**Tim Bazemore, 89, founder and CEO, Workers’ Owned Sewing Company, Windsor NC**

At the American Coop web site:

“The Workers' Owned Sewing Company was, at peak, a 70-worker democratic cut-and-sew factory that operated for 21 years in Windsor, North Carolina.  The company was founded in 1979 out of the bankruptcy of a 12 year-old firm called Bertie Industries… The manager of that firm, Tim Bazemore, reorganized the company as a democratic enterprise and helped re-launch it with the help of consultants including Frank Adams of ICA.  Bazemore owned all the shares for the first two years but then began to sell them to the workers through payroll deductions.  An elected 7-member board was responsible for all major business decisions, including hiring and firing the manager.  After several years of subcontracting, the cooperative was successful enough in 1983 to sell directly to K-Mart and Sears.”

Thad said he was involved in establishing the St. Luke Credit Union in Bertie County in 1944; apparently St. Luke was folded into Generations Community Credit Union in Windsor NC.

From his 1992 oral history:

Born in 1923 in Bertie County. His parents were sharecroppers but also bought a small farm and then a larger farm, which he and his eight siblings still owned in 1992, about ten miles south of Windsor. He attended a Rosenwald School in early years. Then to high school in Northampton County, and then a boarding school in Rich Square. His father died when he was six years old. Lots of challenges in getting to school, lack of buses, having to board at Northampton, etc. He was drafted into the army, sent to Manila with a trucking unit, didn’t go into combat. Came out a staff sergeant, in charge of a motor pool. He was 19 when drafted, left the army at age 22.

Remembered a sense of community members helping one another in that part of the county, when he was a kid; his parents as community leaders; having very limited means in the family; working a lot in the fields, missing out on school for much of the year; not always hostility from whites, but definitely a sense of racial superiority and privilege that the whites felt, even those who were lower-income; his mother was very Christian, and she built a rural church, disciplined the children strictly, washing out the boys’ mouths at times; his strong belief that all people are created equal and deserve an equal shot at using their abilities and reaching their potential, NOT saying that all should have equal wealth, equal levels of education, etc.

Remembered coming home from the Pacific, ended up on a bus in Maryland, and the driver asked an elderly black lady to stand up, so a young white boy could sit down. Figures that memory will remain with him to the grave, a very potent, long-lived memory for him. And remembers Jim Crow segregation of facilities very clearly, as well as racial discrimination in terms of jobs open only to whites, e.g. bank tellers, telephone operators.

Got married four years after the war. Has 7 kids. He got into farming, and did a lot of pulpwood logging as well, pre-1960s. He was involved in the 60s with Bertie County United Citizens, a civil rights group.

Mentions that a number of blacks did own land in Bertie County, in these earlier decades of his life. Interesting connection to Breaking New Ground.

He talks about school desegregation, and says he played a leadership role, which didn’t sit well with some members of the white community, in 1966 under “freedom of choice.”

He talks about studying brick masonry at the community college; with help from the North Carolina Fund, I think. This helped him deal with economic retaliation toward his logging operation. He might have been working directly for the Fund and its Mobility Project, not sure.

Helped organize a boycott in the late 60s to get food stamp program in the county. Economic reprisals could also be things like, a landowner forcing tenants to leave the farm if they become active in civil rights issues.

Talks a lot about the travails of Bertie Industries and then the sewing company, and how he put a lot of his time and family resources into it to try to keep it going.

Post-interview thoughts:

Struck me that Timothy Bazemore has stories that run counter, at times, to the consensus narrative of southern history, in particular race relations in the rural South, e.g. his parents having the courage to actively keep a record of their crops, debts, etc. as sharecroppers, to make sure they were not cheated at harvest time. This seems to connect to TB’s willingness in his own adult life to stand up for civil rights in the 60s and 70s in Bertie County, on issues such as school integration, which put him in disfavor with some local whites and could have been dangerous.

 Also thinking about how he told the story about the bus in Maryland after the war, when the bus was full and the bus driver made a black rider stand up so that a white teenage boy could sit. TB told it differently in 1992 than he did with me last week, in that he seemed to give himself a more active role in the story in this most recent telling. But it’s important that, elsewhere in the interview, he also described his fears about his own memory, and how it feels to him that it’s slipping, that he doubts his memory at times to recall stories accurately.

