Life and death at Imperial - Before the fire, Imperial Food Products workers labored at low-paying jobs under conditions that many hated

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HAMLET -- Gail Pouncy stood at the grave of her sister,

Elizabeth Ann Bellamy, rearranging some flowers that had fallen into disarray in the weeks since her death in the Imperial Food Products fire.

"She probably wants me to be right there now," Pouncy said, pointing to the unfilled plot beside Bellamy's grave. "She liked to talk. And she liked company."

Bellamy was buried in a corner of the Sandy Grove Cemetery, a peaceful spot nestled among acres of rolling cotton fields and ramshackle country homes near her hometown of Bennettsville, S.C. Her grave had more flowers on it than any other in the cemetery.

"She got them pretty pink flowers she wanted," her sister said. "Her favorite color was pink. That's what they buried her in -- a pink dress."

Pouncy took another look at the gravestone. "You know what?" she said. "I'm glad they didn't put Sept. 3 on here. I don't like that date. I don't even like to think about that."

That was the day the fire struck at the Hamlet chicken-processing plant, bringing unimaginable suffering into the lives of people who had already endured their share of hardship.

The people who came to work at Imperial that day -- black and white, young and old, male and female -- shared some unenviable traits: They were unskilled, undereducated and had grown up poor. They had low aspirations and a conviction that they would never find anything much better than a job in a chicken plant, no matter how hard they tried.

Since the fire, Imperial's owner, Emmett J. Roe, has refused repeated requests for interviews. So have his son Brad, who was operations manager at the Hamlet plant, and other family members and company officials.

In the weeks since Sept. 3, people who worked at Imperial have described life inside the plant as tedious and even dangerous. The work was tiring but simple: cutting chicken, breading chicken, packing chicken, frying chicken pieces. And the jobs didn't offer any future -- top pay wasn't much higher than starting pay.

But day after day, more than 200 people came to work at Imperial, which was Hamlet's biggest employer. They came because it beat taking a job in a burger restaurant or a place in the welfare line. They came because they had bills to pay, and because good-paying jobs were hard to come by in Richmond County. Hard work in 'the hole'

On the day of the fire, the Tuesday after Labor Day, Thomas Oates was one of the first employees to arrive. He walked in the front door at 5:15 a.m., as usual, and headed to the dressing room at the rear of the plant.

He put on his gauze hairnet, blue smock and brown rubber boots. Then he placed his shoes and baseball cap inside his locker, along with his lunch: a plate of leftover meatloaf, field peas, okra and ham that he planned to heat in the microwave during his half-hour break at 11:30.

Oates is a husky, broad-shouldered man with a little extra weight around his midsection, a friendly and articulate man with a ready smile. He and his wife, Delores, rent a small trailer a mile or so from the plant.

For Oates, 37, working at Imperial marked the low point of an unexpected tumble down the economic ladder, a fall that began Aug. 11, 1978, when he had a motorcycle accident. He tore up his knee and was eventually forced to cut short his Army career after 13 years.

He headed back to Hamlet, his hometown, and took a series of mill and factory jobs. He ended up at Imperial because it paid a little better than the $4.75 an hour he was earning packing beds and dressers at the Karel Co., a Hamlet furniture manufacturer.

So each day for the year and a half before the fire, Oates went to work at the chicken plant, a sprawling, windowless mass of red brick and cinder block on Bridges Street, a few blocks from the center of town.
Located just up the street from the Leroy Hubbard Homes, a public housing project where many of the town's poorer residents live, the plant was perfectly situated to attract the workers Imperial needed to perform the various menial tasks associated with chicken processing. Many employees lived close enough to walk to work.

When Oates started at the plant, he was paid $4.85 an hour to load 100-pound bags of flour into a batter machine in the processing room.

It wasn't much money, but it would have to be enough support Oates and his wife. They had just married, and Oates didn't want Delores working any more. Like her parents, she had spent most of her life working in mills and factories, and she had the calluses on her hands to prove it. Her husband wanted her to rest awhile.

