

# For town in Bill Clinton ad, jobs have only withered since 1992

TRADE FROM A1

for U.S. businesses and make goods cheaper for consumers, they can punish places like Decaturville with a decades-long void where good jobs used to be. Trade already looms large over the 2016 election, especially for Hillary Clinton, who has declined to take a firm position on a new trade pact with Asia that President Obama is attempting to push through Congress despite heavy opposition.

No one expects Clinton to win Decatur County or carry Tennessee, as her husband did in 1992. But blue-collar voters could prove key to her chances, and her Republican opponents', in swing states such as Virginia, North Carolina and Ohio. Many of those workers have long grown tired of politicians promising relief from their trade-induced job losses but never delivering.

"The working class," the head of the Decatur County Chamber of Commerce, Charles Taylor, said on a recent drive over green hills and past abandoned storefronts, "has gotten to the point where they don't trust anybody."

Bill Clinton expanded trade as president, but many folks in Decaturville fondly remember him as a candidate, including Mullins, who met then-Arkansas Gov. Clinton in Nashville. "He seemed to me to be a little bit more caring than some others," Mullins said, and he plans to vote for Hillary Clinton this time around. He also said Bill Clinton's economy, for all its growth, didn't help him personally.

Mullins, a longtime Democrat who is now 60 years old, worked 18 years at the sportswear plant before it shut down. He hasn't found a comparable job since. He draws a disability check for the arthritis in his joints. Some days he works a shift behind the register at a dockside grocery store on the Tennessee River, on Decatur County's eastern edge.

He'd like to be more optimistic about the local economy, he said, but the plant closure just took so much money out of it. "It hurt us pretty bad," he said. "I don't know what would help."

## Decatur County's losses

Decatur County has just under 12,000 residents. About 800 of them live in Decaturville, the county seat. The county's unemployment rate has doubled, to 9 percent, from where it was at the end of the Clinton administration. Factory employment has been cut in half since 2000. Fewer people had jobs in the county last year than in 2001.

Only recently have civic leaders begun taking steps to prepare the area for a more knowledge-based economy, and even then, many say they're not sure why any college graduate would settle here. There just aren't a lot of professional jobs that require a degree.

Decaturville has never been a wealthy place, but for a few decades, its economy hummed with the sort of assembly-line clothing production that hardly exists in



**TOP:** A wall is all that remains of Decaturville Sportswear in Decaturville, Tenn. A county jail was built on the former factory site. **ABOVE:** Clockwise from bottom left, Cotton Ivy, Paul Ivy and Fred Keeton talk with other regulars at the Diner in Decaturville. For more photos, visit [washingtonpost.com/business](http://washingtonpost.com/business).

*"It hurt us pretty bad. I don't know what would help."*

**Ricky Mullins**, on the impact of the closure of Decaturville Sportswear on the local economy. He had worked at the factory for 18 years and hasn't found a comparable job since it shut down in 1991.

America anymore. The largest of the local garment plants was Decaturville Sportswear. It rose in 1960 from the ashes of a high school gymnasium, which had burned 17 years after the federal Works Progress Administration built it during the Great Depression.

It was a plant where wives of hog farmers hunched over sewing machines, their hair piled up in beehives; where young men fresh

from high school could land jobs punching buttonholes and work their way into supervisory positions; where the beloved manager carved room in his budget to build a youth center in town with an outdoor pool and pay local students to lifeguard.

The pay was never high, but it was steady. Many people in town remember the 1960s and '70s as their economic apex. A lunch counter sold hot bologna sand-

wiches to long lines of workers. There were three furniture galleries.

Plant employment began dropping in the 1980s, as lower-cost foreign competitors began to rise. Decaturville Sportswear was sold, and in 1991, it closed down. Unemployment in Decatur County hit 20 percent shortly before the Clinton campaign sent its camera crew to Decaturville, on the heels of a "60 Minutes" report



that said Bush administration subsidies helped move the plant's production to El Salvador.

The resulting ad opens with a Reaganesque proclamation — "It's morning in Decaturville, Tennessee, but for 650 people who once worked here, there are no jobs" — and goes on to note that the United States had lost 117,000 textile jobs. Since the ad aired, nearly 400,000 additional textile jobs have gone away nationally, along with more than 700,000 jobs in apparel manufacturing. Since Bill Clinton took office, the two sectors have lost a combined 80 percent of their jobs.

Decatur County lost all its garment-making. After the sportswear plant closed, three of its former employees bought its equipment for \$75,000, then opened a new facility called Triangle Sportswear, with 50 employees. One of the three was Collins Pratt, who started at the plant turning sewed clothes right-side out and worked his way up to become plant manager. Through a series of events that he attributes to the Lord's grace, Pratt and his co-owners won several contracts and were making money, making clothes.

