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THE INFLUENCE OF OLIN MATHIESON ON
EDUCATION IN SALTVILLE, VIRGINIA

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A Thesis
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Master of Arts

by
Lorraine C. Heath
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THE INFLUENCE OF
OLIN MATHIESON CHEMICAL CORPORATION
ON EDUCATION IN
SALTVILLE, VIRGINIA

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ABSTRACT

This is an analysis of the response of the Olin Mathieson Chemical Corporation to the educational needs of Saltville, a small Southwest Virginia town of approximately 2400 people. The school system of this small town would resemble more the large city school system in that the Charter, adopted in 1894, called for Saltville to have a separate and distinct school district from that of the county.

The influence of this now nationally-known chemical company began in 1893 and increased over the years until 1968, when the influence of the ecological movement within the United States dealt a disastrous blow to the Saltville Plant, the town, and the Company's influence on education.

An introductory chapter surveys the historical development of the town, observing the rise and fall of each owner of the town's rich mineral resources prior to the acquisition of such by the Mathieson Alkali Works.

The succeeding chapters reflect, in chronological order, the growth of the company that resulted in donations of land, personnel time, and money into the town's educational system that followed to the letter the provisions of the 1894 Charter.

Opinions of the native populace will vary regarding the overall effect of this Company influence, whether good or bad, but the influence was great, and warrants recognition as such.

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Dr. Leland R. Cooper, Chairman
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Nature Chooses a Site	2
The Westward Movement	3
Development Begins	4
Salt Capitol of the Confederacy	4
Industry Grows	5
Saltville Incorporated	8
2. CHARTER	9
Provisions for Education	9
Company and County Agreement	11
3. EDUCATION BEGINS	14
Early Education	14
Facilities Grow	14
Olin Mathieson Influence Begins	15
Sports	16
4. MATHIESON INFLUENCE GROWS	17
Four New Classrooms	18

Chapter		Page
5.	R. B. WORTHY HIGH SCHOOL	20
	New Deed	20
	Playground	21
	Advanced Science Program	23
	The Alkalite	23
	School Board Investment	24
	Former Principal Speaks	24
	Final Tribute	25
6.	VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE DONATION.	26
	Rock Peckers	27
	Land Gift	27
7.	EDUCATION, OLIN EMPLOYEES	28
8.	SALTVILLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	30
9.	TRAINING DEPARTMENT	32
	Adult Materials	32
10.	EDUCATIONAL CO-OP plan	34
	Summer Work Program	34
	Co-op Plan	34
11.	JOB PREPAREDNESS CENTER	36
	Olin Donation	36
	Cooperation, Town, Plant, College	37
	Center Staff	38

Chapter	Page
12. REVISED CHARTER	40
School Supplement Ends	40
Saltville Town Code, Revised, 1970	40
Saltville School Board Members	42
13. DEPARTING GIFT	43
Influence Continues	43
Consolidation	43
14. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY	54
APPENDIX	57

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

When the Mathieson Alkali Works first tapped the natural resources in Saltville, Virginia, in 1893, the town was little more than a valley of salt springs which had passed from one owner to another since 1753.

This new plant in Saltville was the first of what is now the Olin Corporation with plants located all over the United States and many foreign countries. The Olin Corporation's main office is located in Stamford, Connecticut with assets in 1972 listed as \$1,101,379,000 and employing approximately 32,000 people.¹

The influence that this company had on education in Saltville, Virginia is as unique as the Town itself. A very brief history of the town prior to the coming of Mathieson Alkali Works is necessary for a thorough understanding of the area, its historical development, and its industrial development that led to the educational development of the people.

Saltville is a small town, 7.8 square miles and 2,500 population, located in Smyth County in the

¹Olin Corporation Annual Report, 1972, p. 2.

Rich Valley of Southwest Virginia.² A visitor to Saltville would leave I-81 at Exit 13, and travel Route 107 directly into the town. A welcoming sign at the outskirts of the town reads, "Saltville-Salt Capitol of the Confederacy." In summing up the simple life of the valley, a resident recently stated, "We've got no crime problem, no drug problem, no racial trouble."³

Nature Chooses a Site

There is a reason for the site of every town. Saltville is explained by the great salt deposits located in the valley in which the town is situated; hence its name and the presence of settlers long before the rest of the section was opened up.

History and tradition say that prior to the coming of the white man, this valley constituted a "salt lick" where deer, buffalo, and other animals licked the salt from the crusts formed on the surface at the upper end of the valley, and that the Indians made salt by boiling water from the salt springs which, at different points, broke out around the margin of the lake which filled the lower end of the valley. These springs were in existence as late as 1853.

²Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, "Economic Adjustment Program for the town of Saltville, Virginia," The Pentagon, (March, 1974), p. 1.

³Jack Newcombe, "End of a Company Town," Life, LXX, (March 26, 1971), 44.

Originally, the valley was marshland and a considerable part of it was a salt or briney lake bordered on the north and south by majestic hills and primeval forests. Many years ago the valley was ditched and drained and converted into dry land. For 150 years, or more, it has been the site of the present town of Saltville.⁴

The Westward Movement

It was in 1784 that an expedition set out from Waynesboro, in Albemarle County on a long journey through the Shennadoah Valley traveling to the head waters of the Holston River, then on to the great gap in the mountains which they called "The Cumberlands." Mr. Charles Campbell, a member of the party, surveyed the lower end of the valley and a tract of 330 acres called "The Salt Lick" was patented to him by Lord Dinwiddie in the name of George II of England on October 23, 1753, this tract being a part of the present town of Saltville.⁵

Down through the years the valley was called The Buffalo Lick; The Salt Lick; The Big Lick; The Salt Works; and, finally, Saltville.⁶

⁴W. J. Totten, "From Plant Town to People Town," p. 3.

⁵Ibid. p. 1.

⁶W. B. Kent, A History of Saltville (Radford, Virginia: Commonwealth Press, Inc., 1955), p. 21.