His job wasn't easy. With so much chicken to run, the batter machine would consume one bag of flour every 10 minutes or so. Oates came home at the end of the day soaked with sweat, his hair, eyebrows and cheeks coated with flour. His wife told him he looked like the Pillsbury Dough Boy. She wondered if someone had mistaken him for a piece of chicken and run him through the batter machine.

Oates had a name for the processing room -- "the hole." It worried him that the only exits in the long, narrow room were at the south end -- the end farthest from the workers. In an emergency, they would have to get past a rectangular deep-fat fryer that stretched 26 feet and dominated the room. He used to tell himself that Imperial should install doors at the north end, but he never complained to management.

"Talking out there is like asking for a bullet in your head," he said.

If he talked too much, Oates figured, management would find some way to get rid of him. He'd seen it happen to others.

If there ever were a fire, he thought, the workers in the processing room would never make it out. "If you worked in that hole, you just better hope your family has a casket for you," he said.

###'Don't want to be here'

About the same time Oates walked into the plant on the morning of the fire, Letha Terry got out of bed. She took a bath, brushed her teeth, got dressed and drove to work. As usual, she skipped breakfast. She arrived at Imperial about 6 a.m. and parked her car in the rutty, unpaved lot next to the pit that held Imperial's greasy wastewater.

Terry went into the plant and headed back toward her locker. Passing through the canteen, she saw Josephine Barrington, 63, who had been working at Imperial since it opened 11 years earlier, and who also had worked in the plant when it made Mello-Buttercup ice cream.

Every morning when Terry arrived, Miss Josephine, as her friends at work called her, would be sitting at the same table in the break room, eating a biscuit for breakfast. Today, Miss Josephine was sitting with her son Fred, 37, who also worked at the plant.

Terry liked Fred Barrington. He was a friendly guy, always joking around. He would stick pieces of tape on her when she wasn't looking and would play other little pranks like that. She enjoyed his games; they broke up the monotony.

Terry said good morning, then asked Miss Josephine how her Labor Day weekend had been.

"Fine," Miss Josephine replied. "But I don't want to be in this place."

They laughed.

Terry headed off to the trim room, where she oversaw work on the marinade line. The line workers took seasoned chicken breasts from big metal tubs and placed them on a conveyor, which carried them through a nearby freezer, then back to the trim room. The women then took the breasts from the belt, weighed them, bagged them and packed them into cardboard boxes.

They had to move fast. They filled each box with 53 pieces of chicken. Terry could fill a box in a minute; it took the slower women two or three minutes to fill one. Even the slowest workers would be picking up a piece of chicken every three seconds or so.

Although they usually ran breasts that had been seasoned in two big drums that looked like cement mixers, this day the women would be running tenders -- prime strips of chicken that other trim-room workers would pull from the center of the breasts.

About 7 a.m., the workers began filing in, some of them uttering a familiar complaint: "Oh Lord, I don't want to be here."

While many of them hated their jobs, some said they didn't mind Imperial so much. They earned a steady paycheck, and they got along with their work mates. But even those who hated the place stayed on, believing that they couldn't find anything better.

###Family on the line

About 6:50 a.m., while Terry was setting up the marinade line, Margaret Banks called her sister, Flora Lee Banks, from a pay phone in the
plant's break room. Both sisters had worked at Imperial for four months -- Margaret worked the first shift in the packing room, from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and Flora Lee worked second shift in the processing room, starting about 4 p.m. and heading home near midnight.

Some people mistook Flora Lee, 27, and Margaret, 24, for twins. Just over 5 feet tall, with a sparkle in their eyes, the sisters went the same places and did the same things. They even had identical living room furniture.

They talked on the phone so often that Flora Lee was convinced she could distinguish the sound of Margaret's ring from those of other callers. Whenever Flora Lee was confused or in a jam, she could count on Margaret for good advice. They would talk about everything.

This morning, Margaret was calling to ask Flora Lee a favor: Could she call Southern Bell and ask them to disconnect the telephone in her old apartment?

Margaret had purchased a new mobile home two weeks earlier. She was all set to move in with her children, 2-year-old Martika, a playful girl who smiles a lot, and 6-year-old Michael, a generous boy who is quick to share candy.

