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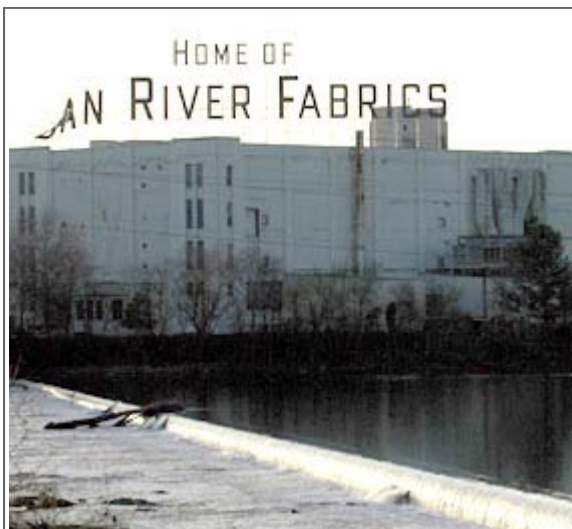
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## Hanging by a thread

BY ROBIN FARMER  
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Mar 5, 2006



Dan River Inc., once Danville's largest employer, will close its last manufacturing plant in the city this month. (NATHAN GRAY/TIMES-DISPATCH)

DANVILLE The medicine for Barbara Bennett's migraines has been sitting at the pharmacist since before Christmas.

"It's there because I can't afford to get it," said Bennett, 55, who worked for Dan River Inc. for almost 32 years before she was laid off in October 2004.

Bennett is one of the faces behind Danville's unemployment rate of 10.4 percent, the highest in Virginia.

Danville, where textiles and tobacco once ruled, has the country's fifth-worst job market, trailing such cities as New Orleans and Biloxi, Miss. But while those Gulf Coast markets were battered by Hurricane Katrina, Danville's stormy economy is man-made.

New Orleans and Biloxi, Miss. But while those Gulf Coast markets were battered by Hurricane Katrina, Danville's stormy economy is man-made.

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**SLIDESHOW: Danville**

The city of 46,000 has been slammed by a confluence of economic forces, misguided outlooks and poor preparation. Instead of shoring up their skills for the storm ahead, some blue-collar workers saw only blue skies.

But in recent years, clouds have hovered over Dan River, the city's largest employer as recently as 2000 with about 4,000 employees.

The fabrics manufacturer, which pioneered the bed-in-a-bag package, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2004, the same year it began permanently laying off hundreds of employees and closing plants. This month, an additional 600 of the remaining 1,000 workers will lose jobs as the company's last manufacturing facility closes and its new owners move most operations to India.

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Of the 400 nonmanufacturing jobs remaining in Danville, 150 will include hourly positions, said Calvin Barnhardt, the company's vice president of human resources.

The hundreds of soon-to-be jobless will add to an unemployment rate that likely will remain in the double digits throughout the spring, according to the Virginia Employment Commission.

About 1,200 of the city's nearly 2,200 unemployed are displaced Dan River workers.

Lacy Barbour's wife, Shannon, is among them. But she is working on her future by studying information systems technology at Danville Community College.

Supporting his wife's decision to continue her education is practical, said Lacy Barbour, a former Dan River employee who now works at Columbia Flooring. Good-paying jobs for folks with just a high school diploma are disappearing, he said.

The government "is not about the people anymore, people who made this country. It's not about the average Joe who didn't get a college education. What are they going to do? It's not just Danville, Virginia, it's the whole country. The list goes on," said Barbour, 41.

Globalization wasn't designed for "someone making less than \$40,000 a year but someone making more than \$200,000 a year," he said.

As jobs move to China, India and other countries, "their labor over there can eat us alive because 12 people get paid what I make a hour. Whatever the ratio is, we can't compete. People here don't care as long as they can buy something cheaper," Barbour said.

Danville's woes are mirrored in other communities across the country, communities that must transform themselves to compete in the 21st century, experts say.

"The traditional factory town that helped transform America into an industrial giant must utilize new ways of thinking and new methods of innovation to remain competitive in the global marketplace," said Nabil Nasr, director of the Center for Integrated Manufacturing Studies and assistant provost of academic affairs at Rochester Institute of Technology.

"New overseas pressure will continue to impact domestic manufacturing, and communities like Danville need to transform their economic environments to meet these new challenges," he said.

The need to develop new skills wasn't lost on Shannon Barbour, 36. Laid off from Dan River during the summer of 2004, she decided to study computers. When she started classes at Danville Community College, she could barely turn a computer on. Now she can take them apart.

Barbour, who worked at the sewing plant for nine years, is on track to graduate this summer. To get a job in her field, she is willing to drive hundreds of miles daily.

"If I have to travel two hours up and back, if the job pays well enough, that's what I would do," Barbour said. She maintains a 3.6 grade-point average while raising daughters Morgan, 14, and Alison, 13, with her husband.

