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My grandmother was bayoneted by a National Guardsman during a textile mill strike in 1934. She survived, but the union movement in the South did not.

On September 14, 1934, Grace Pickard had just turned 30 and was already the mother of five children when she was stabbed in a confrontation with the National Guard at the main gate to the Pioneer plant in Burlington, North Carolina, during the bitter and bloody uprising, the largest strike in American history up to that time, and the closest thing to a revolution this country has ever seen. The General Textile Strike of 1934 was the first time southern workers, like my grandmother, ever stood up en masse against the mill owners who controlled their lives. It started on Labor Day, the fourth of September, and spread like fire through pine needles all across the region, with nearly five hundred thousand cotton mill workers shutting down the looms from Gadsden, Alabama, to Knoxville, Tennessee, from Newnan, Georgia, to Honea Path, South Carolina. Milltown to mill town they toppled like dominoes up through the North Carolina Piedmont to Burlington and Hillsborough, where most of my

people lived and worked. Although factories in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and other northern states shut down too it was in the South that the effects were felt most profoundly. The nationwide walkout paralyzed the textile industry, stunning the mill barons, who depended upon a stable, compliant workforce to compete in the stagnant and declining markets of the Great Depression, by keeping labor costs down and profits — and stockholders' dividends — up. The response was swift and brutal. The powers-that-be in the communities — the police, the courts and the press — all closed ranks behind the mill owners who controlled them to turn back the strike. Even ministers in the churches preached hellfire and damnation from the pulpits against the union pickets. Hired thugs and detectives with strike-breaking experience in the coal mining states were brought in to do much of the dirty work, but the workers themselves were deeply divided over the walkout, and the strike pitted neighbor against neighbor, kinfolk against their own, resulting in widespread violence, mayhem, and death. At the request of the mill owners the National Guard was called in almost immediately, setting up their automatic rifles and machine guns at the mill gates, ostensibly to preserve the peace, but actually to break the strike, and ultimately breaking the back of the labor movement in the South. In Honea Path, South Carolina, seven strikers were killed and many more injured when Guardsmen and deputies opened fire on them from the mill windows. The strike was all over in three bloody weeks. History is written by the victorious, so I suppose it's not surprising that very little is remembered today of that long ago insurrection. Even I, who was born into a family touched deeply by those events, grew to manhood just a generation removed from them knowing nothing about their impact on our lives. "Union was a dirty word around here," explained an uncle, "And still is. . . Always will be. We wanted to forget what happened. Let sleeping dogs lie." "They were afraid, still are afraid," said another relative. The Uprising of '34, as it would come to be called, was swept from memory, not only in my family, but in mill villages all across the South, in a kind of collective amnesia, like it was some shameful secret, a painful, traumatic experience of abuse and betrayal that was best left buried and forgotten. "I can't understand why my daddy never talked about it," said one descendant of strikers. "They could talk about the war and about friends getting blown to bits, but they couldn't talk about their neighbors bein' killed. They oughta be proud. They stood up when other people wouldn't." Although I was raised within a tight-knit family with an affinity for gossip and an instinct for the colorful and dramatic, a family of natural and compulsive storytellers, who passed around yarns over the supper table like hot biscuits and gravy, this was one story I never heard growing up. Of course, in the South, colorful families are as common as barbecue joints and a low-grade schizophrenia is the spiritual coin of the realm. And as Faulkner observed, the past is not over and done — it's not even past. While having dinner with some historians familiar with the Uprising of '34, I mentioned that my grandmother had been involved in the strike. When I told them her name their eyes lit up and they gasped, "You're related to Grace Pickard?" It was as if I had told them I was the long lost son of Elvis Presley.