They would move as soon as the septic tank was installed. Margaret had already decorated the living room.

Flora Lee and Margaret were typical of many Imperial workers. Both single mothers, they had grown up poor. Their father, James Banks, was a county sanitation worker; their mother, Flora Ann, worked the overnight shift in a textile plant.

Margaret had split up with Michael's dad several years ago. Martika's father left town before she was even born. He was stabbed to death last year in Winston-Salem.

A born-again Christian, Margaret sought solace from her church, where she sang in the choir, served as an usher and taught Sunday school. Every evening at 6, Margaret would lead her own children through a religious hour, reading them Bible verses and teaching them to pray.

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Flora Lee worked just a few feet from the 26-foot-long fryer in the processing room. As pieces of freshly battered chicken came by on the conveyor, she separated them and placed them back on the belt before they disappeared into the sizzling hot oil.

The machine, which workers say broke down routinely because of problems with its gears and hydraulic lines, operated at 375 degrees. At the end of her shift, Flora Lee would leave drenched with sweat.

"Sometimes it was like somebody just poured water all over me," she said. "My neck be hurtin'. My back be hurtin'. My arm be hurtin'."

The ache in her arm was especially uncomfortable -- a dull, numbing pain. It seemed to come from moving her arm back and forth so quickly to keep pace with the chicken as it zipped along on the conveyor belt. The same motion, back and forth, back and forth, over and over again.

After a while, she couldn't even raise her hand to her face. If she lifted her arm any higher than parallel to the floor, straight in front of her body, the pain became too intense.

###Cold work, numb hands

One room over from processing, behind a wall covered with yellow tiles, Margaret Banks and other workers in the packing room picked pieces of frozen chicken off the conveyor, hustling to keep pace so the chicken wouldn't pile up and fall off the belt. These were pieces that had just been battered, breaded and precooked, then sent through a blast freezer connected to both the processing and packing rooms.

The air from the blast freezer, which operated at subzero temperatures, made the packing room icy cold. Some of the women wore extra shirts and sweaters to stay warm; others wore winter coats on the line.

The chicken came down the slide frozen solid; the women would break the pieces apart, put them in plastic bags, weigh them, pack them into cardboard boxes, label the boxes and stack them on wooden pallets. Then the men from shipping would come and cart the boxes away.

As the chicken came down the chute to the packing room, it would stack up on the slide, covering up every inch of it. Ice would build up on the slide and on the wall where the slide entered the room from the freezer.

"They sent it through too fast," said Doris Blue, a former packing room employee. "After your hands had been on that cold product for so long, they would get numb. It was hard to tell if you got cut. You wouldn't know it sometimes until your hands thawed out."
The women in the packing room wore plastic gloves with liners underneath them, but the gloves didn't provide much protection from the ice. And it didn't take long for the gloves to get torn up; a worker might go through two or three pairs a night. Imperial gave employees one pair when they started, but after that they had to pay 50 cents for each new set. For many of the women in the packing room, that was too much to spare.

### A raggedy life

Most days, Gail Pouncy and her sister, Elizabeth Ann Bellamy, shared a car for the half-hour drive from their homes in Bennettsville, S.C., to the Imperial plant. On the day of the fire, however, they drove separately.

Pouncy and Bellamy both were single mothers with two daughters. They had grown up poor.

When Pouncy was 19, just after she gave birth to her second child, her husband skipped town. She never heard from him again, never got any child support. Recently, she found out that he was serving a prison sentence for stabbing a woman he eventually married.

“I had a raggedy life,” Pouncy said. “That's why I wound up in that chicken plant. I had to take anything off anybody. I had to work.”

Bellamy, meanwhile, left Bennettsville for New York City right after she graduated from high school. She lived with an aunt and her grandmother, and went to the Brooklyn College of Nursing. Eventually she fell in love with a carpenter named Larry Bellamy, who took good care of Liz and her two daughters, Felicia and Shemean, until he wound up in prison on drug charges about a year ago.