The Barbours don't plan to join the more than 1,300 residents who have left Danville since 2000. They are buying their tidy home set back off a busy street.

The future was on Brenda Hayes' mind, too, when she enrolled in Danville

Community College to study criminal justice while working as a union steward at the Dan River plant.

Reduced work hours and jobs lost to automation persuaded her to plan. In November 2004 she faced a choice: be placed on a call list for whatever job became available or walk away from her employer of 14 years.

Leaving meant she could attend school full time, although deciding to do so was initially scary -- she recently had purchased the home she shares with her daughter, Latoria, 23, and son, Alvin, 18. But her children had jobs and could help out, and she had savings. Financial aid enabled her to go to school.

Long before she lost her job, Hayes, 44, knew the bleak day was coming, even when company officials claimed a sunnier outlook.

"The company always tried to reassure people we are strong. They always told people that to keep them from quitting," Hayes said.

"They might say we have to sell some plants but [not in] Danville. Even when it was taken off the New York Stock Exchange, we knew the company was in trouble, but they kept saying no. They kept saying, 'Things are fine. We might be having a little problem.'

"They shuttered other plants and sent all the work here, so people were convinced we would pick back up. I knew better. I knew it was going out. You hear things and read things."

When the layoffs began during the summer of 2004, Hayes urged workers to return to school through the federal Trade Adjustment Assistance Program. The program, set up under the Trade Act of 1974, assists those who have lost jobs as a result of increased imports from, or shifts in production to, foreign countries.

"They didn't kick you out and not give you nothing. What a lot of people didn't like were the stipulations," she said, referring to requirements attached to the money.

The union held meetings to provide information and answer questions, but several dozen people showed up when there should have been several hundred, Hayes recalled.

"I'm sorry the mill closed for a lot of people, but it's a good thing," said Hayes, who studied administration of justice and earned her associate's degree in May.

"I know people don't like changes. I sympathize with the older people because that's all they know. A lot can't go back and comprehend school. Those are the people I sympathize with the most.

"The young, middle-aged and single parents, no. Single parents have more to gain than anybody else. With FAMIS [insurance for children] financial aid, the Trade Act -- just about everything" one wants is available," Hayes said.

She graduated last month from the Piedmont Regional Criminal Justice Training Academy, three months after being hired as a deputy in the sheriff's office, where she works primarily with inmates.

"Leaving Dan River was the best thing that happened to me."

But it's not a sentiment shared by many displaced Dan River workers.

Barbara Bennett said she left with no health insurance, and she had high blood pressure, diabetes -- and a desperate need for a job

A few weeks before being laid off, Bennett, who had finished the ninth grade, returned to school to get her General Educational Development diploma. Then she took a seven-week course to become a certified nurse's assistant.

She hopes to get a job as someone's nurse but does not want to work in a nursing home. "That work is a little too strenuous," she said.

Bennett is waiting to take her licensing exam and hopes to beat the clock, as her Trade Act benefits expire this month.

Many former Dan River workers lack a high school diploma and are reluctant to return to classrooms. Others think they are too old.

Of the hundreds of folks Hayes encouraged to return to school, "only six listened, and they will be graduating in May," she said.

On a recent unseasonably warm winter afternoon, nearly a dozen male teens within a block were spotted cutting school. The teens saw little connection between school, jobs and the future.

"There ain't enough opportunity for people in Danville," said Deshay Woods, 16, as he sat with six other young men on a sidewalk outside a convenience store.

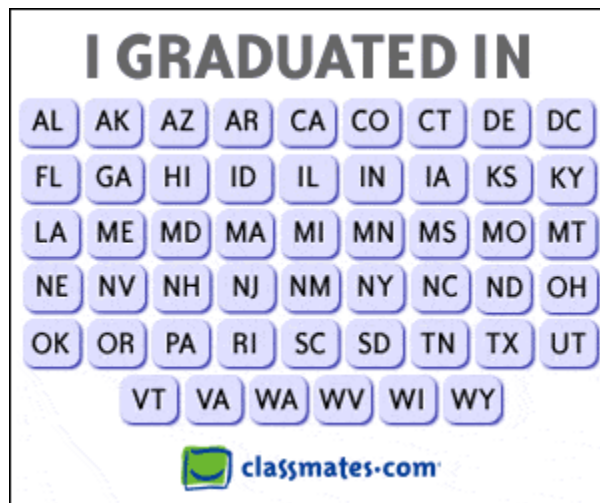
"Only opportunity for people our age is the fast-food [places] or the Army," said Woods, who admitted he skipped all his classes at his alternative school.

Around the corner, A.J. Clark, 18, danced on a lawn to hip-hop beats as several pals lounged on a porch watching him bust moves.

Clark said he has a diploma from George Washington High School but still sees no future in his hometown, which is why he may relocate to Richmond.

"People used to work. They had jobs with Dan River. When everybody get their money straight, they leave Danville," he said.

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