Listening to the interview:

(Can hear TV in the background, unfortunately) Home in the Bazemore Housing neighborhood. Asking about interactions and experiences with the St. Luke Credit Union, but also his own background, from childhood to his working years. Born in Bertie County, five miles from his current home. Pocosin is the community. Family was sharecroppers, but also landowners. They moved to the Neck in the southern part of the county, Woodard was the post office for that area. His parents had bought some land there, after selling their land in Pocosin area north of Windsor. His father died when he was about seven years old, double-pneumonia. Black community didn’t get the same level of medical service. No buses for black students, ended up going to Rich Square, Creecy High School, where he could board; he had eight siblings.

Born April 23, 1923. He had neglected to register, so when he did, he gave his birth year as 1924. Basically he fudged it to keep from getting in trouble. Father was Henry Norman Bazemore, mother was Arie Victoria Williams Bazemore. His grandmother, lived during slavery, Charlotte Bazemore (I think I have a photo of her grave stone).

After high school, went into logging for pulpwood, using crosscut saws. It was only about one year after high school that he was drafted into the army.

**[Excerpt would be: around 13-16:24]:**

An incident that he often talks about, he says: his parents were real religious. Holiness church. When he was about ten years old. He used to see older people rolling their own cigarettes, including his older brothers, and he wanted to do it so badly. He got some brown paper, matches, and he rolled some, corn silk. “And I thought I was a man,” he says laughing. But his mother could see him through the field, and she caught him. She spanked him with a switch, and got soap, turpentine, pepper and salt, kerosene, brushed out his mouth with dogwood brush. A belief that God doesn’t want you to treat your body that way. He remembers that strict upbringing; he doesn’t use Lord’s name in vain, no matter how mad.

Telling about other soldiers playing dice on the ship to the Pacific, then a torpedo hit nearby, they started praying quite diligently. Thought it was funny, but he also couldn’t believe how scared those fellows got; he had thought they had a lot of nerve. They fell all to pieces. He says they were doing “wicked” things. Sent to Manila first. Was then in Japan, right before the planned landing, when the atomic bombs were dropped. Then to Tokyo. He was a staff sergeant, mechanic training, over a motor pool. Feels that he did well. Had an offer to come back, stay in army as staff sergeant over a motor pool. Now, he says, an incident that registered for him then, and now: the bus in Maryland. Blacks in back of the bus. TB was sitting in middle, 16 year old boy came in, TB was told to move back, but TB said, I can’t do that, that’s not right. So he kept his seat, and boy stood. Things were bad, and a lot has changed, still change needed.

I asked him about the bus. He talked about people killed in Japan by snipers, a dangerous situation; and American boys shot people too, he remembered. But he tried to treat people with respect. But sake would affect the soldiers if they drank it. TB says he never drank, has never been drunk. He and his brothers would go out together, and they would drink beer but not him. And his brothers sometimes got blind drunk on bush liquor, had to crawl home, and he didn’t want to be like that. He has five brothers, three sisters.

He went back to farming and cutting pulpwood after the war. He remembers his strength, in being able to load peanuts for market, or cut and load pulpwood. Cotton, corn, peanuts, and little soybeans, over the years in farming. He could load 100 bags of peanuts, 100 pounds each bag.

**[Excerpt 29:35-36:24]:** A story that lingers with him to this day: he had a combine, maybe the only black farmer in Bertie who had one, for harvesting peanuts. He decided to help work on the schools issue. Just a small school for black students in his area. He and some other leaders went to the school superintendent, who told him to go look for a site in their area. TB felt in effect that the superintendent was deciding the area for the site, and he resisted that. Said they had a choice, and said we were going to take the black students to the white school, since they had only 16 students per teacher. Superintendent ran him out of the office, made him leave. TB was spokesman. They ended up taking about 60 students into the school.

Well, the FHA said after that, you are not eligible for the loan, a local supervisor, and a board, that would not give him the loan. Says he will never forget it. He had been leasing a farm for five years, still had three years on the lease, but “they took it.” Said he was too large to be a family farm. TB let his brother take over his family farm, try to get the loan after that, could not. Also, during school integration, had trouble with people not letting him cut wood anymore. TB decided to go down to Greenville for a program in brick masonry, Pitt County.

Now brings up George Esser (director of the North Carolina Fund, 1963-68). Says he had been reading about TB during this integration and civil rights era; TB was asked to come to UNC to talk about justice issues. TB says he worked for Mobility program, as a recruiter, about one year. Black man Charles Davis was the director, and he said, if they don’t let you work for them, then he would give it up. This is because the rules were you needed college degree, or two years of college and work experience. Recruiting people being displaced from farm work by machinery; recruiting people to work in manufacturing jobs in NC, places like High Point. They actually brought people to watch TB in action, to learn from him. A funny story: white recruiter would knock on the door, no answer, but TB could see an axe on the wood pile, or the window vibrating; TB knew they were there, figured they were ducking the candy man, but TB would say, anyone here who needs a job? He worked in ten counties.

