HAMLET -- The sirens interrupted Ruth Land's circle meeting at the First Presbyterian Church.

She walked toward Hamlet Hospital as ambulances tore by with the injured. A police blockade kept her too far away to recognize anyone. Not that she could have anyway.

"I didn't know anybody who worked there," she said. "Just people you didn't know worked down there."

She said that weeks after the fire at Imperial Food Products, while she was deep into a conversation about Hamlet and its history. She was not being callous -- only saying what lots of others know is true: Many of those who worked and died at Imperial were of a different stratum, an underclass just scraping by.

Imperial had been down there, tucked away on Bridges Street by the railroad tracks, for 11 years. Land, 73, -- daughter of a railroad engineer, wife of a prosperous truck and tractor dealer -- had grown up in Hamlet but was barely aware of Imperial. Once, she went to the bank on the plant's payday and found a line of women in hairnets. Only recently had she learned that Imperial processed chicken.

After the fire, when Hamlet was in the news all over the country, some of Land's friends were annoyed by the way the town looked in print.

"I just heard people say, 'It looks like we're poverty-stricken,'" she said. But then again, she acknowledged with some regret, maybe those descriptions were not entirely wrong.

Hamlet is like other small towns that have lost their centers. Once a railroad hub, it has suffered from the decline of passenger trains while other towns have lost manufacturing jobs to automation or cheaper labor overseas. People with limited skills and little education have been left with whatever jobs they can find -- and for some, places like Imperial are the best they can do.

"It's a phenomenon not just in North Carolina but throughout the South," said Jesse L. White Jr. of Chapel Hill, a public policy consultant and a past executive director of the Southern Growth Policies Board. "There are Hamlets all over the South."

'I can't get out'

There was a time -- when the plant made ice cream -- that the workers on Bridges Street weren't strangers to people like Ruth Land. Buttercup Ice Cream Co. was a fixture in Hamlet, a place where high school boys could count on summer jobs and would hurl "snowballs" at each other in the freezer.

"It's FAMOUS because it's GOOD," Buttercup boasted. It was easy to talk the sales manager into a free sample, or even a free gallon. Ask anyone over 50 in Hamlet and watch him grin.

At Imperial, workers "stole everything you can imagine," including scales used for weighing chicken, said Loretta Hall, a supervisor in the packing room. "You didn't leave anything in that plant that was of any value." Some think the bosses at Imperial padlocked a door to keep people from stealing chicken.

At Buttercup, they gave the ice cream away.

Those were the days of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad -- in the first half of the century -- when nearly everyone in town was there because of the trains. Coming into Hamlet from five directions, the railroad gave the town its reason for being and put a jingle in its pocket.

Ruth Land's father-in-law, W.R. Land, owned a department store and a hotel, surrounded by the tracks, where you could have supper for 75 cents on Sunday nights. Twice a year, his twin daughters, Augusta and Virginia, would throw a party and invite 100 people.

"In those days, people visited neighbors. They don't do it now," said Augusta Land, who is 88 and blunt. For 43 years, she taught the 4th and 5th grades in Hamlet. "We didn't have tragedies like we do now," she said.

Like the Lands, Mattie Fairley grew up in the town. But she was of a different generation, a different race and a different Hamlet. She worked at Imperial.
On the morning of Sept. 3, Fairley was in one of the ambulances speeding to Hamlet Hospital. She survived the fire by desperately wedging her head and shoulders through a crack between a wall and a trash bin.

Her mother-in-law, Peggy Fairley Anderson, had worked at Imperial from the day it opened. She died in the fire.

Fairley, 40, walked to work from her rented duplex about a half-mile from the plant. Once, she cleaned rooms in a nursing home, bringing home $200 every two weeks. She also cropped tobacco, picked peaches and cotton, and worked in housekeeping at a hospital in Pinehurst. The most she ever made was the $5.50 an hour she got at Imperial.

She never graduated from high school. "I got tired, I guess," she said.

In 1980, the year Imperial came to town, almost half the people over 25 in Hamlet didn't have high school diplomas. Nearly one-fourth of the town's residents lived in poverty.

Richmond County's jobless rate usually exceeds the state's. In October, 7.7 percent of the county's labor force was out of work, more than 2.5 points above the state rate.

Fairley's husband, Maurice, a construction worker, is unemployed.

"We always talk about going somewhere, but we never do," he said.

"I can't get out of Hamlet," Mattie Fairley said.

