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SOUTHERN ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Carolina Piedmont Project

Interview

with

ERNEST E. CHAPMAN

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Burlington, North Carolina

By Mary Murphy

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ERNEST E. CHAPMAN: . . . in the southern central part of Kentucky and raised there. My mother and daddy lived on a farm. I left rather young after. . . . I didn't go to college; I went to high school. Of course, since that time I have taken courses. I have one degree [course diploma?] from the University of North Carolina, more or less personnel work.

MARY MURPHY: Was this at Chapel Hill?

CHAPMAN: Yes. These two professors that gave the course would come up here at night, and there was quite a few people in the industry that took the course. I was initiated into the Hosiery in Indianapolis, Indiana, around 1921 or '22.

MM: How did you end up in Indianapolis?

CHAPMAN: It wasn't too far from Kentucky. By the time I finished school I had had all the farming I wanted; I wanted something else. And I didn't see any chance of going on to get a higher education, so I was looking for work and I found work in this hosiery mill in Indianapolis. And from there I went to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which was another hosiery center. Had hole-proof hosiery--you probably don't remember it--in the Phoenix Hosiery Mill and everywhere in Milwaukee.

MM: What job did you have when you first started in Indianapolis?

CHAPMAN: I was what they call a knitter.

MM: How long did it take you to learn that?

CHAPMAN: It wasn't a very long training course. I'd say a month or two. It was more or less taking from the machines. They didn't do too much work on machines. A little. Change the needle if you had a broken needle, or something like that. But they changed systems, and they doubled up and instead of having knitters on so many machines, they gave them three or four times as many machines and then put helpers with them at a lower pay rate.

MM: When did that first happen?

CHAPMAN: That was around 1922, '23, along in there. Then I went from

there to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and still worked in the mill, most always working on machines that made ladies' hosiery, not men's hosiery. At that time your work would be pretty regular in the wintertime. In the summertime they'd close them down over there. I met some people from Durham, and they were going to leave Wisconsin and move back to Durham, so I decided to come with them. In Durham I more or less wanted to get into full-fashioned work. Up until that time it was all seamless. That's a little machine like you see today. But then full-fashioned was beginning to get very much in demand. In Wisconsin it was all union, and you didn't get a job learning to knit on full-fashioned except the four years of apprenticeship.

MM: Was the apprenticeship set up by the union?

CHAPMAN: That was set up by the union, that work setup. In Durham they didn't have a union, and I eventually got to work and got training on full-fashioned.

MM: Which mill did you work at in Durham?

CHAPMAN: The Golden Belt Manufacturing Company.

MM: That's another one of the towns that we're studying, and I'm going to go over there.

CHAPMAN: It's gone now.

MM: Yes, but . . .

CHAPMAN: There were two there, Durham Hosiery Mill and the Golden Belt Manufacturing Company. I was working in the wintertime. I was still working on the ladies' seamless, with the promise that when they closed that down in the spring that they would let me learn how to knit on the full-fashioned. In the meantime I'd get up in the afternoon and go over there--I was working at night from six to six; that was the schedule--into the full-fashioned department and help the knitters for an hour or two. So whenever they closed

it down, within three weeks I was ready to take a knitting machine. I guess the superintendent had noticed I was interested. Anyway he stopped one night. At that time, just like it is now, you started at nine on the night shift. He stopped and wanted to know when in the world did I learn how to knit. I told him I'd been working in the afternoon while I was working in the other department. So a couple of nights later he stopped by my machine and wanted to know if I wouldn't like to learn how to fix. I was making pretty good money knitting; I'd just got started.

MM: This was when you had started knitting on the full-fashioned?

CHAPMAN: Yes.

MM: They wanted you to learn how to fix the full-fashioned machines?

CHAPMAN: Full-fashioned. Because while I was knitting over there, I fixed a set of machines in the wintertime on the seamless. I had been around those long enough that I could do most anything that had to be done to them. I told him I'd have to think about it, because I knew I'd have to take a cut in wages while I was taking training. So I decided if I was going to get anywhere, I'd have to take it. So I told him the next night that I would be glad to. So he put me on training, and I took my training there. I was lucky enough to get along very well, and I was the only one on the night shift over there taking care of the whole department, fixing at night.

MM: What year was this that you came to Durham?

CHAPMAN: In '26.

MM: Who was the superintendent at that time?

CHAPMAN: At Golden Belt it was Mr. Ben Gaddy. He had an older brother, Fred Gaddy, that was superintendent of the Wiscasset Mills at Albemarle.