Then Clinton signed the North American Free Trade Agreement. Suppliers began asking Pratt if he could beat price quotes from Mexican factories. Within a decade, Triangle shut down, along with the other

remaining plants in the county.

Clinton, Pratt said, "didn't do what he said he was going to do. He said he was going to stop NAFTA."

Giving a man a job, he added, is like the old saying — you're teaching him to fish, so he can eat for life. "What our country did, they took away our fishing ponds."

The 1990s were nevertheless good for Pratt financially: He invested in a truck-and-trailer business that flourished. Even with its lost manufacturing jobs, Decatur County's unemployment rate fell to 4.4 percent at the end of that decade.

"The majority of people will tell you those were some of the best years they had," said Athalia Taylor, the town librarian, who worked six years at the plant before it closed, then went into nursing and eventually earned a college degree.

## 'Everybody's adjusted'

No one says that about the past 15 years. What civic leaders talk about, instead, is how workers have grown accustomed to earning less than they once did; the median income has fallen nearly 10 percent since 1999, after accounting for inflation. "Everybody's adjusted how they're living," said Gerald Buchanan, the mayor of Decaturville.

Town leaders also fret over the people here who, having lost their routine jobs, now seem content just to go down to the mailbox and collect a government check.

The local bank president complains that Dodd-Frank financial rules are squeezing home lending in the community. Other folks complain about the lack of high-speed Internet access outside of Parsons, the largest city in the county.

Taylor, the Chamber of Commerce president, longs for a couple hundred acres of industrial park, wired for power and piped for sewage, to attract a supplier for one of the big auto plants in the state. He said Decaturville residents ask for something simpler: "Please, just get us a Sonic" drive-in restaurant, they tell him. "A Sonic."

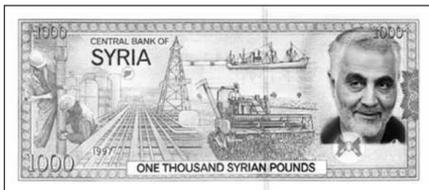
County leaders say their best hopes for economic expansion lie along the Tennessee River, where a tourism industry is growing as more people buy weekend getaway and retirement homes, and in the University of Tennessee at Martin branch campus that opened in Parsons a few years back. Only 1 in 7 adults in Decatur County holds a bachelor's degree or higher; prospective employers are always asking, "Where is your educated workforce?" said Tim David Boaz, the mayor of Parsons.

There are a few small manufacturers still scattered around, including one that makes freezers and one that makes pressure washers. There is no sign of the old sportswear plant. It was knocked down several years ago. In its place sits a fortress of brick and wire: the new county jail.

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## A silent sectarian cleansing is taking place in Syria, Mr. President

Syrian regime forces and Iranian-controlled militias have been destroying and appropriating civilian property en masse in certain parts of Syria. They have also been forcibly displacing and transferring civilian population in and out of these areas, coupled with dubious 'reconstruction' projects.

The majority of those affected happen to be Sunni. The result is changing Syria's demographic composition.

Together, these war crimes and crimes against humanity constitute a deliberate policy of sectarian cleansing that is being implemented under the cover of the war.

The ultimate aim of this scheme is to secure the Damascus-Homs-Coast corridor along the Lebanese border in order to both provide a geographical and demographic continuity of so-called regime-held areas and to secure arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

### This is why, Mr. President, we ask you to:

- Treat the war in Syria as an international armed conflict involving a foreign occupation by the Iranian regime and its militias and a liberation struggle by the Syrian people against this occupation.
- Refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court to investigate the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria, including Iran's and Hezbollah's role.

- Impose no-fly zones to protect civilians and allow humanitarian access throughout Syria, in line with the international 'responsibility to protect' norm.
- Fulfill your promises by arming and training enough moderate Syrian rebels, not only to fight ISIS and al-Qaeda-linked groups, but also Syrian and Iranian regime forces and militias.

Mr. President, the people of Syria need to know that they did not make a mistake in March 2011 when they took to the street demanding freedom and dignity.

To visualize the Iranian occupation of Syria, Naame Shaam produced a photomontage of a Syrian bank note with the counterfeit of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, the de facto ruler of Syria. For more information see our report, "Silent Sectarian Cleansing: Iranian Role in Mass Demolitions and Population Transfers in Syria," [www.naameshaam.org](http://www.naameshaam.org)

Naame Shaam, which means "Letter from Syria" in Persian, is a group of Iranian, Syrian and Lebanese activists and citizen-journalists that focuses on uncovering the role of the Iranian regime in Syria. The group is supported by the Netherlands-based Rule of Law Foundation, [www.lawrules.org](http://www.lawrules.org).

**This is the second advert out of four.**

**The first one was published in this newspaper on May 5.**

**The last two will be published next June.**

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