Development Begins

The property was inherited from Charles Campbell by General William Campbell, the hero of the famous Revolutionary Battle of King's Mountain whose wife was a sister of Patrick Henry. General Campbell left this valuable property to his children, Sarah and Charles Henry. The Virginia Assembly gave Charles Henry five thousand acres of land "in consideration of the splendid services which his father had rendered to both State and Nation." The land adjoining the Salt Lick was selected. Upon Charles Henry's death at age five, all the land passed to his sister, Sarah.⁷

In 1788, further development of these properties were undertaken by General William Russell who had married General Campbell's widow. To settle a dispute that arose over the land, the court appointed Colonel Thomas Madison, brother of President Madison, as guardian of Sarah Campbell who married General Francis Preston in 1793.⁸

Salt Capitol of the Confederacy

During the Civil War, Saltville was the sole source of the salt supply of the Confederacy. On Sunday morning, October 2, 1864, Brigadier-General Stephen G. Burbridge led his Union Army into Saltville with the object of destroying the Preston Salt Works in order to shut off the supply of salt to the Southern States.

⁷Kent, p. 22.

⁸Ibid. p. 23.

In this battle, the Yankees were defeated and were pursued into Tazewell County by the Cavalry of General John Morgan; however, on Tuesday, December 20, 1864 the Union troops, under General Stoneman, captured Saltville, burned all the salt furnaces, filled up the salt wells with cannon-balls, and departed.

The Yankees reported that they had completely destroyed the salt works, but in their haste they had overlooked about half of the salt kettles and a means for removing the cannon-balls was devised.

Several weeks later, the furnaces were going, and salt was again being furnished to the Confederacy.⁹

For some time during the war and for several years after, the wife, and widow, of J.E.B. Stuart lived in the upper end of the valley.

Industry Grows

The valley of Saltville attracted many industrialists from 1745 until the acquisition by the Mathieson Alkali Works in 1893.

The Indians, evidently the Cherokee of the Iroquoian tribe, from remote time until 1745 vied with wild animals for the ownership of the salt licks. The first white settlers moved into the valley in 1855.¹⁰

⁹Kent, p. 35.

¹⁰Ibid. p. 41.

The industrialization of Saltville until the acquisition of the land by the Mathieson Alkali Works in 1893 is as follows:

- 1793 Sarah Campbell married General Francis Preston. In 1795, General Preston retired from Congress and settled at "Salt Lick," with his family. The salt furnaces were then known as Preston Salt Works.
- (Sometime prior to 1793, a 150 acre tract was patented to one Evan Lee. He sold to James Crabtree.)
- 1795 Crabtree sold to John Musgrove, and in 1795, Musgrove sold the original tract to William King for five hundred pounds sterling.
- 1801 William King rented the Preston Salt Works for a period of ten years. King died in 1808, a rich man. His executors continued the operation of the salt works.
- 1819 Court proceedings were brought to straighten out the estate and the salt works were leased to John Sanders for a period of five years at thirty thousand dollars a year.
- 1820 James White bought the lease and operated the works until 1833.
- 1833 Both the King and Preston estates were leased to Alexander McCall and William King, Jr.
- 1845 They defaulted in the rent for the Preston estate, and Colonel Thomas L. Preston was put in charge of the works.
- 1846 Thomas L. Preston rented the King salines for five years.
- 1851 The King salines were rented to Wyndham Robertson for five years.

- 1858 Preston leased the two saline estates to Spenser Ackerman and Company, and George W. Palmer of Syracuse, New York took charge of the operations.
- 1863 George W. Palmer and William A. Stuart, father of ex-Governor Henry C. Stuart, purchased the Preston estate from Robert Gibboney, trustee of Thomas L. Preston.
- 1864 A corporation, the Holston Salt and Plaster Company, acquired titles to both the King and Preston estates, owned and operated by Palmer and Stuart.
- 1893 The property was acquired by the Mathieson Alkali Works.
- 1954 A merger with Olin occurred at the corporate level and the Mathieson Alkali Works became the newly formed Olin Mathieson Chemical Corp.
- 1966 Olin Mathieson Chemical Corporation became the OLIN corporation.
- 1972 Property was acquired by the Town of Saltville from the OLIN corporation in a deed of gift as follows:

That OLIN does hereby grant, quitclaim, give and convey, subject however to the terms, conditions, exceptions and reservations hereinafter set out, unto the Town, as a gift, all its right, title, interest and estate in and to all remaining properties, both real and personal which are not yet owned by it, and are situated within the corporate limits of the Town, both in the part thereof lying in Washington County, Virginia, and in the part thereof lying in Smyth County, Virginia.¹¹

¹¹DEED OF GIFT, Olin Corporation and Town of Saltville, December 28, 1972.

As Olin Mathieson expanded, the labor force expanded. At the peak employment, in 1960, the Company employed approximately 1,500, and the town's population was approximately 4,500.¹²

To develop the town's industry, to Olin Mathieson, meant to develop the town. The development of the town also brought about the development of a unique system for educating the Saltville people.

Saltville Incorporated

Shortly after the acquisition of the Salt Plant and vast farm land by Mathieson, it was decided, that in order to control the holdings secured by sales and grants from the State of Virginia, it was necessary to incorporate the town.

In 1896, a charter was granted by the General Assembly to the new Town of Saltville. This corporation included practically all of the company's holdings and was granted for eight (8) square miles or approximately 5,000 acres.¹³

The provisions for education for the Town of Saltville in this new charter began a story of a relationship between industry, town, and schools that is as unique as the town itself.

¹²Ward Worthy, "Saltville Rallies After Olin Shutdown," Chemical and Engineering News, (March 13, 1972), p. 7.

¹³Kent, p. 42.

Chapter 2

CHARTER

Application for a charter was made on August 4, 1892 as required by the laws of the State of Virginia. On August 13, 1892 the Charter was entered as a matter of record in the office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth at Richmond, Virginia.

Provisions for Education

To incorporate the Town of Saltville and to Repeal an Act entitled, "An Act to Incorporate the Town of Saltville," approved March 8, 1894.

Section 2: The territory within the corporate limits of said town is hereby created and declared to be a separate and distinct road and school district, and all persons and property therein shall be exempt from all road taxes and services from taxes for the support of the poor and from county and district taxes for free school purposes, provided, the said town shall keep roads within its limits in good order, support its own poor, and maintain its own public or free schools. And it is further provided that all lands contained within the corporate limits of said town which are used exclusively for agricultural purposes shall be exempt from all corporation tax, except for road and school purposes and supporting its poor.

Section 7; paragraph 10: The Council shall have power to purchase and hold lands and lots on which to erect school houses and other necessary buildings, and may sell and convey the whole or any part thereof, provided two-thirds of the Council concur therein. They shall have power and authority to appoint

school trustees of the town, such trustees to be clothed with all the powers and to perform all the duties now vested in and required of district boards of school trustees; and in providing funds for the support of the schools the trustees shall be governed by the provisions of Section fifteen hundred and forty of the Code of Virginia of eighteen hundred and eighty-seven.