Another memory: a center where families would come; people couldn’t believe how these families were living on such a very small amount of money, didn’t think it could be done; TB said it can be done, they knew how to buy cheaply, buy beans, meat, and bread and make a good dinner for cheap. Our staff just couldn’t believe it, but we talked about it. A real sense here of TB feeling a part of this, helping to educate people. TB then wrote a proposal to get chickens to families. Encouraging gardens also, and raising hogs. But then food stamps came out, and that changed things.

TB was active in the credit union; it was small. I think the 60s and 70s. Then Bertie Industries brought in, through government program. Small Business Administration, 8(a) program. Then Blue Bell plant came in too, a private plant. TB was asked to sit in and observe the operation. Talking about this plant manager, lying to the overseers that he had goods ready. TB left in charge after that. TB had started a training program, via the community college in Williamson. He noticed workers often were not meeting sewing goals, not sewing effectively. He said he would have to lay off those not at least 70 percent; soon after that, those down at 30 percent or so immediately increased their productivity.

TB had been raising hogs, had about $17,000 saved up. Put the money into the plant, trying to make it work. They didn’t have any credit. It was owned by shareholders, which had a board. It went defunct. Took six people or so, wanted to convert the Blue Bell building. Blue Bell had built another building. This is the 1970s. Martin Eakes, right out of law school, he came down there. TB was responsible for withholding taxes, he had that in the bank, and he almost got locked up for that. He wanted to work people at Workers’ Owned, and pay them when money started coming in, but state Dept. of Revenue said you can’t do that. Martin Eakes, Self-Help Credit Union, they helped us get financing. They started with 6 people, had 50 people after 1.5 years. TB had to put up all his property to get those loans.

TB had also borrowed about 100k from Self Help, he was building a mobile home park. Crack cocaine came in and the tenants wouldn’t pay their rent, he was almost foreclosed upon. A guy bought him out, 250k. TB paid off loan, bought this land where he is now. There are 42 mobile home lots out there now, 33 that are for rent, eight owned by people. He borrowed about 225k for developing, he would buy homes and start renting them. From Self Help as well. They had taken over St. Luke, which had gone defunct. They didn’t have the required reserves, and Martin Eakes came in, now it’s part of Generations.

I think his family’s land ownership helped him, his service in the war, his logging and farming, he had property, able to borrow money, different from a landless tenant, or factor worker.

Talking about an old school building; people said it couldn’t be done, but he made it work. Divided it into four apartment units. Initially he was going to do it for the community, which even St. Luke said was a waste of money. Then he got behind in his payments, had some drug problems among tenants; he put his money into the payments for a while, and now it is a good property, rent comes in and it stays full.

Asked him about credit access in late 1930s, early 40s, especially for black folks in a rural county. He said, very little chance of borrowing, very little. FHA was leading thing for blacks, in agriculture. Even credit union wasn’t strong enough in early years. This leads him to his borrowing about 20k from credit union, had some land right here to develop, it had been passed as perking properly, but then another inspector failed it.

“Very little chance of borrowing. FHA was the leading thing for blacks in agriculture. But building a house or something else, there just wasn’t anything. The credit union wasn’t strong enough for the early part of it. They loaned me probably $20,000 to buy the lots on this road right here, in the 70s. All this was woods. I cleared it up.”

“I’m reasonably successful. Even though I don’t have no money, but I’ve got a lot of assets. I have to say it, the credit union was the reason that I’m successful.”

He feels like he’s reasonably successful; not any money, but a lot of land. And he gives a lot of credit to the CU. And also, he says, CRA, Community Reinvestment Act, banks had not wanted the CUs making these loans, so banks would start making loans more regularly to black folks. Helped them build houses, for example. Not clear to me how CRA figures in this.

His parents, how did they buy land?

They had a little farm up north of Windsor. Sold that farm. Southern Land Bank. This other land, didn’t drain well, and blacks could buy the lower quality land. The Southern Land Bank sold it to his family, 227 acres. They cleaned up a lot of that land. In later years, they had it ditched. TB took over the farming and he ditched it. Now it’s a good farm, not too wet or sandy. His mother willed that land to the nine kids, and the will keeps it in the family. Four of them still alive.