In other words, they grew up in the hosiery. My idea was to sometime be in charge of a mill. At that time the industry was growing very rapidly. A lot of mills were starting. There was about four new ones starting here in

Burlington at that time, and Tower was one of them. I was anxious to get ahead, so I contacted Mr. Reid Maynard and made a deal with him to come and take charge. He was just getting some secondhand machines. I don't know whether he told you about that, when they started. They were really worn-out equipment and probably had been in use twenty-five or thirty years. They were manufactured by Textile Machine Works in Reading, Pennsylvania, and the newest machine that they had was serial number 222.

MM: [Laughter]

CHAPMAN: So you can imagine how. . . . And I fought them for sixteen hours a day. I worked from seven until ten or eleven o'clock every night, trying to get them started.

MM: How many knitting machines did he start with?

CHAPMAN: At that time they had eight. You had six what we call leggers, and two footers, which was supposed to have been two units. A unit at that time was one footer and three leggers. I got about four or five of the leggers running. I got one of the footers running, but it never did make any first-class work. After about two months I told Mr. Maynard that I would never be able to make him any money with that equipment, and if he wanted to try somebody else I'd give it up. But I think that he knew enough that he could see enough that he said he didn't want to quit, that they was figuring on getting new machines, which they did; I think in August or September the first one come in. Then when we got one of those going,we stopped then .

MM: [Laughter]

CHAPMAN: It's been a great turnover. The machines that we got in at that time--that was in 1929 and '30. . . . I started getting young people in to train. I trained all the knitters. We had four footers and about eight leggers, and they were German machines, made in Germany.

MM: Were those better than the Reading machines?

CHAPMAN: They were a good machine as far as knitting hosiery was concerned, but they was very difficult to fix because no two machines was built by the same person in Germany. Each hole(?)finisher, or whatever they called them in Germany, would start on a machine, and he would build it himself and build it his way. And a lot of the parts on it were fitted by file; they weren't standard molded parts. And if you had to replace one, it was the same way: you'd have to fit it on the machine. But as far as knitting, the production was good. They made good work. In fact, the machines that we had from them actually built our hosiery mill.

MM: When you got those new machines, was the principle the same as on the knitting machines you had worked before? Did they have to send somebody to train you how to fix those?

CHAPMAN: They always sent men here to install them. See, they come in in boxes in parts, thousands of parts. They were shipped across. I don't know if you have pictures of them; I imagine you do have pictures of full-fashioned. You see, they weighed tons and was somewhere around forty or forty-two feet long. All that stuff come in in little parts, and they sent men here to erect them and get them to running, and then they were turned over to you. Or you accepted them whenever you saw that they were all right. You would sign a paper that you accepted. In the meantime, you were working with the people that installed them, and you can see more about. . . .

Most all of the people that was over here were on consignment from Germany to come over here, and after so many days or weeks they'd have to go back. And some of them were old stubborn Germans. If you walked around him and stopped to look and see what he was doing, he was just liable to lay

his tools down and go get him a drink of water.

MM: [Laughter] So they were protecting their skills, in a way.

CHAPMAN: Yes, that's right. They didn't want to give you too much knowledge. In the meantime, we trained all the young people. You mentioned Joe Crutchfield. I guess Joe now has been at Tower Mill longer than I was there. I believe I hired Joe out of high school in 1930. Boys like that that we trained were different people at that time than what you get today. You didn't have to be a foreman or a supervisor or a manager. The only thing you had to do was to work with them and give them a chance. They had enough pride in what they wanted to do. Of course, at that time it was during the Depression, and you had young fellows, say, twenty years old, some out of college, that would come in willing to learn for nothing if you'd just give them the opportunity. We most always tried to give them something, and most of those fellows like Joe and the young fellows that we trained at that time did it for eight dollars a week. Burlington was lucky; we never did run less than three days a week. Of course, the wages was low. You hear people talk about the "good old days"; I reckon that was the good old days. You could walk out there where the railroad runs up there, and the freight train'd come by and you'd see forty or fifty people riding them, going from place to place just looking for anything. But we were lucky here in Burlington. We didn't have any bread lines or soup kitchens or anything like that. Everybody did work enough to have all of . . .

MM: Do you think that was mostly in the hosiery, because hosiery was kind of booming then?