Section 9: The Council shall have power to levy and collect a poll tax of fifty cents on each male person so assessed for free school purposes.

The school trustees as provided in Section 7 of the Charter became the Saltville School Board consisting of four persons. The members of the Saltville School Board were elected by the Town Council every four years, and they could succeed themselves.

The typical Saltville School Board is illustrated by the men who held the position in 1955. They were:¹⁴

R. B. Worthy, Clerk - Manager, Olin Mathieson
Chemical Corp.
H. L. Craft, Member - Manager, Mathieson General
Store, owned by Olin.
John Morgan, Member - Assistant to Mr. Craft in
the Mathieson store.
Dr. T. K. McKee, Chairman - Director of the one
Saltville Hospital, owned
and operated by Olin.

Except for the provisions for a separate school district as listed in the Town Charter, Saltville would be just another school in the Smyth County School System.

¹⁴Kent, p. 145.

In the county there are elected, by the people, seven supervisors, one from each school district. Each supervisor appoints from his district one person to serve as a member of the Smyth County School Board. There is a Superintendent of Smyth County Schools, an Assistant Superintendent, and a Director of Instruction.

Even though Saltville was a separate school district, it was located, geographically, in one of the seven districts; therefore, from the Saltville district there is a supervisor and a county school board member. The county school board member represents his particular district in which Saltville is located, but not Saltville at that time. One member of the Saltville School Board sat in on all county school board meetings, but did not have a vote.

This situation has existed since the charter that was entered on record in the office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth at Richmond, Virginia, and adopted by the Council of the Town of Saltville at a meeting on April 20, 1920.¹⁵

Company and County Agreement

In April, 1921, Mr. Eugene A. Hults was named Manager of the Mathieson Alkali Works at Saltville. Mr. Hults had enough foresight to determine the influence

¹⁵Mathieson Alkali Works, "The Alkalite, Anniversary Number," (July, 1922), p. 10.

that this growing company would have on the entire county if left to politicians and county tax systems. His ideas, however, did not include the county as such, but it was the betterment of the Town of Saltville that was foremost in his mind. His policies were geared to insure the growth, both intellectually, and culturally, and to offer the very best educational facilities available.

To substantiate Mr. Hults' intention of keeping as much Plant money in the town of Saltville as possible, especially in the educating of Saltville's young people, he negotiated an agreement with the County as follows:

Mathieson Alkali Works would maintain the Town of Saltville, including the operation of the schools.¹⁶

Under this agreement, Mathieson Alkali taxes would be based on the needs of the Town rather than on an up-to-date tax assessment. "Admittedly, the County would not get a fair share of tax dollars from the Company, but a portion of the county school maintenance load would be eased and the Town of Saltville and the Saltville schools would profit greatly."¹⁷

¹⁶Alkalite, Anniversary Number, p. 65.

¹⁷Statement by R. L. Warren, Town Treasurer, personal interview, November 12, 1972.

The Company anniversary publication of "The Alkalite" in 1922 described the arrangement this way.

The Mathieson Alkali Works supplements the usual funds furnished by the State and County for public schools by large contributions for their betterment, and thus, has made possible many advantages not ordinarily available. This interest on the part of the Company, together with the efforts of the Saltville School Board, explains the remarkable successful conduct of our school system.

Saltville schools have been accredited by the State Department of Education since 1914. The Saltville School System is also a member of the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools which is the largest accreditation agency to be obtained in the State of Virginia.

Chapter 3

EDUCATION BEGINS

Early Education

For reasons not fully understood, the early settlers in Saltville failed to provide for education when they settled in the valley. It was in 1788 that the first public school was held in Saltville. It was held in the Elizabeth Church built by Madam Elizabeth Russell, sister of Patrick Henry. The school was taught by a Methodist minister and would fit the definition of a classical school.¹⁸

The schooling consisted of the three "R's" plus music and singing of hymns. Reverend William Asbury, a Methodist minister conducted the school.¹⁹

Some of the more prosperous families employed tutors for their children, and these methods of educating the Saltville youth prevailed until 1858.

Facilities Grow

Shortly after the War between the States, George W. Palmer, owner of part of the valley, erected a small school building. The building was a small and simple frame structure, built like a long, one-room shanty.

¹⁸Kent, p. 139.

¹⁹Ibid.

In 1876, Mr. Palmer built a more substantial school building of brick. It was more spacious, and had two rooms. One large classroom could accommodate 75 to 100 students, and a primary room which accommodated 25 to 50 children.²⁰

Olin Mathieson Influence Begins

The Mathieson influence began with the immediate purchase of the land from the Holston Salt and Plaster Company in 1893. The building that housed the entire public school system was then situated on the newly acquired Mathieson land.

By 1905, this new owner of the valley set a precedent that would continue for approximately 70 years. Realizing that a complete and well-rounded inter-school athletic program is a vital part of education, an athletic field was provided by the Company with no deed to the land, but clear provisions for its use for all sports events and enjoyment of the Saltville public.

In the fall of 1920, twelve boys turned out to practice a new game called "football." A four-game schedule was completed with Saltville losing all four; but, more important, the Company had provided the means for the Saltville Schools Athletic Program.

Maintenance of the school and field grounds was provided by the Company. In an interview with the writer, James K. Osborne, principal, R. B. Worthy High

²⁰Kent, p. 140.

School, 1972 through the present, summed up the assistance with this statement.

"On the day before a sports event, I could look from my office window to watch the Olin men raking, trimming, and painting; getting ready for the game.

The day after the game, they would be back, cleaning the stands and field, raking and re-planting, anything that needed to be done."

Sports

Prospective coaches were carefully screened with Management at the Plant playing a major role in the selection. The Saltville coaches were better-paid than those of the County Schools.

Saltville fielded many championship teams which were composed mainly of sons and daughters of Olin Mathieson employees. A sports event was a family affair.

When the public address announcer asked that a particular man report to the telephone, each man in the stadium knew which department at the Plant was having trouble. Several men would usually leave the stadium without being called.

Chapter 4

MATHIESON INFLUENCE GROWS

With ample space for expansion on the parcel of land provided by Mathieson for the school, a larger school building was planned.

In 1925, with money obtained from a bank loan, the cornerstone for the new Saltville High School was laid. This new building provided a means for separating the high school and elementary students. The older, 1905, building served as the Elementary section.