36 trains a day

For 63 years, Elmer Lee "Tug" Jones has worked at the Seaboard Filling Station, not far from the mansard-roofed depot at the end of Main Street. Jones, 83, jaws with the occasional visitor amid a clutter of cigar boxes and displays of Wild Turkey bottles and old license plates.

Today the depot is closed more often than it is open, a whistle-stop for the Amtrak Silver Star, which pulls in twice a day. But Hamlet once was the thriving headquarters of a Seaboard division and the home of many train crew members. Jones remembers a time, in the 1930s, when 36 trains arrived each day.

"It was a real hamlet then. It was busy," he said. "If we had the old Seaboard railroad, we'd have something."

Rail passengers knew where they were when they got to Hamlet. In the '30s, on a knoll beside the tracks, Ruth Land's mother planted spirea bushes that spell out H-A-M-L-E-T to this day.

"There's a lot of civic pride in a small town," Land said.

Hamlet's founder was an Englishman who had a woolen mill in nearby Rockingham before it was destroyed in the Civil War by Sherman's troops, along with Richmond County's turpentine industry and courthouse. John Shortridge began again in 1872 in the area known as Sandhills, at the time consisting mainly of sand and longleaf pine -- and a railroad line to Wilmington.

"This is not a hamlet yet," he said when he named the town in 1873. "But I believe it will be one soon and perhaps in years to come a city."

By 1894, Hamlet had become a rail center, and the railroad remained the town's focal point for the next half century. The Seaboard Hotel, Hamlet's first, was built in 1900 chiefly as a dining room for train travelers, who were disgorged for 20-minute meal stops.

In a day of segregation, the arrival there of black social reformer Booker T. Washington caused a commotion. "Things worked out all right, when sheets were strung down the center of the large dining room," the local newspaper reported, "and Mr. Washington and his entourage used one half of the room while other guests used the other."

A famous crooner came through -- "Oh, it was the biggest thrill to see Rudy Vallee," Ruth Land said. So did the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, accompanied by their little brown pugs.

Between the passenger trains and a freight yard north of town, Hamlet's railroad employment reached peaks in the 1920s, and again during World War II and in the '50s. Members of the railroad brotherhoods were well paid for the time. "Blue-collar workers on white-collar salaries," some say of them now.

"Generally speaking, they were upper-middle-class people," said Dr. R.J. Blackley of Raleigh, whose father, an engineer, took home $500 to $600 a month in the 1920s. "They didn't make a whole lot of money, but they were comfortable."

There were other benefits: good pensions and passes that let families of railroad workers ride free.
But railroad work was not cushy. The rails often kept firemen, brakemen, engineers and conductors away from home.

"Lordy, the wife raised the children," said Julius A. Crowell, a retired conductor who runs the National Railroad Museum in the Hamlet depot's old newsstand. Some workdays lasted 15 hours and 59 minutes; after 16 hours, the railroad had to provide an eight-hour break between stints.

Tom Wicker, the New York Times columnist, was born in Hamlet in 1926, the son of a freight conductor. From his house on Hamlet Avenue, he heard the locomotives whistling in the night.

"My recollection is practically everybody worked for the railroad," he said. "Every time you would go anywhere, you generally would have to wait for the train to pass."

Jazz saxophonist John Coltrane also was born in Hamlet during the railroad boom, in the same year as Wicker. Coltrane's birthplace, a flat-roofed structure down the street from Wicker's house, now holds D's Alterations and Renee's Rental of Party Supplies, the NAACP office and Mary's House of Beauty.

Building a paradise

The railroad beckoned Buttercup's founder, Louis A. Corning, to Hamlet in 1920. Like Emmett J. Roe, who would start Imperial Food Products decades later, Corning was an ambitious New Yorker who brought his family into the business. But Corning, unlike Roe, made Hamlet his home.

Corning had been a pharmacist in Elmira, N.Y., where ice cream was his more profitable sideline. In 1919, he sold L.A. Corning Quality Ice Cream Co. to a larger company in a deal that prohibited him from making ice cream again within 500 miles of Elmira.

He was in his 40s, too young to retire. And his wife, Minnie Elvira Corning, wanted "to get him the heck out of the house," said his grandson, Roland S. Corning, a South Carolina legislator. "He picked up a map of the South and noticed all the railroad connections in Hamlet."

Buttercup expanded to employ 150 at the plant Corning built on Bridges Street and at branches in Sanford, Wilmington, Asheboro, Lumberton, Fayetteville, Conway, S.C., and Sumter, S.C.