CHAPMAN: I think it was because of the hosiery that Burlington was so lucky, because I guess at that time women considered it a necessity. Later on they began to get the bare-leg effect, but at that time you did move your

goods some.

MM: Hosiery seems to be a much more skilled job than some of the textile mills. Did people want to work more in hosiery than textiles?

CHAPMAN: Yes. I never did have any desire to work on the weaving or anything like that. I was interested in hosiery, and I lived it day and night. I enjoyed it; I enjoyed working with the people, and I never did have any serious problem. I got along with the help very good. We were lucky enough with the help that we trained that they appreciated their job and they did a good job. The last two or three years that I was down there, it was quite different. Now you can't get young people interested in hosiery.

MM: Why do you think that's so?

CHAPMAN: The main reason is that the hosiery prices have been so low. If the hosiery companies make any profit, the margin is so low that they can't pay their wages and compete with the other industries. The young people are not thinking about taking a job and working theirself up; they want topflight to start with.

MM: When we went through the mill, the new knitting machines, unless you're a fixer, there doesn't really. . . . The man that showed us through said in effect, the people that are running them are really just inspectors for the stockings that come up. There really isn't too much to do on the machines, whereas on the old knitters it seems like it was a much more interesting and fulfilling kind of job.

CHAPMAN: In other words, the full-fashioned was much more interesting than seamless is today. Today, even now since I've left the company, they don't even inspect it. They just blow them in a bag, and maybe they go by every hour or two and look at one. The idea there is that, say, if you have a broken needle and it just keeps running, the material that you have to throw

away is less expensive than the personnel to be there and catch it right away. Most of the people that have interesting jobs now in hosiery is the fixer, because he has different machines to fix. The basic principle of knitting is the same, but then they do the same thing with different. . . . And it's changing all the time. They're changing styles, trying to get something that's more attractive. Another thing is the speed of the machines. I think now they knit a panty hose leg in about a minute and a half. They run 800 revolutions a minute, and that's four courses, four feeds. Every time they make one revolution, it's four courses. So that's thirty-two courses [3200?] a minute.

MM: On the older machines, I think we said it took about twelve minutes to knit a leg?

CHAPMAN: Oh, yes, on the seamless it took fifteen. When the full-fashioned finally went out and we got the first seamless machines, I think we'd figure it about fifteen minutes for one stocking. The full-fashioned machines can only make one course at a time. As far as hosiery is concerned, there's never been a hose that's been made that was as good as the full-fashioned, since that time, before or after. Because they fit well. Finally the only objection that women could have was the problem of keeping the seam straight. But it'll come back. I don't know how long it'll be, but the seams will become more popular later on.

MM: You think so?

CHAPMAN: Definitely I think so.

MM: Mr. Crutchfield sure wished that it was so. [Laughter]

CHAPMAN: He was really wrapped up in the full-fashioned machine. But he was good.

MM: He showed us the machine manual. I hadn't heard his name, and your book was still there with your name on it. And I said, "Oh, are you Mr. Chapman?" And he said, "No, no, I'm Mr. Crutchfield, but I keep up Mr.

Chapman's book." [Laughter] And he had a whole toolbox, and he had samples of the different kinds of stockings that he had knit, and some shirts that he had made on the machines.

CHAPMAN: I wondered, did they show you any of those ladies' shirts and all that.

MM: Yes.

CHAPMAN: And, of course, the four machines they have now are making those little children's tights. And you were talking about non-run?

MM: I didn't really understand that, though.

CHAPMAN: They're the only true non-run. You can't make a true non-run on a seamless machine. You can make it run-resist[ant], but on the full-fashioned it is a non-run. There's no way you can make it run. I guess . . .

BEGIN TAPE I SIDE II

CHAPMAN: It's hard for them to ever get used to the seamless, I think. But I don't know of any industry that has had to. . . . It seems that they completely change over every few years from one thing to another. Even when they started on full-fashioned, they started at 42-gauge and then 45 and then 51 and then up to the 60, and a few finer than that, 66's. But the 60-gauge was about as fine a gauge as was practical to run. If you got any finer than that, the tolerance was so close that two degrees' change in temperature would affect it. The 60-gauge machines were a real good machine, in other words, after you had your air conditioning and had controlled temperature and humidity. Another change there's been, when Tower Mills first started it was real heavy-gauge silk, like 8-strand and 12-strand silk. It made hose almost as heavy as these trousers I've got on. And then it gradually come down;

say, from '36 on to '40 or '41, it was real what they called three-strand silk. And that was really a beautiful hose. You know how silk is spun, by the silk worms off a mulberry leaf. And they spin it on a cocoon, and it's taken off of that. When you got into the fine hose, then it showed rings more predominant. You could see it on your leg, in other words. So that required to do something about it, so then they made an attachment on the machines where it would run one course off of one cone of yarn, another course on the other cone, and then what they called three-carrier. It knit the entire stocking off of three different cones of yarn. And that would level out those rings to the place where you couldn't detect them.