At the time her husband went to prison, Bellamy had been in New York for 20 years, and the escalating violence was taking a toll on her. Just across the street from her apartment was a public park, a hangout for a tough crowd. She and her daughters routinely heard gunshots. It seemed that someone in the neighborhood was getting killed just about every day.

Bellamy decided to pack up her family's belongings, head back to South Carolina and start over. She hoped to find a good job, save some money and buy a nice big house. She didn't realize she'd end up working in a chicken plant, earning $5 an hour.

Pouncy and Bellamy worked in the marinade and cutting room, inserting chicken breasts into machines that sliced off a little chunk of meat from each one. The chunks were used for chicken nuggets, while the breasts were marinated and frozen in the marinade room or breaded and precooked in the processing room.

Gail Pouncy and Liz Bellamy weren't the only members of the Pouncy clan who worked in the cutting room: Bellamy's daughter, Felicia Odom; their niece, Zelda Roberts; and three cousins worked there, too.

The chicken came packed in ice, which would melt and cover the floor with so much water that many of the workers walked around with plastic bags covering their feet. They didn't want to ruin their shoes.

Flies buzzed around the room. They buzzed all around the plant. "We used to be fly killers," Pouncy said. "We used to take turns, go around killing flies."

Chicken fell on the floor all the time. So Pouncy walked around spearing the fallen pieces with a stick and putting them back on the marinade line. She said that's what management would tell them to do -- even though the meat had been on the floor.

"Once it gets through that marinade machine with all that seasoning and sauce, it's going to taste good," she recalled managers saying.

### Sharing troubles, songs

To Pouncy, the Imperial management seemed mean and stingy. Shortly before the fire, the company announced that employees would have to start washing their own work aprons. Imperial couldn't afford to clean them anymore.

For the employees, most of whom didn't have their own washing machines, the new policy meant extra trips to the laundromat and extra weekly expenses. To Pouncy, that seemed unfair.

“They were people who didn't have money in their pocket,” she said. "They had to borrow quarters and nickels and dimes.”

Of all the Imperial managers, Pouncy said, the one she liked the least was Brad Roe, the operations manager and son of the company's owner. When Roe gave Pouncy her allotment of three aprons, she recalled, he said in a loud, gruff voice: "You better not get a damn spot on them or I'll fire you on the spot."

If life in the plant was sometimes grim, Pouncy said, the employees had ways of making it easier. The line workers were country people, open and friendly. They kept no secrets. They shared problems; they comforted each other. They were like a family.

Sometimes, to break up the monotony of life on the line, the younger women would sneak over to a room near the garbage bin for a few
minutes and flirt with the male employees. And sometimes, they lightened the atmosphere with music. "Come on, let's sing," Bellamy would say whenever they were feeling sad. "I ain't in the mood to sing," Pouncy would say.

Then Liz Bellamy would convince her sister to sing one of her favorites, "I Love Jesus." Bellamy loved to hear Pouncy sing that song, and she'd try to join in. But Bellamy couldn't sing a lick. ###Worst kind of shame

On the day of the fire, Thomas Oates was overseeing operation of the two grading machines in the trim room. The machines sorted the chicken by weight into one of eight baskets attached to a conveyor belt. To operate properly, the machine required that a steady flow of fine mist be sprayed upon it. Whenever he worked the grader, Oates went home soaking wet.

Sometimes, baskets on the grading machines overflowed or tilted and spilled chicken on the floor. One day, Oates said, he picked up a piece of chicken from the plant floor and started to carry it to the garbage bin in the "inedible room," a place where several Imperial workers say they saw maggots crawling up the walls.

An inspector from the U.S. Department of Agriculture had told Oates to toss out any chicken he found lying on the floor. But Oates said that when Brad Roe saw him heading for the garbage bin, he exploded. "Where are you going with that damn chicken?" Oates recalled him saying. "I want the {expletive} chicken picked up and put in the box."

Oates explained that he was simply following the USDA man's instructions. "I ain't the USDA man," Roe replied, according to Oates' recollection. "I own this place.