Additional space was needed, however, so a loan was granted to the Saltville School Board by Mathieson Alkali Works for sufficient funds to build an additional four new classrooms.

Both loans were repaid at \$1000.00 a month to the Bank, for the original 1925 loan, and \$1000.00 a month to the Mathieson Alkali Works.²¹

These two payments (\$2000.00) were entered in the Town of Saltville Budget. With Mathieson Alkali Works supplementing the budget, this resulted in the

²¹Saltville Town Budget, 1905 ff.

Company helping repay the loan it granted to the Saltville School Board, as well as the Bank loan.

Between the years 1925-1954, no new land grants were recorded, but the Olin Mathieson influence continued with the following:

1) The large Company supplement made possible a Saltville School teacher's salary scale that was higher than the County scale. This attracted some of the better teachers to the Saltville area.

2) School uniforms and Coaching Staff for football, baseball, basketball, and track.

3) A School band and chorus with the Company contributions being the largest in purchasing uniforms.

4) An Elementary school music department.

Four new classrooms

In 1948, the Mathieson Alkali Works merged with Olin and became the Olin Mathieson Chemical Corporation.

This newly-named Company's influence on education continued, when, in 1949, the high school building was overcrowded. The Company crew of Carpenters appeared at the school, and in a short length of time, four additional classrooms were added to the building. In that same year, the Company added night lights to the ball field.²²

²²A. R. Schmerda, Report to the Plant Manager, February 22, 1950.

In an interview with Dr. J. L. Mauck who served as principal of Saltville High School from 1944 until 1948, he recalled that while he was principal of the Saltville Schools there was no known deficit in school funds. The principal prepared the proposed yearly budget and submitted it to the Manager at the Plant. It was always approved. If, during the school year, an item was needed that was not included in the budget, or unexpected repair work was needed, then a call was made to the Plant Manager, who gave him permission to purchase the item, and the Company picked up the tab.

Dr. Mauck recalled that an example of this extra assistance occurred when the school needed a lunch room. The proposed budget for the year included the cost of the lunch room. The first day that it was used they "fed children from 11 o'clock until 2 o'clock."

A telephone call to the Manager's office at the Plant resulted in a Company Carpenter crew reporting to the school the very next morning. The crew tore down walls, built additional counter space, added plumbing, and completed a larger lunch room.

"That's all there was to it. I wish it were that easy now."

Dr. Mauck is, at present, serving as Superintendent of Smyth County Schools.

Chapter 5

R. B. WORTHY HIGH SCHOOL

Mr. R. B. Worthy, Manager of the Saltville Works from 1942 to 1952, never hesitated in conversation or interview to voice his interest in the youth of Saltville and his desire to keep the Saltville child in a desirable position to compete. In an interview with a reporter from the Baltimore Sun, he stated:

"Mathieson supplements the school funds, thus improving educational standards. We want a good grammar and high school system. We want the children to grow up, go away to college, and come²³ back to take over the technical work."

In 1952, Mr. Worthy was promoted from Manager, Saltville Works, to Manager, Chemicals Division of Olin Mathieson Chemical Corporation with an office at the Corporate level in New York City. He continued to maintain a home and an office in Saltville, and commuted quite regularly.

New Deed

In 1954, Mr. Worthy personally negotiated at the corporate level a section of land on which to build

²³Based on personal correspondence between R. B. Worthy and Reporter, Baltimore Sun newspaper.(n.d.)

a modern high school. Also, being a member of the Saltville School Board, and on the Board of Directors of the First National Bank of Saltville, he helped negotiate a 30-year loan to provide the financial means for building the school.

Again, the monthly payments were entered in the Town Budget. Olin Mathieson's contributions to that budget increased accordingly, thus the payment was absorbed.

In a merger with Olin at the time, the Company became the Olin Mathieson Chemical Corporation, and the new deed to the Saltville School Board reads as follows:

Where-as, Olin Mathieson is the owner in fee simple of the hereinafter described lot or parcel of land, and has agreed to give and convey said lot or parcel of land to the School Board and the School Board intends immediately to erect a school building on said lot.²⁴

Size: Approximately 11.34 acres.

Playground

At the same time, Olin Mathieson leased to the School Board for a period of thirty (30) years with the right to renew for an additional term of twenty (20) years, rent-free, the right to the uninterrupted use of

²⁴Recorded in Clerk's Office, Smyth County, Deed Book #136, p. 99.

a section of land situated across the road and in front of the new school and adjoining the ball field.

A playground for the pupils of said high school during each school term at all such hours as the School Board provides supervision for the pupils playing there.²⁵

With the coaching staff serving as summer supervisors of this playground, the facility has become the focal point of student recreational outlets during the summer vacation months. On February 23, 1959, this approximately 5.76 acres lot was donated to the Saltville School Board as follows:

Whereas, the School Board owns and operates a public school on a lot across the alley from the lot herein after described and needs additional land for the more efficient operation of said school and for use in connection herewith and has requested Olin Mathieson to give to it the herein after described lot and Olin Mathieson desires to advance the education of the youth in the Town of Saltville and has agreed to give and donate said lot to the School Board.²⁶

In 1954, Mr. Walter P. Stuart, Personnel Manager, Olin Mathieson Chemical Corporation, wrote:

This property was laid off and improved by the Company. It was leveled throughout and improved with grandstand and wooden bleachers on the northside of the baseball field, and steel bleachers on the southside

²⁵Clerk's Office, Smyth County, Deed Book #136, p. 103.

²⁶Clerk's Office, Smyth County, Deed Book #161, p. 564.

Two concrete tennis courts and two swimming pools ajoin the ball field.

The Company has maintained all the improvements in good condition, and expects to continue to do so.²⁷

Advanced Science Program

Again, supporting the committment to keep the Saltville child in competition with the outside world, the Company supported an advanced science curriculum at the new high school. Above the supplement to the School Board, Olin Mathieson would directly pay the salary of the person hired to teach these advanced courses. The pre-requisite, a Master's Degree in the areas of Chemistry and Physics, and some college experience "outside."²⁸

"The Alkalite"

The Saltville Mathieson Employees Association published a monthly newspaper, "The Alkalite." The June, 1957, edition carried this statement.

The donation of land for school building and grounds by Olin Mathieson Chemical Corp. shows that this company is interested in providing adequate educational facilities for the children of its employees and other children in this territory.