MM: Did they have to bring in a new machine to do that, or would you just make adaptations on the one machine?

CHAPMAN: It was just one attachment, what they call a friction, that pulled the carriers backwards and forwards, that laid the yarn in front there that knit. What it would do, they had the first three carriers with the same yarn on, say one-two-three. This friction would take this carrier down here and drop it and shift and pick up the other one, and back and shift and pick up this one, and then it'd go back and take this one again. So really they didn't have to change the machine other than that. Then they went from the footer-legger-type equipment to the one machine that would knit it all the way through.

MM: Did that put a lot of people out of work?

CHAPMAN: No, not really, because at that stage they were still increasing production, buying more equipment, and they would shift the help from one thing to another. And we didn't lose. . . . Some, of course. Some of the help didn't want to change. They wanted to get out and do something else.

MM: When all the innovations in the machinery came, who made the decision

to bring in the machinery? How did that work in the mill? Did Mr. Maynard keep up with all the latest innovations, or would you? Were there journals of new inventions in hosiery, or would people in the factory itself invent . . .

CHAPMAN: That was my job. In other words, the superintendent had to keep up with that. As far as Mr. Maynard, he knew absolutely nothing about the knitting machines, nothing. He worked more with finances and sales, and, of course, his word was the boss from the word go. He knew what was going on, but as far as knowing mechanical on the knitting machines, he didn't, and he doesn't until this day. But he knows what it takes to make a good hose. He's got to have the equipment; he knows that. And if something new come out for the factories, like Textile Machine Works would make another machine, I would go to see. If we were going to buy new machines, get with the people, like with Textile, and I'd outline what we wanted on the machine. A lot of companies, of course, have what they call superintendents and foremen that haven't come up through the mill like I did, from the bottom to the top, but I think it's an advantage to know equipment. You don't have to have that knowledge to handle the help and get along with training people, but to know what's going on your industry, I think, is a big advantage to work. You know what a knitter can do if you done it yourself.

MM: Were you superintendent of the whole knitting mill or the full-fashioned? How was that broken down in the mill?

CHAPMAN: Yes, I was superintendent of the entire. . . . Of course, then I had my foremen under me, or supervisors, whichever one you want to call them, in each department, but they all answered to me, and I had to answer to Mr. Maynard. The seaming, the inspecting, the gray goods(?), you had to know all that, and you had to have people that you could depend on. You give them authority to do a job, and you expect them to do it.

MM: When you were working in Durham at the Golden Belt, was there no opportunity to move ahead over there?

CHAPMAN: I didn't think that there was. At the time that I contacted these people up here, I had heard that they were starting a mill. And I was working at night, and in the meantime I had gotten married. I was still working at night, twelve hours. And I didn't think that there was any opportunity, even to get a day job, because there were older people, and they were established. It didn't appear that they were going to enlarge any more. And, too, I kind of felt like I'd rather be a big fish in a little pond than a little fish in a big pond. I wanted to really see if I couldn't establish myself and run a mill. I had enough confidence in myself that I could do it. I was lucky enough that I got by with it.

MM: Did you ever want to try and own your own mill?

CHAPMAN: I had an opportunity to, and I didn't have nerve enough to. I was rather young; I was twenty-five years old when I took the job at Tower. Then after we got this German outfit that we got our first machines from, I worked with them pretty close, and they worked with me in getting them started. And the old German that run it--his name was Reiner--that company that built these Iron Sickle(?) knitting machines, said he'd put me in six machines for nothing, and I could pay for them as I made it. But, of course, I'd have had to get out and get a building, and I didn't have any financial backing other than that. And I didn't, and of course it's possible I could have gone to the bank; possible, but I doubt it. Because I didn't have any collateral at that time. I wasn't making too much money, but I was making enough I didn't want to give it up . . .

MM: [Laughter]

CHAPMAN: Take a chance, I guess. I don't know. That's the one opportunity I had. Later on I got older, and I could see that possibly I could have made

it all right. But I don't know; I haven't regretted it.