Another time, Oates said, he complained to Roe that some chicken in the cooler was too rotten to process. It was always easy to tell when the chicken was rotten, he said: "The smell alone is enough to gag a maggot or send a buzzard running for a gas mask."

When he called the chicken to Roe's attention, Oates recalled, Roe told him, "As long as it's not green, go ahead and run it."

But what bothered the workers most of all, Oates said, was the company's "occurrence" policy, under which employees would be punished if they went to the bathroom too often.

Employees were permitted to use the bathroom four times daily, but they had to ask permission before going. If they stayed longer than their allotted five minutes, or if they went one time too many, they were penalized half an occurrence. Anyone who accumulated five occurrences would be fired.

To Oates, the policy seemed better suited to a classroom of kindergartners than to a factory work force. It seemed an indignity for adults to submit to such treatment, so Oates simply flouted the rule, going to the bathroom when he pleased.

Another Imperial employee, afraid of accumulating too many occurrences, once tried desperately to wait for a break rather than request an extra trip to the bathroom.

She wet her pants. ###'Where's my baby?'

About 8:15 the morning of Sept. 3, two maintenance men were in the processing room working on the fryer, which was malfunctioning again. As they worked on the machine, a hydraulic line sprang from its fitting and began spraying fluid onto the 375-degree, natural-gas-powered fryer. The fluid ignited in a burst of fire.

Gail Pouncy was standing in the trim room at the time, talking to her sister Liz Bellamy as they cut pieces of chicken with stainless steel knives. Their niece, Zelda Roberts, was there, and so was Bellamy's daughter, Felicia Odom.

Pouncy was telling her sister that she had some job applications in the car; they would fill them out and leave Imperial soon. Bellamy smiled at the thought.

Then Pouncy heard the screaming.
She looked up and saw a room full of fire. Grabbing Bellamy by the arm, she raced toward the door to a shed that enclosed the garbage bin.

"Where's my daughter?" Bellamy shrieked. "Where's my baby?"

"She's coming," Pouncy said.

Odom and Roberts ran behind them, Roberts still carrying the knife she had been working with moments before.

As soon as they entered the shed, Bellamy reached for the door. "Oh Lord, it's locked!" she cried as the terror swept over them.

Within moments, about 40 hysterical employees had crammed into the shed, climbing over one another in their desperate attempt to flee. As smoke filled their eyes and lungs, they pounded on the walls. "Lord help me!" they screamed. "I don't want to die! Let us out!"

Pouncy made her way toward the front of the shed, where she and Bernard Campbell tore a hole in one corner of the tin wall. Campbell, young and agile, slipped through the tiny opening to safety. Pouncy tried to hoist herself through, but she was too heavy to make it.

Looking through the opening, Pouncy saw Danny Pate, an Imperial supervisor, standing outside. He told her to make her way over to the doorway; they had a key. It would be open in a moment.

As she turned for the door, Pouncy fell to the ground. She felt hot ashes on the back of her head. She tried to pull herself up, but she felt so weak. Struggling toward the door, she heard a woman shout, "Let's try to make it to the freezer!"

### Prayers and panic

Pouncy warned them not to go -- the door would be open in a minute. But it was too late. The women had gone.

Pouncy heard her niece's voice. "Don't go, Zelda!" she screamed at Roberts. "They got the key! Zelda, Zelda, please don't leave me!"

Pouncy then made her way to the doorway and passed out beside it.

Roberts ran over to the nearby loading dock, but a delivery truck was blocking the way out. She entered the back of the tractor-trailer, where frantic workers were banging on the walls, hoping to get the attention of someone outside.

Truck driver Rickie Godfrey, who had been napping in the cab, awoke to the sound of their screams. He pulled the truck forward from the dock and watched as smoke billowed from behind.

Zelda Roberts stepped from the rear of the truck up onto the loading dock, then jumped to the ground and safety.

In the plant, Liz Bellamy and Felicia Odom sat inside the cooler, praying they would get out alive. Along with about a dozen others, they had entered the cooler seeking refuge from the smoke and chaos.

Bellamy started to panic. "Oh, Father! Oh, God! I ain't ready to die!" she screamed.