"It was one of the few industries other than the railroad that had employment there in Hamlet," said another grandson, Louis A. Corning III of New Bern, a retired telephone company executive.

And workers found Buttercup a good place to be. "I know he treated them well enough that a number of them started with him in the '20s and '30s and stayed right on through," the grandson said, "and he was able to secure good workers."

While his wife kept a house in town, Corning bought land north of Hamlet and developed what his grandsons describe as Xanadu. At Lotus Pool Farms, he built log cabins -- a small one for the family and a more elaborate one for guests and parties. Deer and pheasant ran freely, and water spouted from the mouth of a sculptured frog in a pond.

"He had animals all over the place, and you could hike from the farm out to the railroad, and you could play in the woods," Roland Corning said. "It was a paradise for kids."

The ice cream business grew in competitiveness in the 1960s. To keep up, Buttercup would have had to expand greatly. Instead, the family sold the business in 1968 to Coastal Dairy Products Inc.

Coastal ran the Bridges Street plant, using the name Mello-Buttercup, for nine years before moving the operation to Wilson. The 1977 announcement of its closing was painful for Hamlet.

"People around here had a lot of pride in the Buttercup plant," said Barbara Thomas, whose husband, Richard, was plant manager. "Buttercup had a real good name. I felt like it was just a real part of Hamlet for so many years."

Echoes of an era

But nothing stung like the passing of passenger trains in the 1940s and '50s, as airplanes and automobiles became supreme. In 1940, Hamlet's population was 5,111. It fell after that until the 1980s, when annexation helped boost the count to 6,196.

"The older I get, the more I realize the railroad is the focal point of the community and the more I comprehend its impact," said Mayor Abbie G. Covington, whose grandfather started a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Hamlet in 1903.

"As I saw the railroad begin to change, I realized it was going to change the whole structure of the community because every time something impacted on the railroad, it impacted on us."
Hamlet still considers itself a railroad town. Fifteen percent of its labor force is in transportation, mainly at the weedy freight yard of CSX Transportation north of town. An average of 2,820 rail cars arrive daily to be uncoupled and rerouted. Diesel locomotives, boxcars and flatcars get minor repairs at the adjacent shops. CSX employs 600 there, down from 1,500 a decade ago.

Last year, when the National Civic League deemed Hamlet an All-America City, people gave it a nickname with railroad echoes: "The little town that could." The league recognized the town for saving Hamlet Hospital by backing its takeover by a for-profit company, for expanding the meticulously kept town library and for reinvigorating the Seaboard Festival, an annual love feast for the railroad.

Across the street from the train depot, down from a soup kitchen, rumpled men stand outside the 80-year-old Terminal Hotel. Painted on a window is "Dining Room. Best Coffee in Onondaga."

The sign and others like it were left by Hollywood, which made over parts of Hamlet to look like Onondaga, N.Y., in the 1930s for the filming of "Billy Bathgate." The signs remind people of the way Hamlet used to be.

"I think they look good," said Ernie Covington, whose family owns the Terminal. "Nobody seems to want to tear them down yet."

A flat foundation

While trains waned in Hamlet, textile mills were making things go five miles up the highway in Rockingham, the county seat and commercial center. For those displaced by Hamlet's economic decline, the mills provided alternative employment.

One of the state's first cotton mills started production in Richmond County in 1836. Power from the Pee Dee River, on the county's western edge, helped attract the textile industry. But the most powerful lure was the area's labor supply.

Generations of Richmond County residents have labored in the mills, including one owned by Sheriff Raymond W. Goodman, a cigar-chewing Democratic power who has held the office for 41 years.

More than four of every 10 jobs in the county are in manufacturing. And more than half of those manufacturing jobs are in textile and apparel plants, the rock upon which the county's economy is built.

But like a rock, this foundation does not expand.

"It has just managed to hold its own," said Glenn Sumpter, editor of the Richmond County Daily Journal. "Plants have opened and closed and reopened, and it's been a stagnant economy. It's not growing. It's running on a flat, level plane."

In 1974, Richmond County seemed about to leave its low-wage textile-and-apparel rut. Rust-belt industries were heading south, and Clark Equipment Co. broke ground for a huge truck and bus transmission plant in Rockingham. James B. Hunt Jr., then lieutenant governor, drove a front-end loader to turn the first slice of clay; Gov. James E. Holshouser Jr. showed up later with a state flag.