MM: Mr. Gordon said that there were a lot of fixers who would buy a couple of old machines and just set them up in their garage, and their wife would do the seaming and inspecting, and there would be this whole kind of little garage hosiery industry. Did that happen in Burlington?

CHAPMAN: That did back along during that same time in the half hose or men's hosiery business. There was a lot of little old places started like that. Some of them worked at other mills and still had that at home, see, and their wife would do the running of it. But they couldn't do it in full-fashioned, because you had to have a controlled temperature. You had to have a good mill; you had to have a good building to operate full-fashioned machines, and they were expensive, too.

MM: So these would probably have been seamless machines that people would set up?

CHAPMAN: Yes. They were all seamless machines. More or less in the half hose, because during that period, say from '25 to '55, that's when the full-fashioned was really good. When I first come to Burlington, they had the McEwen Mill and the May Mill and Standard Hosiery Mill; that was the three established firms here. And they had been operating for some time. They were all full-fashioned. Around, probably, '38 to '40, McEwen and May merged. And then later on the sales organization that sold the goods representing Standard Hosiery Mill in New York was a fellow Roth. He had got a-hold of Kayser Mills up in Pennsylvania, and then they bought out the Standard Mills and made it go to Kayser Roth. And then Burlington bought out the May-McEwen plant. And Tower is still knocking heads with them.

MM: Was there a lot of intense competition here in Burlington?

CHAPMAN: Yes, always has been. People like Tower kind of hated to see

Burlington get into the hosiery. Because Burlington just more or less monopolizes everything, and we felt like that they would do the same thing in the hosiery, which they did. At one time they had probably six or eight or ten hosiery mills all over, Virginia and Tennessee and North Carolina. Their production was probably somewhere around 50,000 dozen a week. Then we got to the place where the beginning of the reduction in prices.

have to sell their goods, and they cut the price a little bit and move them. They made it tougher on the little individual places.

MM: When that would happen, would you have to cut wages in the mill, or how would that filter down to the people working in the mill?

CHAPMAN: They did at one time; around 1940 it started. If it hadn't been for the Second World War, this hosiery changeover possibly could have come sooner than it did. We had to cut wages around 1940, '41, and we did have unions get to work on us.

MM: Over at the Tower Mills they tried to unionize?

CHAPMAN: Yes. I've always had a little bit of hard feeling towards Burlington, because we got the blame for cutting wages one time. They were supposed to put up their notice the same day that we did, but they didn't; they waited a day or two. So Tower, he was the one that led the wage reduction, which had to come; there's no question about it. Either that or stop. Now Burlington has no full-fashioned machines at all. They had the seamless knitting plants; I think most all of it now is at Harriman, Tennessee. The finishing plant's over here off of the highway. I doubt if the hosiery in Burlington's setup amounts to anything, hardly, a drop in the bucket to the rest of their business. Kayser Roth has been sold to Gulf Western or something like that.

MM: Tell me a little more about the attempt for the union. Was that a direct

result of the wage cut? Was this around 1940?

CHAPMAN: Definitely. No question about it.

MM: Had there ever been an attempt before that to unionize?

CHAPMAN: No, that started then, and then we had the first election, I think, in 1941. We won it by a few votes. And from that time on till about 1952 or '53, we messed with it and argued with them, but we never did sign a contract. And finally the help voted it out.

MM: Do you remember what union this was?

CHAPMAN: The Federation of Hosiery Workers. I think finally the people realized that we were doing all we could do for the help; in other words, we had to make some money. There was no question about that. You're in business to make money; if you don't, you don't last long. What they made went back into the business, made more jobs for more people. We started with one little plant there, that first building on the. . . . And while I was there, we built the addition to the back of it. And then from that we went down to Hawkins Street and built the basement and the other room. They had all that built up. And since we come back and built the addition out in front to Hawkins Street, and then since then another one in the middle and one in the back. All that was putting what they made back in the business.

MM: In Durham, when you were there, they also didn't have a union in the Golden Belt Manufacturing?

CHAPMAN: They did after I left there.

MM: I thought there was a union there in Durham.

CHAPMAN: I'm sure they had it at Durham Hosiery, too. And Durham Hosiery has moved out of Durham. I don't know exactly where it is.

MM: In the general textile strike in 1934, did any of the hosiery mills go out as well? Do you remember that at all?