“Yes, it’s still in my family. My mother willed it to nine of us, and we will own it the rest of our lives, and then it goes to the grandchildren.”

He first borrowed money from CU in 1970s, to buy lots and sell them, develop some land. Seven acres along the road. Before then, how did he borrow money? A man ran a service station, where TB did a lot of business at the store. TB had 7-8 men working for him. His men would eat there, get supplies, and TB had a running account there, and this man would deduct the expenditures. That man made a mistake once, gave back too much money to TB. A white man, A.J. Yates. Later on, TB loaned him money to build a house. TB was doing pretty well logging.

“One day, he got it wrong. He gave me all the money back, so when I paid my men off, I had too much money. He had made a mistake, and carried him that money back. He would have never known. … He couldn’t hardly believe it. He probably would have never caught it. But I didn’t want that money.”

That man sold gas, repaired tires, cleaned cars, greased trucks. TB would give the man his logging check, and Yates would take out the costs, and TB would stand there and make sure it was right. That time he gave back too much to TB, TB took back that money out of conscience. Selling logs to a pulpwood company, mainly pines and occasionally hardwood. His crew of men could get out wood more quickly than the white crews with mechanical crawlers. He paid by the load, not by the hour.

Also mentioning Self-Help, two lines of credit and borrowed more than $200k. Not clear to me what the details of this were.

Talking about approaching K-Mart to get a contract. They were not sure Bertie Industries could do it. They had gotten a state loan at zero percent. And Martin Eakes helped him put together some money, so they would have the capacity to do this contract. Got check for 103k from Kmart, bank in Windsor said, you have to wait 14 days before check is cashed; he says they didn’t want to help them. But Wachovia in Williamson cashed it immediately. I think this is actually Workers’ Owned, which he ran for 25 years.

They could not pay as much as Blue Bell; but they gave their people a bonus at the end of the year, sometimes as much as $2-3,000. They had to pay minimum wage. But the people could sew enough to make twice the minimum all through the year, and then the bonuses. They worked hard to get people to want to work hard, throughout the year. If a hard worker was hurt or sick, or car broke down, the company would try to take care of them with money for a while; they had workmen’s comp, as required, but this was a backup.

He remembers an accountant, Joe Fox, a white man, a good guy, not prejudiced.

Got in trouble with feds, when he had all the withholding money, every penny in the bank, but he had not submitted it. Oh, the bank had foreclosed and had trouble getting to the money. This was Bertie Industries.

Why does he think he has this business savvy? How did he succeed? His parents were entrepreneurs. They had a peanut picker they owned, a tractor, they could do work for other people with this equipment. He found room to imagine things, dream about things, as a kid while working on the farm. He and his older brother, they would talk. He remembers this strongly. Thinks this was critical, his parents having a certain amount of self-sufficiency. He remembers his father buying a 1928 Dodge, just from farming and cutting logs in the winter. This reminds me a bit of my Breaking New Ground people. He was used to trying to own something, his whole life. His parents provided that example. And competed with others farming. He could compete in his logging work, trying to beat other crews getting loads of logs out of the woods.

Walking 3.5 miles to school. White kids on the bus, they would shoot spitballs. One day, he got his friends to make marbles out of red clay, pelted the bus back. Didn’t happen again!

He also remembers a landowner, a white man, a good man, Aubrey Tarkenton; a good man, although he didn’t believe in integration. Remembers him well. One night, he went up to that man’s house to get some kerosene. He had lots of hunting dogs. TB smacked one of them with a wooden wheel spoke. Knocked him down. Tarkenton told him, you did the right thing, didn’t get mad at TB. TB was only about ten. Dogs closing in on him. The family had been inside eating, not paying attention to TB hollering. Tough spot for a black kid on a white farm in the 1930s.

He also thinks it made a big difference that his mother raised him strictly, and in the Holiness Church. Even the Baptists were not strict enough for his mother’s tastes. He wasn’t a saint, but he stayed away from the bad things for the most part. And his parents helped neighbors a lot. Or maybe the landowners would cheap people at time to settle, and the people just had to take it. His parents would help people like that, real destitute people. And his parents would stand there and keep track of the crop and the money, to avoid getting cheated. Why were his parents able to do this and stay safe?

