanoke Rapids and gave the male leadership of the union pause. By all accounts, Sutton was remarkably successful at engaging audiences and stirring support for the union with her passionate and sincere indictment of conditions in the southern textile industry.<sup>121</sup> The confidence and ease with which she addressed crowds indicates how quickly Sutton adapted to her new role and suggested that she enjoyed the attention she received as the “real Norma Rae.” The speaking tour certainly thrust her into the spotlight in places she otherwise never would have seen, much less stood at the center of attention. She recounted in an interview that she was not nervous about speaking at Harvard University until her daughter explained to her “the world’s richest children go there.” She confessed she was worried that she “couldn’t use the words the way they used them,” but assured her interviewer that “everything turned out well.”<sup>122</sup>

Crystal Lee occasionally employed the same coyness and play on gender and sexuality that she had used with her supervisors at Stevens. In one interview Sutton remarked that she found the scene in the movie when Norma Rae and the organizer skinny-dip in a pond amusing. “Isn’t it a shame,” she noted slyly, “that we didn’t have that much fun?”<sup>123</sup> During one speech, an audience member commented, “There’s a

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<sup>121</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>122</sup>Unknown author, “Crystal Lee’s Norma Rae,” *The Real Inquirer*, February 9, 1980. at CLS #986.87.

<sup>123</sup>Megan Rosenfeld, “Through the Mill with Crystal Lee and ‘Norma Rae,’” *The Washington Post*, June 11, 1980, at CLS #986.87.

delightful quote attributed to you about how you compare yourself with Sally Fields. You said you're tougher and sexier. Is that right?" Sutton, "standing tall and throwing back her shoulders," fired back, "Well, you *see* me!"<sup>124</sup>

Sutton negotiated with the media for control over the meaning of her activism, and she was quite skilled at and content with her role as spokesperson. According to Jeffords, not a single negative story about the campaign appeared during Sutton's speaking tour as the "real Norma Rae."<sup>125</sup> It appears she struggled with the union, however, over her role as spokeswoman. Publicly, Sutton never wavered from her support for ACTWU. "I go wherever the International feels I'm needed most," she told a reporter. She saw the publicity tour as "an opportunity [to] show people that they can stand up for their rights and there are laws protecting them."<sup>126</sup> Pam Woywod, an ACTWU representative, and Jeffords travelled with Sutton and wrote the press releases and pamphlets that were distributed before speeches and interviews.<sup>127</sup> Sutton resisted their attempts to dictate her language and tone on at least two occasions. She heavily edited one of Woywod's press releases, indicating in her notes that she felt it was "not so good." Attached to a typed copy of a speech she gave in Canada in 1979 was a handwritten comment in which Sutton noted, "I did not use [this speech]. I spoke from my heart [and] I continue to do so whenever I do go somewhere to speak about (myself) 'Norma Rae.'" The note attests to the ownership she felt of her "Norma Rae" persona

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<sup>124</sup>Anicia Lane, "Fact and Fiction: Crystal Lee Sutton insists she is not 'Norma Rae,'" *Signal* 10, April 8, 1980, at CLS #986.87.

<sup>125</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep With Stevens!*, 108.

<sup>126</sup>Janet Simpson, "Little Did 'Norma Rae' Realize Her Deed Would Result in Fame," *Eden Daily News*, January 13, 1983, at CLS #986.87.

<sup>127</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens!* 107-108.

and indicates she rejected the union's assumption that Woywod and Jeffords knew better than she what to say and how to say it.<sup>128</sup>

In the fall of 1980, ACTWU settled with Stevens, agreeing to end the boycott in exchange for a union contract in Roanoke Rapids and a pledge from Stevens that it would bargain in good faith with the union.<sup>129</sup> This agreement ended Sutton's "Norma Rae" speaking tour, though she continued to give interviews and speeches to support the unionization efforts of a wide range of workers and industries.<sup>130</sup> Sutton settled back in North Carolina as a full-time, paid organizer for ACTWU, but evidence in Sutton's personal records suggests that gendered assumptions created conflict between Sutton and her supervisors.<sup>131</sup> From 1982-1983, Sutton filed several grievances against ACTWU and received \$800 in back pay. Sutton's note attached to her copies of the grievances reveals the level of her frustration with the union: "had to file a grievance about this ... to receive same pay as other organizers- ACTWU had to pay me *back pay*, same as good ole J.P. (her emphasis)."<sup>132</sup> Sutton felt she was "discriminated against as a woman" and "denied on-the-job training." The tension between Sutton and her supervisors apparently worsened after she was hospitalized for an illness and missed a considerably amount of

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<sup>128</sup>Sutton's personal records, CLS #986.87.

<sup>129</sup>Hodges, "The Real Norma Rae," 268.

<sup>130</sup>Sutton's personal records are filled with copies of speeches she gave in the late 1980s and 90s to a variety of institutions, organizations, and groups. See for instance the typed transcript of a speech given to the Professional Flight Attendants Union, American Airlines, Dallas, TX, April 22, 1987, CLS#986.87.

<sup>131</sup>TWUA and ACTWU records related to Sutton are housed at Cornell University and the University of Wisconsin. Previous scholarship that has utilized these sources does not comment on her deteriorating relationship with the TWUA and ACTWU. There were no records related to her employment or involvement with the union in the TWUA records at the Southern Historical Collection.