CHAPMAN: No, didn't any of the hosiery mills take any part of it. Now one day there was a bunch of them got one of the little half-hose mills, the boarders, got them to walk out with them. And they got up a crew; there was a whole mob come by our mill. And we tried to get the doors locked--we saw them coming--but they bursted in the plant and tried to run everybody out. Of course, some of the women got scared to death and they ran out. One of them had pulled the main switch. They had big old sticks and clubs,carrying them, but they didn't hurt anyone. They went on out, and people went back to work. That night a time or two that whole street was full of people, trying to get them to come out. We kept the doors locked from then on. They could get out, but they couldn't get in without breaking the door down. But we never did have any strike. We argued with them. And I think that the people realized that it wouldn't do them any good. In other words, we was doing all we could do for the help. No question in my mind. I've never been in favor of a union. I guess it's done some good in different industries. But I think it's going to ruin this country eventually. It's pretty well controlled the government and everything else, I think.

MM: What do you mean, the unions are controlled by the government?

CHAPMAN: The unions, the AF of L and the CIO, they're so strong that they more or less tell the government what to do.

MM: Don't you think business is pretty strong itself in the way that it can tell the government what . . .

BEGIN TAPE II SIDE I

CHAPMAN: . . . much responsibility as a union, is that what . . .

MM: Yes.

CHAPMAN: Oh, yes, definitely. And if it wasn't for the union, I don't know, maybe the business would really monopolize the. . . . But I have a little more faith now in the businessman that they want to be fair, and they have more sympathy for working people than maybe they did years ago. I know they do here in Burlington, than what they did way back before I ever come here. There was cotton mills and things that more or less didn't give their help much chance. I think there certainly has to be some changes made, but(?) you can't spend more than you make and last forever, and that's what the governmenment's doing, and it's just a vicious cycle. You raise wages, and then you raise prices, and you raise wages, and you raise prices. The cost of living goes up, and then the union just wants more money. That's the system that they have.

MM: Were hosiery workers on the whole better paid than textile workers?

CHAPMAN: Not now. In fact, I think the textile workers are making probably a little better percentage than the hosiery workers. But at one time the hosiery workers. . . . A full-fashioned knitter would make more than a bank clerk or a lot of lawyers and certainly more than the teachers were making. And he was just the king bee around here. But they let it get away from them by overproduction. That's definitely the cause of it. Everybody wanted to get in the hosiery business. You take Burlington and J. P. Stevens and those people that are big textile manufacturers. When they go into something, they go into it in a big way. But there's been so many people that's gone out of business that it looks like it should be now about levelled off.

MM: In the full-fashioned, did women ever become knitters?

CHAPMAN: Oh, yes. During the Second World War, we trained I don't know how many, but we probably had forty or fifty women knitters.

MM: Would they get the same wages that the men had been getting?

CHAPMAN: Oh, yes, they were on incentive work, what we called piecework. They got the same thing.

MM: Before that, what were the jobs that women traditionally had in hosiery? Before World War II, women weren't knitters.

CHAPMAN: At that time we probably had the footers and leggers. They were what they called toppers. They took the leg and put it on a stand and then transferred it from that stand to a bar. And that was transferred to the footer machine. You had 24. You'd have three toppers. She'd have eight bars to fill while he was running the set off. And the good help, they were all on incentive work. Every time he ran off a dozen, they got so much pay for topping. And what they would do, the good, fast girls--some were faster than others--they would have that bar filled and up ready, and as soon as the machine stopped they would help take the work off the strings, and then they were ready and dropped those bars in there, and they'd be gone again. The women did that. And then, of course, they did the seaming and the looping. At that time they had to have loopers. They looped the heel together,and then the toe had to be looped. That was before what they call the round heel come into effect. And then you had to alter(?)the machine so that it would knit narrow all the way in to where there wasn't but four needles or eight needles left that run a little toe tab out. And then when the seamer seamed that, that just folded back and was sewed into the seam. Women did all the seaming and did all the inspecting and the looping. Of course, then when they went to the finishing plant, a lot of the women did the boarding, which is the hottest job in the world.

MM: I talked to one woman who was a boarder, and she said that she could stick her hand in boiling water and pull out a corn cob, because her hands were so tough that she didn't even feel it.

CHAPMAN: When I was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, working for Phoenix Hosiery Mill, the spring of the year they closed down the knitting machines and wanted me to go over to the boarding department in the finishing and board the half hose. I went over there with no experience. You don't have to have any experience, other than being able to turn loose [without getting burned]. And I boarded one day, and I had blisters in the palm of my hand as big as a half a dollar. And I said, "If I have to make a living doing that, I'll just die."