The school has thirteen classrooms as well as business and study rooms, laboratories, student activity rooms, a band room, a guidance room, cafeteria, clinic, library, gymnasium and an auditorium with a seating capacity of 700.

²⁷Personal correspondence between Walter P. Stuart and State Board of Education, November 10, 1954.

²⁸Statement by R. G. McCoy, personal interview, May 12, 1973.

School Board Investment

A 0.543 acres lot next door to the new high school was included in the land grant in 1954. According to former Mayor W. J. Totten, the modern ranch-style brick home that was built for the exclusive purpose of housing for the R. B. Worthy High School principal, was financed by "capital investments of the Saltville School Board."²⁹

Former Principal Speaks

In an interview with Mr. R. G. McCoy, who taught, coached, and then served the school as principal from 1964 until 1972, he stated:

"Besides getting anything within reason through on the budget, if plumbing went bad, electrical work needed done, anything within reason, anything we needed, a call to the Superintendent of that particular department at the plant would bring a crew to the school to get it done.

We knew each superintendent by name and just placed the call to him, didn't even have to ask the Manager.

Man, it was Utopia!"³⁰

²⁹Statement by W. J. Totten, personal interview, November 5, 1972.

³⁰Statement by R. G. McCoy, personal interview, May 12, 1973.

A Final Tribute

The following editorial appeared in "The Alkalite," June-July, 1959 issue.

"When death came to R. B. Worthy on July 26, sorrow came to Saltville and the area surrounding. Coming to Saltville in 1926, he advanced with the Mathieson Co., and became manager of the Chemical Division of Olin Mathieson Corp. His leadership in the plant was aggressive and vigorous, and he constantly improved the physical condition of the plant so it could compete with similar companies. During his term of active management, management relations were good. He went the second mile to help individual employees, and secured as much increase in wages for the employees as conditions allowed.

Mr. Worthy took a keen interest in the town and worked constantly for a modern high school. It is very fitting that our high school bears his name.

He was friendly to all, high and low, and many went to him for counsel and advice.

The Saltville Mathieson employees secured many things while Mr. Worthy was in charge, and we appreciate everything that he did for the town."³¹

A native of McPherson County, South Dakota, Mr. Worthy was buried in the Elizabeth Cemetery in Saltville, Virginia. His wife had preceded him in death in 1936, and he had remained a widower.

³¹The Alkalite, editorial, June-July, 1959.

Chapter 6

V. P. I. DONATION

The influence of Olin Mathieson on education in Saltville was not restricted to the native populace. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University is located approximately 75 miles from Saltville in Blacksburg, Virginia. A part of the college's curriculum offering is geology. The rock formations in Saltville are of great interest to the geology department at the school.

In order for the geology students at V. P. I. to come to the Saltville area and spend enough time to conduct the studies needed to advance their knowledge in this field, Olin Mathieson constructed a large dormitory, a brick structure, for the specific use of geology majors.

The building was constructed on Olin land in 1955, with no clear title to the land, but clear provisions for its use. V. P. I. and State University was given the right to use the building, but asked to accommodate geology majors from other schools who might desire to use it.³²

³²Statement by L. H. Tuggle, personal interview, April 26, 1974.

Rock Peckers

Each summer, at least 40 geology students come to Saltville to dig, analyze, and learn. The people of Saltville have grown accustomed to seeing these young people digging along the roads and on the hill sides. They, jokingly, refer to them as "rock peckers."

Land Gift

In July, 1970, Olin Mathieson made another donation to Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Olin hereby does grant, give, and convey unto V. P. I. and S. U., as a gift, that certain lot or parcel of land on which is located the building known as the Virginia Polytechnic Institute Field Station. Lot size, approximately 1.565 acres.³³

Although this facility is located within the corporate limits of Saltville, this Olin gift reaches "outside" to influence the education of young people.

³³Clerk's Office, Smyth County, Deed Book #238, p. 811.

Chapter 7

EDUCATION - OLIN EMPLOYEES

The influence of Olin Mathieson on education of the Saltville youth gained momentum over the years. By 1957, with a new and modern high school serving the Saltville youth, the Company began to formulate plans for extending educational opportunities to the Saltville adult.

The Olin Mathieson plant in Saltville had an 18% "functional illiterate" rating among its employees. A great number of Olin workers had never completed high school, many had never gone beyond the third year of elementary school.³⁴

In 1959, in an effort to alleviate this problem, Olin Mathieson enacted a new policy designated to provide financial assistance for educational purposes.

If an employee did not have an educational background of high school or its equivalent, there were basic education courses offered at the Plant site. Since

³⁴Statement by Martha Turnage, personal interview, July 12, 1971.

Olin operated the plant on a 24-hour basis, the classes were so timed as to be available for men working each of the three shifts. Also, the Smyth County Basic Education classes were offered two nights a week at the newly built R. B. Worthy High School.

After the high school diploma or the General Educational Development certificate was obtained, an employee could enroll in college courses or correspondence school courses approved by the Plant Management with the following allowances:

The amount of financial aid is limited to 75 percent of actual tuition cost up to \$90.00 per semester or \$180.00 in any 12-month period, plus the total cost of books, registration fees, and laboratory fees.³⁵

At the completion of each semester of work, the employee would turn in the transcript of his work and costs, and a reimbursement check would be made promptly. The reimbursement covered only those courses in which the employee earned a letter grade of "C" or above.

³⁵The Alkalite, March, 1959.

Chapter 8

SALTVILLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

When the new R. B. Worthy High School was completed, the elementary students remained at the old site and moved into the 1925 high school building. This building was deteriorating rapidly and a new elementary school was needed. Again, Olin Mathieson made the first commitment toward getting this new facility.

In a letter to the Corporate office in New York, R. C. Aebersold, Manager, Saltville Works, wrote:

"Attached is form of deed conveying approximately 10.7 acres of land along with sanitary and road easements from Olin Mathieson to the School Board of the Town of Saltville. The land has a book value of \$53.00 per acre. The cost of grading is estimated to be \$25,000.00.

I would estimate the true sale value of this land to be approximately \$400.00 per acre. Total value - \$4,265.60." ³⁶

The donation of this parcel of land resulted in a bank loan for the building. Again, the monthly payments were absorbed in the Saltville Town Budget.

³⁶Letter from R. C. Aebersold, Saltville, to G. F. Henrich, New York, June 22, 1965.