Clark came south for the lower tax rates, a non-union work force and the promise of training at Richmond Community College. By the late 1970s, it was the county's largest manufacturing employer with 1,100 on the payroll. Its workers were paid well. Twice, they rejected efforts to unionize them.

Then came the pain.

Foreign competition forced Clark to cut back. In 1986, to Richmond County's regret, it closed the Rockingham plant. That year, Clark's last, the average weekly manufacturing wage in the county was $307.93. In 1987, it dropped to $282.57.

The closing was a blow to people like Stephen B. Snead, an industrial engineer who had left a textile job to work for Clark. Until Clark came along, he had been thinking of moving away. "There was nothing here for me, future-wise," he said.

Clark's departure left a void in the job market, although a smattering of smaller companies grew up in its wake. Snead went into partnership with Jerry Eteo, a Michigan transplant who was supervisor of manufacturing engineering at Clark. Their precision machining company employs 32 at Pinehills Industrial Park near Hamlet, paying an average of $9.50 an hour.

Job applicants show up almost daily. But when Eteo asks whether they can handle his computer-controlled equipment, they look at him blankly.

"We tell them we are happy to take their application, but we probably won't have a job," he said.

That's an old story in rural North Carolina. For years, researchers have documented a steady decline in jobs for those with low skills. In Richmond County, even traditional manufacturing employers are demanding a better-trained work force.
Where Clark once employed men on metal-working machinery, women now sit at sewing machines, piles of white cotton at their sides. Fruit of the Loom, whose wage rates didn't match Clark's, bought the plant in 1986.

Fruit of the Loom's 1,600 workers knit, bleach, dye, cut and sew, turning out 30,000 to 50,000 dozen sweat shirts, sweat pants and T-shirts a week. Its ever-droning knitting machines, like the lathes in Jerry Eteo's plant, are operated by people who run computers.

"These ladies and men are very skilled labor," said plant manager William A. Tucker. "People say they are unskilled labor, but people who say that don't know what these ladies do."

Downhill slide

Some still hurt from Clark's departure. Richmond County has been "kind of on a downhill slide" ever since, said Steve Shelton, manager of the Rockingham Stainless Steel plant outside Hamlet.

Or what used to be Rockingham Stainless Steel. Production stopped in July after the company that owns the plant said the valves manufactured there were not profitable enough.

"As a rule around the county, the average blue-collar worker recognizes there is practically no opportunity for him here," said Shelton, who suspects that Richmond's leaders aren't doing enough to woo industry.

But manufacturing plants no longer are streaming southward. And those that do relocate choose areas with interstate highways and commercial airports. Richmond County has neither.

"We're in the middle of the biggest interstate highway void in North Carolina and South Carolina," said Johnny S. Sutton, Richmond County industrial director.

After Clark closed, representatives of another major company came to look over the county. Later, on their way to the Charlotte airport, they got lost. They did not return to Richmond County.

Today, much of the county's energy goes into fighting against a low-level radioactive waste landfill that the state is considering locating near Hamlet. Many fear that the landfill would damage the county's economic prospects and endanger its residents.

Ruby Bruce, who lives on the potential landfill site, turns up at every public meeting on the subject, taking notes and giving anyone who will listen a piece of her mind. Lately, the fire at Imperial and government's ignorance of working conditions there have provided her with new ammunition.

"If they can't inspect a chicken plant, how are they going to inspect this?" she asked.

Rising standards

In the moist chill of the Perdue chicken plant in Rockingham, Hester Thomas is a liver trimer, which means she separates giblets from chickens: an average of 19.8 chickens per minute, 1,187.5 chickens per hour, 9,500 chickens per day.

Thomas, who commutes the 25 miles from Bennettsville, S.C., is one of 850 Perdue "associates" in Rockingham. The company's associates, mostly women, make $6.05 per hour on the day shift and $6.15 at night.

Perdue produces 500,000 "oven-stuffer roasters" a week, slaughtering chickens trucked in from farms under contract to the company. It's a surreal scene on the processing line: Workers in rubber boots, vinyl coats, hats and hairnets stand side by side, deftly slicing, examining, sorting and packing pound after pound of chicken.

Thomas has seen the plant become increasingly automated since she began working there in 1973, fresh out of high school. Rubber-fingered mechanical pickers take off feathers, an eviscerator removes internal organs, machines make thin slices of chicken breasts.

Greater automation eliminates jobs, but increased production and new product lines have kept employment growing from the 400 who worked there in 1985 when Perdue bought the plant from White Poultry. For instance, the company is preparing to process chicken feet for sale in the Far East.