TB says, the landowner knew who was going to stand up, and they respected that, or they would not just those people on their farms. His daddy, he was doing some farm work for the game warden. His son, a little white boy called his daddy a liar, and he knocked the boy off the hay wagon, and was not hurt for that. They didn’t do anything to his daddy. And the same man his daddy slapped, after the war, that man had fenced in his land, about 100 cows, he turned his cows out and let them run into TB’s corn. TB told his tenant to tell the man not to do that. The next day, TB had about 15 cows, they went into a field of the man that wasn’t fenced in. The man ran his cows into his pasture. TB says, I always had nerve, I could make myself have nerves if I need them, not stupid, but nerves. That man said, you’re going to pay me. I said I’m not paying nothing. His son was running for sheriff. TB had tried to help him get sheriff. His son said not to do anything to TB. He said he would put his fist in TB’s mouth. I opened the gate and got my cows, I made myself not get scared.

I was working for civil rights, and I got my combine stuck and that son came and helped me pull it out. The Smallwood family. The son said he was doing the right thing in civil rights.

Except? 1:00:28 or so? Or maybe around 56, talking about how he keeps trying to move.

With the CU, one of the things he remembers, he sent someone to the bank to buy a car, one of the workers at the sewing factory. At the same time, he went to the bank and asked what they were doing about CRA, in the 1990s. He didn’t know about the loan denial that lady had received. She went back after he had been there, and her loan was approved.

In 2011, he farmed about 220 acres, this year about 100, next year, just a four-acre garden. I know it’s time for me to stop, but I just love to move. And I get tired, too. But I just come home and rest up. He has health issues but he is doing well over all.

I asked about his wife; he got married after the war, in 1946 I think. Their children started helping on the farm when they got big enough. His wife Hannah. She died in 2009.

When you get my age, you think about passing. You know that you can’t stay here forever. He is trying to stay healthy, and help people as much he can. It makes him feel a lot better inside.

He has some concerns today, that children are being raised to leniently. Talks about during integration, no more paddling, since you weren’t going to have a black teacher paddling a white kid. But you could get paddled in the segregated school. And he does believe kids need more discipline, while they are young. Worried about so many black boys going to jail, gangs, not being raised with enough discipline. Black children often left unattended.

He is pretty thoughtful on this point. He concedes he doesn’t know the current thinking on this on the part of child psychologists, etc. And he doesn’t want kids to be nervous, worried about being beaten. But he does think that a whipping sometimes is needed.

He has twelve grandkids.

“I tried to do what’s right. Worked hard. Couldn’t do all that I wanted to do, but I do what I can. I tell my children, if they need me, I’m’ around the corner. But they don’t used me much. Theire selfi sstianding. Theyv’e got jobs, make dexence livins.l They don’t; beg me for noithing>L I just give em what I want ot give em. It’s just fortunate that they make enough.”

**[Excerpt: 2:44:25-2:49:40]:**

I asked him to say a little more about 1960s and 70s. An instructor came from Chapel Hill, and she rode all over the county with him and showed her a few things. There also were several SNCC students who came down there to explore the poverty, and they asked TB to place the students with poor families, which he did. One time, he had to take SNCC students up to Lewiston to buy food and take shelter, and one of them slipped on ice going into a food store, he caught her hand, white guy in truck with gun made threats to him, but he ignored him. Sheriff came to him the next day and said he couldn’t protect Tim with that stuff. Sheriff said you know there’s a lot of KKK in this county; TB said yeah he knew. Same sheriff, TB had been farming and had a small debt for oil on the books, while white farmers had lots of debt, but they came and took his tractor from him and sold it. That sheriff did it because he was active in civil rights. But TB told black citizens about this, and they supported a different candidate for sheriff.

I asked him: what were opponents of civil rights so worried about? He said, they didn’t believe equality was right, thought blacks were supposed to be the “underdogs.” Another way of saying second-class citizens. He talks about, blacks owned some land, but much of it got away from them. He also remembered, having to call a young white man sir, to try to get rights to cut some timber. Had to play that game to their ego. But if they wouldn’t let him cut, he laughed and said he would drop that sir business.

He says he’s not remembering dates well. Worried that he has Alzheimer’s, but they say he doesn’t. He does feel like his mental capacity has changed, declined. I asked him about the bus in Maryland again. He said, in fact, he let that lady take his seat when the white boy took her seat. He also remembers, having to go to the back of a café to get their food. Silly, sad, not right. Stood up for their rights, at times, didn’t just take anything wrong thrown at them. And would support white candidates who were at least more concerned about equal rights.

But he does wonder a lot, where do we go from here? How to bring blacks and whites closer to truly help one another? Still a gap. Still discrimination in jobs, banking, he thinks.

Agricultural Stats for Bertie County: About 49,000 bales of cotton in 2010. About 23 million pounds of peanuts. More than 7 million pounds of flue-cured tobacco.