When completed, this facility consisted of 15 modern classrooms, a spacious lunch room, library, gymnasium, and clinic. It is currently in use in Saltville.

Chapter 9

TRAINING DEPARTMENT

With adequate facilities for the high school and elementary students of Saltville, the influence of Olin Mathieson on education again encompassed the adult learner.

In 1966, Olin Mathieson expanded its efforts in educational opportunities for the adult employees. A vacant building was remodeled at the plant site and became the newly developed Training Department. In order to offer every advantage possible to the adult learner, the department was directed by a Training Specialist and an Assistant.

Adult Materials

The educational materials that were available to the employees consisted of classroom situations and programmed self-study units on a variety of subjects. Desk-type stalls were built with ear phones to afford the adult as much privacy as possible. Instructors were also available for the Basic Education Courses.

On October 5, 1967, graduation exercises were held for 50 Olin employees who had successfully completed the Adult Education program sponsored, and financed, by Olin Mathieson.³⁷

³⁷Olin News, Saltville Works, No. 5 Edition, October, 1967.

Chapter 10

EDUCATIONAL CO-OP PLAN

In addition to the contributions made toward better educational opportunities for the elementary, high school, and Saltville adult, Olin Mathieson further aided the Saltville youth in his college endeavors.

Summer Work Program

For approximately twenty years, the graduating senior at the high school who planned to attend college could work during the summer months before entering college in the fall. The student could work 90 days. His hourly wage was "starting laborer's pay for the permanent employees as shown in the current contract."³⁸

At the end of each school term, the college student could return to Olin to, again, earn a portion of his financial needs for the next school year.

Co-op Plan

A special agreement between Olin Mathieson and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University called the Co-op Plan furnished the college student the opportunity to alternate his school and work needs. He could attend

³⁸Tuggle, personal interview, April 26, 1974.

college for one quarter, then work the next quarter at the Olin Mathieson plant, and then return to the college campus once again.

With this cooperation between Company and school, a student could, quite literally, put himself through college.

Chapter 11

JOB PREPAREDNESS CENTER

When in July, 1970, Olin Mathieson announced that it would close the Saltville Plant because it could not comply with the new pollution standards set by the State of Virginia, the influence on education in Saltville did not cease.

Olin Donation

In July, 1971, to coincide with the first lay-off of 400 Olin Mathieson employees, the Virginia Highlands Community College, located in near-by Abingdon, established the Job Preparedness Center with the objective to re-educate and re-train the laid-off Olin employees.

When no financial aid was made available from Federal or State sources, Olin Mathieson, again, answered to the educational needs of the town. A cash donation of \$150,000 assured this project of a two-year funding.

Between July, 1971, and June, 1973, approximately 350 Saltville adults used the Job Preparedness Center. Of these, 56 men and women received General Educational Development certificates for completing high school. Approximately 200 others received certificates for the completion of other courses ranging from Bookkeeping to Welding.

Cooperation - Town, Plant, College

The building in which the Adult Learning Center was housed was also an Olin Mathieson gift to Saltville. Before it was evacuated, the building had been used by Olin Mathieson as a computer data center for less than one year, and had an approximate value of \$250,000.³⁹

The Center was designed to meet the individual needs of the men and women who would use it. Upon entering the Center, rapport between instructor and enrollee was quickly established. A Placement Inventory was given to determine the reading level, mathematical and English comprehension of the enrollee.

The majority of the materials used were programmed to allow the enrollees to advance at their own pace. These materials served a dual purpose in that it practically eliminated the chance of embarrassment when a forty-year-old man found himself reading fourth grade level materials. Programmed materials and teaching machines were used, alternating each method in order to keep boredom to a minimum.

The Center hours were also well-timed to meet the needs of as many people as possible. Opening at 12:30 P.M., and closing at 9:00 P.M., Monday through Friday, gave opportunity for study for the unemployed,

³⁹Bristol Herald Courier, December 28, 1972, p. 1., col. 4.

day, evening, or night-shift worker. This timing also allowed the unemployed man to draw unemployment benefits because he was free to take a job on either shift, if a job became available, and continue to use the Center.

Several classroom courses were offered. When the men requested a Welding Course, and money was not available, a request from the Director of the Center to the Manager of the Olin Mathieson plant resulted in a donation of two welding machines plus much welding equipment. He donated additional office equipment for use in training the women enrollees. Classroom courses in Shorthand were then offered.

Cooperation between Town, Plant, and Community College was close. The Town donated a building to be used as a Welding Shop, rent free. The Chamber of Commerce paid the telephone bill for the Center until money was available via the Olin Mathieson cash donation. The Town paid the electric bill with only one room in the building being used by the Town. The Town Manager's office was upstairs, and he devoted much time to keeping the building serviced. Janitorial help was provided by the Town Crew.

Center Staff

When the Center opened in July, 1971, there was money available for only one employee, that employee being this writer. This salary, plus the machines for teaching,

and the materials that were available on opening day were donated by the Special Training Division, Virginia Department of Community Colleges, Richmond. The one employee served as Director/Counselor/Instructor. The ladies of the Home Demonstration Club alternated on four-hour shifts to work as Receptionists, free of charge.

The Olin Mathieson cash donation provided the salaries for three more employees. An assistant instructor, a secretary and a job placement specialist.

Additional materials were bought, and the Manager at the Olin Mathieson plant, upon request, allowed the Director to move to the Center all those materials that were left in the now defunct Training Department at the Plant.

The Center also served as an educational device for the disadvantaged youths of Saltville. The Neighborhood Youth Corps boys and girls met the four-hour educational requirement by working in the Center to complete high school via the General Educational Development test.

With no additional financial support, the Center closed on June 30, 1973. At this writing, the building that housed the Job Preparedness Center is still vacant, except for the Town Manager's office.

Chapter 12

REVISED CHARTER

In 1968, prior to the phase-out of the Olin Mathieson plant in Saltville, a decision was made at the Corporate level of Olin no longer to supplement the Town Budget.

School Supplement Ends

With Olin Mathieson no longer supplementing the school budget, the town could not hope to operate the schools, especially now that the only industry in the town was in the process of phasing out. A request was made by the Saltville Town Council to the Smyth County School System to allow the Saltville Schools to merge with the County.

Saltville Town Code Revised, 1970

Section 3 - School District-Designated;
county school taxes; board of school
trustees

The territory within the corporate limits of the Town of Saltville, as herein above designated, shall constitute a separate and distinct school district, apart from either Smyth County, Washington County, or any other school district.