MM: [Laughter]

CHAPMAN: But that's my experience of boarding. I've seen women up here--and they're on piecework--when it'd be 102 or 103 degrees, and the perspiration was just pouring like it was water off of them. And I don't see how they stand it, but they do.

MM: Were there any dangerous jobs in hosiery? I know there were a lot of accidents in cotton textiles. Was it possible to get hurt in a hosiery mill, too?

CHAPMAN: Oh, yes. The worst injury we had, a knitter, he. . . . They had these little rods there that they'd hook on to pull the stocking out. He dropped one down in the machine, and he reached down to pick it up. And there was a big half-moon cam come around, and it only cleared the rod by about that much, and it caught him on the arm here. It come around and caught his arm down in there and just laid it open down there. That muscle all down there was just laid open. That's the worst one we had. I'd have them break their fingers. You see those wheels in front there that turn? One boy passed the trick(?) that he had, to reach back and do. When he did, he stuck his finger in that wheel and broke his little finger. Things like that. Mash your hand, finger. The worst thing, though, is those hooks. You get them stuck in your hand, and you can't get them out. You've got to

have them cut out, because that little hook is like a fish hook. But we never had any real bad accidents. It's more or less carelessness anytime.

MM: This is raally interesting, because you had worked in northern mills and then in the South. Did you notice any difference between management techniques or the atmosphere of working in a northern mill versus working in a southern mill?

CHAPMAN: Not a great deal. The name of the mill in Indianapolis was the Real Silk Hosiery Mill. They had about a thousand knitting machines; it was a pretty good-sized place. The supervisor in the knitting department was an easy-going type of fellow. And they had what they called an Employees' Benefit Association or something like that. It was more or less supposed to be a union inside of the mill, just that employer. The company could not lay you off; that was one of the things. But when they made this stretchout system, they gave me another job. I had just started on knitting and hadn't been there long, and they gave me another job, but the pay was next to nothing. So that's the reason I left and went to Wisconsin.

MM: How did you find out about the job in Wisconsin? Were there other people going up there, or had they advertised?

CHAPMAN: No, they hadn't advertised. I just knew that there were some good-sized hosiery mills up there, and I said, "I'm going to travel around a little bit." I run into people up there that were originally from Durham, and that's the reason I come back. You don't understand how these things happen, really; the moves that you make, you don't know why, but they turn out right.

MM: There seems to have been a whole pattern. A lot of the people that I've talked to just moved from mill to mill all the time, and there seemed to be a whole travelling body of people that moved from mill to mill, always

looking for something a little bit better.

CHAPMAN: Perhaps it seemed so, but I don't think that there was too much migration. Now at one time, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was really the hosiery center. Had full-fashioned, seamless, everything. And I don't know if there's any up there now. And, of course, the people in the South think the reason why is the union. They couldn't compete. One of the things that I could never agree with the union is, they want to set a standard way. . . . Well, say, the slowest, most inefficient employee that you have, they want to take his standard and set that as a standard./ Where, say, a knitter for us would knit fifteen or sixteen dozen a day off the machine, because the two in the aisle would work together and they'd help one another on [each other's] machines. While this one was changing and starting another set, this one over here would be running in the middle of the stocking, and do that. Well, the union wouldn't want them to do that. I never could understand that part of the thinking of unions, why they wouldn't want people to put out the most efficient and the most work that they could put out in a day, because they'd make more money by doing it. But that's one of those things that I couldn't agree with the union. And another one is that they wanted to keep an uproar all the time. They didn't want things to go smooth. I had enough experience. I was gray-headed from the time I was forty years old. When I was fifty, I was white as this.

MM: [Laughter]

CHAPMAN: A lot of nights I didn't sleep.

MM: When did you retire from Tower Mills?

CHAPMAN: At the end of '73 or January 1, '74. That was forty-four and a half years I was there. All my life in there. They gave me that clock there when I was there forty years.

MM: What did they do when you retired?

CHAPMAN: Well, I did all right. [Laughter]

MM: Did they have a big party for you and send you off?

CHAPMAN: We had been having, and did, a supervisors' and fixers' Christmas dinner during the Christmas holidays. We'd have steak dinners at the club or somewhere. And, of course, that year they had a present for me.

MM: The Burlington Mill had its mill village, and the Plaid mill had a mill village. Did the hosiery mills also have a mill village attached to their mills?

