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Data Show County's Pain as Economy Plummeted

By SABRINA TAVERNISE

GREENWOOD, S.C. — The Greenwood Mills Matthews Plant once employed three generations of Frances Flaherty's family. Her grandmother, father and brother made textiles there — denim for jeans and khaki for military uniforms.

But it all but closed in 2007 when the economy soured, pitching dozens of workers into the ranks of the unemployed, and the plant now functions mainly as a bleak backdrop to Ms. Flaherty's restaurant, the Southside Cafe, where diners gaze out at its red brick walls.

"It's what held this town together, all the mills," Ms. Flaherty said, watching another thinly attended lunch hour go by. "They just slowly but surely dwindled out."

The falloff of the economy of Greenwood County, a district of almost 70,000 people that once pulsed with busy factories and mills, was the steepest in the country by two counts.

According to an analysis of [Census Bureau](#) figures made public on Thursday, its poverty rate more than doubled to 24 percent from 2007 to 2010, the largest increase for any county in the nation.

The decline also engulfed the middle class. Median household income plunged by 28 percent over the

same period, shaving nearly \$12,000 off the annual earnings of families here during the recession, according to the analysis, by Andrew A. Beveridge, a demographer at Queens College.

The numbers tell the story of a painful decade in Greenwood, which began with poverty levels that were close to the nation's, and ended far above — after layoffs in textile mills, a foundry, restaurants and construction companies pummeled the county's residents.

The number of workers in manufacturing alone fell by a quarter in the county from 2005 to 2009, according to a census survey of employers.

Those new facts are just sharp reminders to people here about what they have lived through.

“There just aren't any jobs in Greenwood anymore,” said James Freeman, 58, a former textile mill worker. “My son can't even get a job flipping burgers.”

Mr. Freeman worked for years in the textile mills, including the Matthews plant. He lost his last mill job in 2007 and was unable to find another. The work at one of the mills that employed him went to Argentina, he said, because the fabric was cheaper to produce there. Those workers were paid less, he was told, and got no benefits.

“That made me feel kind of bad,” said Mr. Freeman, who now collects disability. The mill's closing “hurt a lot of people here in Greenwood.”

Disappointment like Mr. Freeman's has welled up in areas of deep economic decline, infusing this election season with a blend of exhaustion and bitterness.

“Until we bring the companies back from overseas and stop protecting the world, we're not going to be anything,” said Sam Stevenson, a retired construction worker, who could summon only expletives when asked about President Obama's job plan.

In many ways, Greenwood is a typical American county. More than a quarter of its residents had at least some college education in 2009, roughly the same as the 27 percent nationally. It has a public

university, which grants four-year degrees, a museum and a shopping mall.

But education has not seemed to ease the economic pain in an area whose fortunes were tied so closely to the textile industry that is now in such steep decline. Signs with the words “space available” are posted outside vacant factories on the road between here and Columbia, 80 miles to the east.

A red brick Baptist church on the outskirts of town commanded on its marquee, “Have your tools ready, and God will find you work.”

Apache Pawn and Gun, a pawn shop in town, is packed with items sold by people trying to make ends meet. Televisions, chain saws, bicycles and guitars are stacked from floor to ceiling. Chris Harris, the owner, said more middle-class people had come in to buy since the recession began.

“They’re saying, ‘Why should I buy a new chain saw when I could buy a used one?’ ” Mr. Harris said.

Ms. Flaherty said her cafe —its walls adorned with black-and-white photographs of mill workers and residents from happier times —is barely making it. When she opened in 2007, lunch used to bring lines out the door from workers at the plant and other businesses. Now it draws only a few diners. On Wednesday around 1:30 p.m., there were two.

And while housing prices have picked up — now a median of about \$120,000 for the current listings compared with \$109,000 in 2009 — the economy this year does not seem to be getting any better.

“It’s been bad this year,” said Kathy Green, owner of the Garden Grill, who said business was down significantly since the start of the recession. People order less, she said, and come in for the specials — \$6 for a hamburger, fries and a drink.

Ms. Green said, “People just don’t have the money anymore.”

Barclay Walsh contributed reporting from Washington, and Anne McQuary from Greenwood.



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