(a) The county school taxes of Washington County levied and collected from persons or properties shall be turned over and paid by the said counties to the town treasurer to be used for school purposes within said district.

(b) The board of school trustees for the school district of Saltville shall be constituted and shall act and possess the powers as provided by sections 22-89 to 22-100, inclusive, of the Code of Virginia of 1950 as amended.

Section 4 Same - Dissolution

The special town school district of Saltville in Smyth County and Washington County may, by ordinance of the town council and by and with the approval of the state board of education, be dissolved as a separate school district and upon such dissolution, said separate school district shall be and become a part of the respective county school units, and shall be managed, operated, and controlled by the respective county school boards of such units. Such ordinance shall state what disposition is to be made of any balance in the school funds of the special town school district of Saltville of Smyth County and Washington County, at the time of its dissolution, and shall provide for disposition of any outstanding bonded indebtedness of such school district. Such ordinance shall also provide for the disposition of all school property, real, and personal, the title to which shall remain in and be held by the school board of the special town school district of Saltville until agreement has been reached on the disposition of such property and the ordinance has been approved by the state board of education.

Such ordinance shall provide:

1. That the town school property shall become the property of the school board of Smyth County.
2. That the County of Washington shall continue payments heretofore made to the town school district, to the County of Smyth for children from Washington County attending school in Smyth County.
3. That any funds distributable to the special school district for school buildings shall be paid to the County of Smyth and any attendance or enrollment figures for such special school district shall be credited to the County of Smyth.

This revised Town Code is, at the present time, on the waiting list of bills to be placed before the Virginia General Assembly.

Until this happens, and with Olin Mathieson's departure, the Saltville Schools are operated, by contract, by the Smyth County School System. A contract is negotiated on a yearly basis by the Saltville Town Council and the Saltville School Board with the Smyth County School System.

Saltville School Board Members

In contrast with the 1955 members of the Saltville School Board shown earlier in this paper, the 1974-75 members are as follows:

Chairman, Mrs. Hazel Marshall, housewife
and Teachers' Aide

Member, Herbert Arnold, employee, State
Water Control Board

Member, Ernest Osborne, employee, Mount
Rogers Planning District Commission

Clerk, Mrs. Elaine Mullins, secretary,
R. B. Worthy High School.

The contrast can be noted as the 1955 Board was composed of 4 Olin Mathieson employees. The 1974-75 Board consists of 4 people with different occupations. It is interesting to note, however, that the two male members are former Olin Mathieson employees, and the Chairman is the wife of a former Olin Mathieson employee.

Chapter 13

DEPARTING GIFT

On December 28, 1972, Olin Mathieson donated to the Town of Saltville approximately 3,500 acres of land with buildings valued in the millions of dollars. Olin will also turn over to the town \$600,000 in several installments.⁴⁰

Influence Continues

With the help of the \$600,000 donation from Olin Mathieson, both county and town will cooperate to keep the status quo of the Saltville School System.⁴¹

Consolidation

Plans for a new consolidated high school are near completion at the County level that will combine the R. B. Worthy High School of Saltville with two smaller county schools. It is anticipated that the request to take the Saltville Schools into the county will be placed before the General Assembly at the time of the consolidation which is expected to occur in 1976.

⁴⁰Bristol Herald Courier, December 28, 1972, p. 1., col. 1.

⁴¹McCoy interview, May 12, 1973.

Chapter 14

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The influence of Olin Mathieson on education in Saltville, Virginia began with the immediate purchase of the land.

In 1893, the Mathieson Alkali Works bought the Salt Works in this small Southwestern Virginia town. A Charter was drawn up to incorporate the town, and one of its provisions called for Saltville to have a "separate and distinct school system" apart from the County of Smyth in which Saltville is located.

To maintain the separate and distinct school system, the Company entered into an agreement with the County in which "in lieu of certain tax assessments, the Company would maintain the Town of Saltville." This was done, financially, by yearly supplements to the Town Budget.

Over the years, through growth and merger, the Mathieson Alkali Works became the Olin Mathieson Chemical Corp., and is currently known as the OLIN Corp., a multi-million dollar enterprise.

Between the years 1893 to 1968, the Company followed to the letter the provisions in the charter and the agreement with the County.

Through Company donations of land, plant personnel time and influence, and the yearly budgetary supplements, bigger and better schools were built and new educational programs were instituted.

Company, Town, and Schools shared a relationship that only ended when the Company became the victim of the current ecological movement when it could not comply with the more stringent water pollution standards set by the State of Virginia.

Although the Olin Corporation phased-out its Saltville operations in 1971, the Company donations of land and money are still being used to maintain the town.

The schools are operated by the County on a yearly contract basis until the Legislature can pass on a resolution to merge the Saltville School System with the Smyth County School System.

The influence that the Olin Mathieson Chemical Corp. had on education cannot be calculated in money or time. These figures are impressive; however, a more critical look at the influence that this company had on the town, its youth, and its adult populace, must begin in the homes of the resident/employees.

Since 1893, the Company "maintained" the Town. As the Company grew, the Town grew. As the Company prospered, the Town prospered; however, as the Company grew and

prospered, it developed "outside" interests. The Town did not.

The town was isolated from the county. When Saltville needed something, the Company provided it. For instance, when new schools were needed in other parts of the county, land had to be bought and financed. When Saltville needed new schools, land was donated by the Company. Saltville could, quite literally, thumb its nose at the outside world, and did not hesitate to do so.

Over the years, complacency set in. The majority of Saltville residents did not actively participate in any efforts to promote change in the town. The Company provided everything they needed. Hadn't the Company provided a swimming pool, golf course, hospital, hotel, new schools, water, and houses? The Company never failed to make sizeable donations to all worthy projects.

For many years the Mayor of Saltville and the entire Town Council were Olin Mathieson employees. All decisions relative to change were made in the office of the Plant Manager or in his presence. This is not to say that he insisted on it, but it was well recognized that a "Thumbs up, or Thumbs down" from the Manager spelled the difference between success or failure of a project.

The educational advantages were vast as the Saltville youth was given the most modern methods and materials by which to learn and mature. Having well-kept athletic

fields, new uniforms, the best sports equipment, the better coaches, vocational workshops, and advanced courses in the sciences certainly prepared the Saltville youth to compete in the "outside world," but he was not prepared to go.