CHAPMAN: [None] other than Alamance. Now the Standard Mills at Alamance at one time owned all those little houses back over there. I don't know if you've been out there or not.

MM: I haven't yet.

CHAPMAN: But now they don't have it. I think that they sold them all out, gave the people that were living in them an opportunity to buy them. Because this company that bought Standard. . . . Yes, that was a mill village out there, more or less. I come here in '29. They had been in business in half hose first for I don't know how long, and at that time they were in men's fashions. But that's the only one that I know of that had any type of housing or anything like that.

MM: Were most of the people that worked in the Tower Mill from Burlington, or did you have to bring in knitters in the beginning that already knew the work, from outside? Or were there enough people here?

CHAPMAN: No, I started training them from the very beginning. There were a few at that time more or less knitters drifting from place to place. And I hired some of them, and maybe they'd be here a while. But in the meantime, we always kept, probably on every machine, a trainee. Because we expected to get more machines, and we wanted to have them ready when they . Other

than I would say maybe half a dozen or so, we trained them all, and that group didn't stay long. Get a few dollars in their pocket, and they'd be gone.

MM: How long would it take to train a knitter on the full-fashioned?

CHAPMAN: At that time, we considered about six months. They had to learn to straighten and line up needles, keep them in order, and then to make the changes and all on the knitting machine. If they made a mistake, it could cause a thousand dollars' damage that quick [snaps finger]. Breaking a bunch of needles. They had twenty-four heads, and if you did something and break the needles out of twenty-four heads, boy, you really got something.

MM: What about a fixer? That must have taken a long time to learn.

CHAPMAN: Of course, it took much longer, years.

MM: That would have been the most skilled job in the industry?

CHAPMAN: Yes. The skill in knitting was being able to square(?) up needles and keep them in a perfect line, and straighten the needles when you had to put in a needle. And then as far as the fixing was concerned, when they changed styles all that big chain in front there that buttons them, every one of those buttons had a job to do, and you had to know. That was probably the most skilled part of fixing. The last four German machines we bought,where we put the reinforcing down here in the heel and sole, it wouldn't make a clear stitch. It more or less split the stitch. The inside would be kind of fuzzy-looking. All four of those machines were like that. We couldn't get any satisfaction out of them. I had to do something, so I changed the motion on the machine,/the cams that did the knitting, to clear that up. Things like that, you just had to do what you thought was right, and if it worked well and good. I was lucky enough, I helped to just clear it up. The cams that are on this big shaft--I don't know whether you noticed the camshafts in the mill--control the motion of the machine, forming

the stitch and everything. And to be as fine as it is and look like it's a pretty heavy thing, to control the little bitty. . . . Take the narrowing, when it goes down and picks up the stitch and moves it over to narrow the hose down for the ankle. There's only a thousandth and a half tolerance to go down between the sinkers and dividers. If you hit it on top, it just curls that point up like that, and every time it goes down it's taking needles out. All that has got to be set just exactly right. That's the reason why you have to have controlled temperatures, because that narrowing is on a rod half the length of the steel rod and half the length of the knitting machine. Any variation in temperature will contract or expand that, and that's what puts you out of line. Did Mr. Maynard or Jim Maynard take you through the mills?

MM: Mr. Gordon took us through the mill. The other man who's working on the project had interviewed Mr. Maynard several times, and he just kind of walked by while we were going through. But we spent several hours. First we went through the finishing plant, and then we went through the knitting mill. Mr. Crutchfield was wonderful and kept us there for a long time and showed us everything, and it was really fascinating.

CHAPMAN: Joe's a wonderful person. I guess he's one of my greatest admirers.He'd come to me now for advice if . . . . He is one loyal person.

MM: And he still goes in there every morning to work for a little bit?

CHAPMAN: Yes.

MM: It's obvious he just loved his work.

CHAPMAN: He talked to me about it. I didn't know whether that would work out or not, for his sake. I'd hate to be tied down all the time like that, every morning having to go in. Knowing Joe, he'd be kind of lost not doing anything. So I guess it's just worked out fine.

MM: He had one picture of some men working on the machinery in the mill.

Did anybody ever take any pictures in the mill or try to record any of the . . .

CHAPMAN: Yes, I had some, but I don't know where they are now. The only picture I got is our baseball team that we had.

HM: Yes, I heard you had a great baseball team. [Laughter]

CHAPMAN: I got that picture in there.

[End of interview]