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'You've got to fight for everything': Canton, NC, carries on after floods, mill closure

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CANTON When the Pisgah Black Bears returned to football practice Oct. 7, one of Jody Mathis' junior varsity players was a no-show.

The school had checked on its students the week before and kept a tally of how many lost their homes to Helene: 22. Mathis got a new tally and an explanation for his missing player the next

day. "I just found out they lost their house," the coach said in an interview with The Charlotte Observer that day. "That's why he wasn't here yesterday. It makes sense now."

Three football players lost their homes, Mathis said. Floodwater in Pisgah Memorial Stadium covered all the visitors' bleachers save for three rows. The football field is damaged and much of the fence around it is de-

stroyed. Seniors have likely played their last game on the field. Mathis hopes juniors will get to play there again.

The Pigeon River crested at nearly 26 feet — a

new record. People dragged wet trash to the curb: family furniture, clothes, toys that children couldn't play with anymore. Some older women slept in a storage shed. Others left town at night, coming back each morning to rebuild. The town is used to

struggle. In September 2004,



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Jody Mathis sits in the stands of the football stadium that was flooded during Hurricane Helene at Pisgah High School in Canton, N.C., on Tuesday, October 8, 2024.

Hurricane Frances hit Haywood County. Nine days later, as the ground dried, Ivan paid a visit. Mathis thought he'd never see anything like it again.

But in 2021, he watched from a distance as Hurricane Fred filled his football stadium. At the same spot, he watched it when Helene hit.

"God dang, I've seen it twice — and twice in the last three years," the 21year coach said.

On top of it all, Canton lost about 1,000 jobs last year when a company closed the doors to its historic paper mill.

EVERYTHING'

'FIGHT FOR

About 20 minutes from touristy Asheville, Canton is an old-school, bluecollar town.

For more than a century, it made paper. Smoke would billow out of the mill downtown. People across Western North Carolina remember the smell of wood chips pulping, sometimes even

fondly.

More than being a major employer, the mill symbolized Canton. A mural, local businesses and even a bluegrass song by the North Carolina band Balsam Range pay homage to it.

Mathis, 51, is a fourthgeneration mill worker. His great-grandfather worked at Sunburst, a logging community whose wood helped build the mill where his grandfather worked as a foreman and his father had a salaried

The youngest Mathis

went in as a salaried employee, too. By 2023, he managed inventory, logistics and a warehouse.

The running joke: In 1908, the mill opened on Tuesday. By Friday, it was shutting down. As soon as it opened, it was at risk of closing. Its workers were always struggling against something, like prior floods that filled its basements or environmental

concerns, Mathis said. "That's where you get this mentality. You've got to fight for everything," he said.

Pactiv Evergreen, the last company that ran the mill, shuttered it in May 2023. About 1,200 people worked there. Four thousand people live in Can-

The company cited expenses, like upgrading the century-old mill, and an unfavorable market.

When the news of closure broke, Gov. Roy Cooper warned Pactiv Evergreen in a March 2023 letter that closing would violate a state incentives agreement and could cost the company

\$12 million. "The Canton mill has been in operation for more than a century and has been the lifeblood of that town and region," the governor wrote. "I am deeply concerned about the impact of the mill's closure, which will have a devastating effect on the livelihoods of thousands of people in Canton and western North Carolina, as well as the region's economy and social fab-

Attorney General Josh Stein followed up with a lawsuit. Last week, a Wake County judge ruled

the suit can move forward. Speaking at Pisgah Memorial Stadium Oct. 4, Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers said Spiritas Worldwide, a potential buyer, is still interested in buying the property, to his knowledge. It's unclear what the company would do with it.

"But again, it's one of those things," Smathers said. "The world looks much different now than it did literally a week ago. If we were in this stadium a week ago, we'd all be underwater."

For now, the mill remains idle. "Milltown Mentality" —

the branding on Mathis' shirt Tuesday and a sort of slogan among townspeople - doesn't.

The Bears, for example, have been helping their neighbors. After CO-VID-19, two floods in three years and Canton's economic and cultural heart stalling, Mathis has seen his kids get their hands dirty.

Ten were asked to help clean up a house damaged

by Helene. Twenty showed up, and that grew

to 25. Knee-deep in mud, they got to work. That's the way it's always been, Mathis said: People have each other's backs.

WHEN THE WHISTLE **BLOWS**

Waiting in a long line to get gas at a BP station in neighboring Clyde days after Helene tore through Western North Carolina, Bobby Thompson offered what was on his mind: Pisgah Memorial Stadium.

Some normalcy would be nice, but the field had been wrecked, he said. "This town needs it,"

Mathis said of football. It's unclear how long it will take to repair the field and host games there. It fared better after Helene than it did in 2021 when Fred hit. The turf stayed put this time.

"When we get on the field — win or lose — it's gonna be great," Mathis said. "Because at that point, we know we can start moving forward."

Canton has survived adversity before, and Mathis looks forward to the eventual return. In the meantime, the Bears will play at a temporary home field.

On a typical home game night, the Bears line up and two rows of people numbering in the hundreds watch as they walk to the stadium. The dormant mill, still the heart of the town's identity, sits downhill.

The stadium's whistle from the old paper mill survived the storm.

Latched onto a scoreboard, it bellows when it's time for kickoff or when the Bears score a touchdown.

Whenever they play at home again and the whistle shrieks, Mathis said, Canton will go wild.

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