All the above advantages were psychologically removed as the Saltville youth stepped from the school bus in the afternoon to parents who taught him that the Company was providing all these advantages, and that he would be expected to put this new-found knowledge to work "down at the plant." This was his parents' greatest ambition for him.

After all, the outside world was cruel and cold. Crime, alcohol, and dope were out there. The Company protected the town from all these vices. He must stay home, work at the plant, and be safe. The Company was "raising" its own labor force.

Olin Mathieson did attempt to disengage itself from complete ownership of the town during the last several years the company was in Saltville. The Mathieson General Stores were phased out. The Company houses were sold to the employee/resident at a minimal price. The Water Works were donated to the town along with a cash supplement by which the town could maintain the Works.

The supplements to the Town Budget continued through 1968, but as shown in Chapter 13 of this paper, the donations continue at this writing.

When the phase-out of the Olin Mathieson Saltville plant began in July, 1971, the employee was faced with the label "unemployed" for the first time in his life. To go to work at the Plant in Saltville simply meant to go with Dad to the plant one day and "get on."

Psychological Barriers

To contrast the emotional impact of the Saltville laid-off man and the city unemployed is simply to say that the city man lost a job. The Saltville man lost a job, but more seriously, he lost a friend, a pal, a protector, a "father," and a way of life in one gesture. In a company-owned town, a replacement could never be found. The effect was catastrophic.

To go in search of new employment in the county was comparable to visiting the enemy camp in search of water. He was forced to "eat crow" by those men in other parts of the area who had envied him for his higher wages, better benefits, and paternal godfather, Olin Mathieson. In this situation, the Saltville man did not want to stay, but he did not know how to go.

Job Preparedness Center

The manifest purpose of the Saltville Job Preparedness Center was to re-educate and re-train the laid-off Saltville man; however, the latent purpose became far more important.

Under the existing circumstances, the unemployed Saltville family needed time to adjust to the shock that they had received. They needed to talk to other people who were facing similar problems. Financial problems were acute. To the Saltville families the plant had always been there and had even provided them with a regular income during the depression years. They had company-paid insurance, paid vacation, and a good pension plan. Savings were not so important with this security. They did not know how to apply for unemployment benefits and food stamps. They needed advice and help, but they also needed each other. They found all this at the Job Preparedness Center.

The financial impact was great, but the psychological impact was devastating. Having been born and educated in Saltville, and a former Olin employee, and having served as Director of the Job Preparedness Center, the writer was appalled at the frustration and depression that she witnessed as men and women sought refuge and help at the Center.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that a more detailed plan should have been instituted for the withdrawal of this major industry from this small town. The decision to depart was not made in a moment's notice, but had to have been recognized for several years as pollution standards were

raised. It is felt, by this writer, that counseling was needed more than money to prepare the people for this departure.

It is, therefore, suggested that a committee of townspeople should have been appointed to discuss prospective plans before the actual departure, and that a Center, similar to the Job Preparedness Center, should have been established prior to the departure, with counseling and training to help prepare the employees for the actual departure at a future date.

To face the problem after the lay-off, and to try to find work, re-train, and/or re-educate at the same time was extremely difficult. It came at a time when the man was least psychologically, or financially prepared for it.

Although the arrangement that Olin Mathieson entered into with the County of Smyth eventually resulted in much pain and frustration for the Saltville populace, the influence that Olin Mathieson had on education can best be summed up by a short entry from the November 22, 1971, Saltville School Board minutes. It stated:

The drop-out rate of R. B. Worthy High School in Saltville is the lowest in Smyth County, and the lowest in Southwest Virginia.

The effects of such a record will be felt by generations to come in Saltville, and cannot be measured in monetary value.

Implications

It is felt by this writer that Saltville will not be the only "victim" as industry continues to move about in search of better facilities, lower wage scales, available raw materials, and abundant work force. The current energy crisis could become a dominant factor in creating such an exodus.

The role of the community college could take on new dimensions in such a crisis. A part of the community college's responsibilities is to the community service area in which it is located. An unprecedented role was attempted by Virginia Highlands Community College in Abingdon, Virginia, as it sought to fulfill its community service commitment which included the small town of Saltville, Virginia. The college sought funds and personnel to come to the aid of Saltville. As is evidenced in Chapter 11 of this paper, the rewards were great. Many people were helped, more were not. Not enough money was available but, more important, there was not enough time. A hurried, short-term program was implemented; a long-term program was needed, sooner.

Therefore, it is suggested that an integral part of the community college program include a plan whereby an almost instantaneous reaction could be expected in case of community need. A committee, or task force, should be appointed, composed of college personnel, community and

business leaders to keep a watchful eye on industrial trends and problems. In this way, a close relationship between town, industry, and college could be maintained. In the advent of economic problems, a task force would be readily available to swing into action. In case of industrial loss, a re-training program could be implemented, using community college facilities prior to the departure of industry. The approach to new and different industry could be a more positive one if a well-trained and available work force were offered.

The community leaders on this committee should maintain a current file of geological materials, facilities such as schools, hospitals, recreational areas, etc., that are available in the area.

Industrial leaders should file with the committee a list of heavy machinery, buildings, tracks, and equipment. A list of job titles and responsibilities and other pertinent information regarding labor force statistics should be kept. This could help determine how experience plus training could best be used.

The community college members of this committee should maintain a current file of state and federal programs designed to ease the economic burdens of towns in trouble. These members should also acquaint existing industry with the programs of industrial help available through the Special Training Division of the Community College.

Through community speakers, at club meetings, P.T.A. groups, etc., the idea of re-training, if necessary, could be introduced to the populace quickly, at a time when it would more readily be accepted. Indoctrination is a much needed, and apt to be neglected, phase of this program.

The citizen/employee should be aware of this task force committee and its long range objectives.

College, Town, and Industry should sponsor programs to keep the adult populace in some type of continuing education. Vocational, human interest, crafts, and college parallel programs should be offered, off-campus in the community, if possible. This should be done while the communities are enjoying prosperity. If an emergency situation occurs, the idea of re-training will not be so awesome.

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APPENDIX

Table 1

Examples of Olin Mathieson cash supplements
to the Saltville Town Budget

<u>Year</u>	<u>Amount</u>
1920-21	\$ 5,405
1923-24	5,854
1930-31	24,500
1935-36	17,000
1940-41	20,500
1944-45	23,000
1950-51	61,500
1964-65	58,899
1968-69	45,000
1971	150,000*
1972	600,000**

*Job Preparedness Center

**To be paid in several
installments.