Perdue hires about 10 new workers a week, or roughly one in five applicants. Some former Imperial workers have found jobs at Perdue, which provides employment for the low-skilled -- to a point.

"We don't hire just anybody who comes in the door," said Wayne T. Burgess, complex manager for Perdue. "We have screening, and we do give physical exams to our prospective associates. We don't hire people to work for a few days or a few weeks at a time. We like to believe we have some pretty high standards."
Standards are rising in workplaces across Richmond County, squeezing out workers with limited skills -- the very ones who would make an ideal labor force for another Imperial. Beeping robots drive machinery at Burlington Industries' fabric plant. At the Owens Illinois plant, machines run by skilled operators make plastic bottle caps.

"Employment is shifting slowly toward high-skill technicians and away from low-skill operatives -- mostly women -- who have traditionally claimed the textile and apparel jobs," concluded a 1987 report on Richmond County by MDC Inc., a Chapel Hill research firm that specializes in economic development.

"If Richmond is to prosper 10, 20, and 30 years into the future, its work force will have to be far better trained and educated than it is today," the report said.

Education leaders recognize that, said M. Doug James, the county school superintendent.

At Richmond Senior High School, where Hamlet sends its students, a Tech Prep program builds academics into vocational training, preparing graduates for Richmond Community College. Another program, Occu Prep, guides the curriculum for students who will go to work directly after graduation.

Both programs are too new to have had much impact. But they are promising in a county that traditionally has put more stock in athletic deftness than in academic ability. Consider the way people give directions to Richmond Senior High, a perennial producer of football champions: "Drive down the road until you see the football stadium. The high school is in the hole behind it."

This year, Richmond's SAT scores averaged 769, well below the state's 841 average. But the county is keeping more students in school: Of those who started high school in 1982, 29 percent never finished; for those who started in 1986, the dropout rate was 17.5 percent.

A little over a third of the high school students plan to attend college. Many will not return to the county.

"Richmond County does not have a lot of opportunities for young people who go off to college and get four-year degrees and would like to come back to the area," said James, the school superintendent.

"But who's left to drive the economy of Richmond County? So we felt we needed to do something to improve the competencies of the kids who stay here."

The hope, said Joseph W. Grimsley, president of Richmond Community College, is to reduce the numbers of the undereducated, undertrained and underskilled. Those were the kinds of workers who found jobs at Imperial -- if they found jobs at all.

"There is a hidden unemployment thing around here that will bring out workers when work is available," Grimsley said. "If Imperial Food Products opened up today, I wouldn't have any question about filling the jobs. There are just that many invisible unemployed people."

No one had to sell Rosie Chambers on the value of education. When she died Sept. 3 at Imperial, she was close to getting a degree in human services from Richmond Community College.

She lived in Ellerbe, north of Hamlet, with her grandmother, Roxie Chambers.

About 35 years ago, Roxie Chambers worked the third shift in a cotton mill, but had trouble staying awake. "Roxie, it looks like you're taking your nap," she remembers the boss saying. "I'd say, 'yup.'" Still, she stuck it out for three years. She then farmed with her husband before getting a job as a custodian at Ellerbe Junior High, where she stayed more than 20 years.

Rosie Chambers, at 23, wanted better.

She went to work at 6:30 in the morning in her blue Ford Fiesta, which she bought with her earnings from Imperial. She'd come home around 3:30 p.m. and study until supper at 5:30. At night, she went to school.

On Sundays, she attended the Powerhouse Church of God in Hamlet. Her grandmother preaches there, and Rosie sang solos.

"She had a voice you could follow when she sang," her grandmother said. Sometimes, she said, she would find her granddaughter singing away in the kitchen or living room, holding a broom handle as if it were a microphone.

At Richmond Community College, they plan to hang a plaque in memory of Rosie Chambers.

### It was a small town in touch with the larger world via the rails. Hamlet was a crossroads - a place where important people passed through, a place where people felt important. Those days passed, and Hamlet became like scores of other North Carolina towns. Times were harder, jobs were more scarce. Hamlet, once home of the luxurious Seaboard Hotel and its own opera house, became the home of Imperial Food Products.
Caption: 13 photos; Hamlet; Railroad Station; Fairley; Land;

Index terms: SERIES; 2; HISTORY; Hamlet; North Carolina; NC; Imperial Food Products; death; employment; safety; disaster; Tragedy in Hamlet

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