<sup>132</sup>Collection of copies of grievances filed by Sutton with the ACTWU, Sutton's personal records, CLS #986.87.

work. According to Sutton, in a meeting with her supervisors Jim Walraven and Jim Renfroe, Walraven “went in to how hard it is to be an organizer, to be away from home so much- especially for a woman. He questioned me about if I was having any marital problems. I said no, my husband is very supportive of me and my *union* work (her emphasis.)”<sup>133</sup> In a letter to Walraven, she maintained that all of her absences were documented by her physician and expressed her frustration and anger that the union “which [she] stood up for, fought for, lost [her] job for” now questioned her commitment.<sup>134</sup>

Whatever bitterness or frustration Sutton felt towards ACTWU, she never publicly denounced the union or stopped advocating for workers’ rights and the need for collective action. In one of her last interviews, Sutton maintained that of the many ways that workers’ lives improved in Roanoke Rapids because of the TWUA and ACTWU campaigns, the most important thing that the union did was to ensure “[mill workers] were treated with respect... [that] was the main thing.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup>Ibid. Her supervisors alleged she missed seventy-seven out of 212 days, but Sutton refuted this number.

<sup>134</sup>Letter to Jim Walraven, November 30, 1982, CLS#986.87. Historian James Hodges acknowledges that a “short stint working for the ACTWU as an organizer... evidently did not work out well, and [Sutton] permanently severed her connection” with the union but he does not dwell on the implications of this rupture with the ACTWU or how and why it occurred. Hodges, “The Real Norma Rae,” 268.

<sup>135</sup>Crystal Lee Sutton, interview by Chris Fitzsimon, “Crystal Sutton aka Norma Rae discusses her life story,” *NC Policy Watch*, <http://www.ncpolicywatch.com>, September 4, 2007.



## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

Throughout her involvement in the campaign to unionize J.P. Stevens, Sutton consistently and passionately expressed her belief that unionization was the best method for empowering poor and underrepresented people and affecting social change. She turned the intimate details of her private life from a personal liability into an integral part of a public persona that served the union's interest and remained part of her identity for the rest of her life. It is not surprising that the media sensationalized her story; after all, "sex sells" and there was much preoccupation with women's "sexual liberation" in the late 1970s.<sup>136</sup> One is left to wonder, though, if a male unionist would have been forced to defend his past actions and explain his personal choices as Sutton was compelled to do in countless interviews.<sup>137</sup> Sutton's sexuality and past were not simply talked about. Her private choices and relationships were held up for judgment, ignored or forgiven by those

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<sup>136</sup>For an analysis of the mass media's conflation of the women's liberation movement of the 1970s with the so-called "sexual revolution," see Beth Bailey, "She 'Can Bring Home the Bacon:' Negotiating Gender in Seventies America" in *America in the Seventies*, eds. Beth Bailey and David Farber, 107-128 (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004).

<sup>137</sup>The history of twentieth-century labor struggles reveals that working-class women's sexuality and femininity was consistently scrutinized and attacked in public debate disproportionate to that of men. See, for instance, Frederickson, "Heroines and Girl Strikers." Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall noted that public discourse over working women's resistance reveals "a fascination with women's sexual agency that [the press] both reflected and helped to create." See Hall, "Private Eyes, Public Women," 265.

sympathetic to the union's campaign or supportive of the women's movement, and condemned by those hostile to Sutton or the labor movement.

Despite the tensions between Sutton and ACTWU after the Stevens campaign ended, her belief that unionism was the "salvation" of the working-class never wavered. Indeed, she often used religious metaphor to describe her activism. When asked in an interview in 2006 if she would do it all over again, Sutton emphatically declared that she would because she "felt that her actions were God's will for her life. It made her see she was worth something."<sup>138</sup> Crystal Lee Sutton told Victoria Byerly that the time she spent as an organizer in Roanoke Rapids was "an exciting part of my life because I was doing something I didn't even think I could do."<sup>139</sup> Sutton's life was changed when her story played out on the big screen. She believed that unions could help make a better way of life for poor and working-class people, and being the "real Norma Rae" gave her a chance to fulfill personal ambitions and contribute to movements for class, race, and gender equity.

On September 11, 2009, Crystal Lee Sutton passed away after a lengthy battle with Meningioma, a form of brain cancer that is usually benign. "I call my cancer a journey," she said in a June 2008 interview, "and it is interesting to see where it goes. It reminds you to live each day to the best you can." The spirited hope with which Sutton approached her fight with cancer was matched only by her commitment to the fight for justice and respect for workers. In 2007, she donated her personal papers to Alamance Community College, a place "where the working poor can come... and get a new start to

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<sup>138</sup>Sutton, phone interview with Kathi Farinacci, January 29, 2006, transcript, Sutton's personal records, at CLS #986.87.

<sup>139</sup>Sutton quoted in Byerly, *Hard Times*, 215.

life,” she reflected.<sup>140</sup> Sutton was an activist to the end, using her own struggles with the health care industry to draw attention to the plight of many working-class families who are denied critical care after years of paying high premiums and the even more perilous situation of the millions of uninsured. Perhaps the most significant part of her legacy is the unforgettable image she presented as “the real Norma Rae.” At a memorial service in Greensboro, North Carolina, in January 2010, activist and close friend Richard Koritz asked the audience if anyone had ever been called “Norma Rae” by a friend or foe of the labor movement. Hands shot up around the room and smiles spread across the faces of the many “Norma Raes” there to pay their respects to Crystal Lee Sutton. In the blurry lines between fact and fiction, and the personal and the political, the image of one determined woman standing up to the powers arrayed against her endures in the minds of workers and activists.

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<sup>140</sup>Brie Handgraaf, “Real Norma Rae has new battle involving cancer,” *The Burlington Times-News*, June 28, 2008.

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