"Mom, calm down, calm down," Odom said. "It will be all right."

Bellamy lay with her legs stretched out in front of her, resting her head in the lap of Monica McDougald, 21, a marinade room employee who was sitting with her back against the rear wall, praying that she would see her 2-month-old son, Dashawn, before she died.

Felicia Odom watched her mother take her last breath. Then she passed out herself.

Out on Bridges Street, Thomas Oates watched as rescue workers carried body after body from the plant. Corpses lay scattered on the grass across from the garbage bin. Unconscious workers lay on the ground frothing at the mouth, their faces covered with soot, smoke emanating from their nostrils.

Running faster than he ever imagined possible in his clunky rubber boots, Oates had raced out the front door within seconds of seeing the smoke and hearing the screams. He was one of the lucky few to make it out uninjured.

He watched in horror as someone with a tractor pulled the garbage bin away from the plant. Three bodies tumbled from the opening where the bin had stood. One of them was Bertha Jarrell. Oates had been working beside her just three minutes earlier.

Letha Terry staggered out through the shed door as soon as someone opened it from the outside. Coughing and gagging, she ran to the parking lot across Bridges Street, where she saw her friend Elaine Griffin, a packing room employee.

"Lord, Lord, this can't be true!" Terry hollered. "No, no!"
She pointed at all the people lying on the ground. "There's Lillian. She's dead," Terry said. "There's Mary Alice. She's dead."

Griffin tried to comfort her. "It's going to be all right," she said.

"No, it won't," Terry replied.

###Cries in the night

Margaret Banks didn't make it out of the building alive.

In Laurinburg, about 20 minutes from the plant, her mother, Flora Ann Banks, sat next to the radio, listening to reports about the fire, hoping for news of her daughter. With each new report, the list of the dead grew.

The afternoon seemed like it would never end. But finally, about 4 p.m., her husband, James, and Margaret's sister, Flora Lee, came back from the plant, where they had gone to look for Margaret -- or Lisa, as the family called her.

"Where's Lisa?" Mrs. Banks asked, rushing to meet them in the driveway. "Where's Lisa, y'all?"

When she saw her husband's face, Mrs. Banks knew her daughter was dead.

Felicia Odom and Gail Pouncy were among those carried from the plant that day. They would spend weeks struggling to recover from the horror, visiting doctors, talking to psychologists, taking pills and sucking on inhalers to aid their damaged lungs.

One night about seven weeks after the fire, Liz Bellamy's orphaned 9-year-old daughter, Shemean, spent the night at her aunt's house. Gail Pouncy was having trouble sleeping. As she paced back and forth in the hallway, thinking about her sister, she heard Shemean calling out in her sleep.


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Caption: 12 photos

She got them pretty pink flowers she wanted, Gail Pouncy said of her sister, Liz Bellamy, one of 25 who died in the fire.

Thomas Oates is one of the lucky few who made it out of the Imperial plant uninjured; he had worried that processing room workers wouldn't be able to escape if fire broke out.

Letha Terry escaped with her life, but was shaken by the loss of many close friends.

A photo taken by an employee sometime prior to the fire show workers packing chicken at the Imperial Food Products plant in Hamlet.

Excerpt from Letha Terry's account of the fire:

An inhaler prescribed by her doctor helps Gail Pouncy's smoke-scared lungs; like many survivors, she suffered respiratory injuries in the Imperial fire.

A somber Brad Roe, operations manager at Imperial, attends a news conference just hours after the fire; the son of company owner Emmett J. Roe, he grew up in the chicken-processing business.

Doris Blue worked in the packing room at Imperial.

Flora Lee Banks, a second-shift worker, lost her sister and best friend, Margaret Banks, in the fire; Martika, 2, and Michael, 6, lost their mother.

The Hamlet tragedy has left Flora Ann Banks of Laurinburg with new responsibilities: caring for her smiling granddaughter and grandson.

Elaine Griffin made it out of the smoke-filled plant alive.

The Imperial Food Products plant had never had a safety inspection the 11 years it had been open.

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