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Interview

with

PAUL HUNTER

July 5, 1995

by Patrick Huber

Transcribed by Jackie Gorman

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Citation of this interview should be as follows:
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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

PAUL HUNTER
JULY 5, 1995

PATRICK HUBER: The following is an interview by Patrick Huber with Paul Hunter at the Delux Barber Shop in downtown Mebane, North Carolina, on July 5, 1995. The following is being conducted for The Southern Oral History Program and is part of its Oral History of the White Furniture Company of Mebane Project.

I thought, Mr. Hunter, that we would start out today by having you tell us a little bit about where and when you were born and what your folks did for a living and if you had any brothers and sisters.

PAUL HUNTER: I was born in Alamance County in the sixth month, twenty-ninth day of 1939. I don't have any brothers or sisters. My father worked at Cherokee Flooring Company in Burlington. I had a cousin that cut hair here in Mebane and so that's what inspired me to go barber school. I came to work for his son. So out of the Hunter family, cutting hair here in Mebane, has been cutting hair here approximately maybe ninety some years. My cousin cut for fifty-four years, and I've been here about thirty-six years. During that time between the family we saw quite a few people go and come out of Mebane.

PH: Where did you go to barber school?

P.Hunter: I went to barber school in Raleigh at Harrison's Barber College in Raleigh.

PH: Uh, huh.

P.Hunter: Yeah, that was in 1959.

PH: Well, what were your general impressions of the White Furniture Company?

P.Hunter: When I came to Mebane, White's Furniture Factory was one of the biggest places--for most of the people to get haircuts in there in the barber shop worked at

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White's. During that time that was just about the way a livelihood was through White's. I can always remember the times when we got close to Christmas most of all the employees got real excited over the big bonus that White used to give back in those years. It was just a matter of a person's livelihood; they had to come to White's and a lot of it, you know, because there was only White's and Kingsdown and a yarn mill were about the only employees here. And Craftique.

PH: Were there any other big employers in town?

P.Hunter: At that time it wasn't. Those were about the only four places that was here that worked a big number of people. Most of the fathers and sons all worked at White's or either Craftique, one or the other.

I had quite a few customers at that time and it was all the White fathers and sons.

PH: Do you remember any--? You knew a lot of them by first name?

P.Hunter: Yeah, quite a few of them. Mr. Miller, and Mr. Rice and his son Donald. Mr. Sawman, Robert Sawman his son Frankie, all the family employed there. Quite a few people that were out in the rural area that didn't live in Mebane worked at White's, too: the Porterfields, the Beavers, and Durhams. Just quite a few of them in the country.

PH: Back when you came to Mebane was White's considered a good place to work?

P.Hunter: At that time it was and the work was good. They made good quality of furniture at the time when I came here. And, you know, the thing that I've seen the difference as the years went on was the thing that the older people were so--. They enjoyed doing what they were doing, and they enjoyed the work that they turned out. They could boast about the quality of the work that they put out, you know. Of course, it's always been the high price of furniture, but at that time it was all good solid furniture.

And, of course, that was under the leadership of Steve White and Steve Millender, and Mr. Bean, Phonie Bean, I think his name was. He was the plant manager, I guess.

Then they had a superintendent, Mr. Selph, but those people, of course, that worked under them they just had more authority than the next generation that come along, so the quality of the work was much better and people did a much better job. So as time passed on to Mr. Millender's son, Charlie Millender, was working and working in the plant with them. Of course, Sam was there, Sam White was there and they made him president and then Bernie Bean, the son of Mr. Phonie Bean, ended up being the plant manager.

Of course, in my opinion, what I saw the difference with under the leadership was just a lack of communication with each individual out there as the generation, you know, changed and the authority to really get the work out of the people because--

PH: They weren't as good as the older generation?

P.Hunter: They may-- You know, I think maybe Bernie knew the work--Bernie Bean did--but he just didn't have quite the authority that his daddy had to push the employees. You know, when you go see things like that happening the employees would get to the point that they didn't do the work as much or slack up and do just what they had to do to get by. That started killing the quality of some of the work.

And, of course, Sam White was a very fine man as far as an individual talking to him and everything, and he didn't have quite as much personal contact with the employees as Charlie had. Charlie Millender was the vice-president which was there working with them, you know, kind of like hand-to-hand. So I feel like that made some difference, too, because most of the time I always felt from listening at the employees that a lot of them had quite a lot of respect for the people that would come direct and talk to them, you know, just come up and have a personal conversation with them. It made quite a lot of difference, I'm sure, in the quality of work that they turned out. So I don't recall exactly--seemed like it was-- I don't know whether it was two years or three years. It wasn't too long after the change of the family leadership that the company was selling out.

Of course, the people that they sold out to were mostly investors and so I had the opportunity to meet the president, plant managers, and cut most of their hair, too, some of

them. You know, not knowing and not realizing that during the times that they needed people to work and keep the good employees made a difference there because they had an idea of turning out so much work and regardless of who did it they didn't come and fall in love, by that, love the family like the old generation of White did, you know. They just kind of got to be family to each other.

Quite naturally, from what I could talk and get the understanding out of the employees there, it caused them not to really care the type of work that they put out or anything because they felt like they didn't appreciate them as much. That's the only thing I could see in the falling, mostly, of the factory.

A number of years that I was here that factory was feeding families and building homes for families and educating children and so it looked like it kind of just faded away from that, you know.

PH: Did the Whites' come in and the Beans' come in and get their hair cut here?

P.Hunter: Most of them went to the Hope man which was a part of my cousin's. They were brother's-in-law that opened up the barber shop here in the beginning. Now, Sam White got his hair cut here. Charlie Millender got his hair cut here. I had cut Bernie Bean's hair. Most of them got their hair cut with Mr. Hope which was really a part of the family, too. He was at a different shop.

I had an opportunity to know him. I knew Mr. Selph that used to be the superintendent down there so I knew him. Most of the supervisors, I knew Mr. Rice, Mr. Durham, Mr. Westbrook, Mr. Clayton, Mills, Ralph Mills. Most of all of the supervisors, I've cut quite a few of them, quite a few of the supervisors and quite a few of the employees.

I had an opportunity to see the difference in the older supervisors and the chance to see the new ones, too.

PH: The new ones when the new company came in?

P.Hunter: Yeah.

PH: What were the differences?

P.Hunter: Well, the difference was, I felt, was just a matter of not having the close relationship that the other people kind of grew up with, you know, the employees and the supervision that grew up working in the plant and worked into being a supervisor. They quite naturally got a lot closer to the employees than the new people that took over. They come in from somewhere else that didn't know anybody, family-wise and all, you know.

I say this much about the older White's ownership and the management and all, they cared enough about the families if they were sick they were making sure that they were taken care of because they appreciated at that time good quality employees. But the new company that took over was like a lot of new companies now, the bottom line is the dollar sign. They don't really get that close, I don't know, they don't really have that love that much for the employees as the old ones did through the years or most of any company I guess now or it used to be a long time ago.

PH: You don't think they were as concerned about the community of Mebane either?

P.Hunter: No. I don't think they were that much concerned about the future of White's Furniture Factory. I think the whole idea was to buy that name and to get to the point that they could move the company back to a place where the wages was a lot different, a lot lower, than they were in this area. Because the wages got a little higher in this area after GE, DKN, Mebane Packaging, and those companies moved in. You had a lot of people that were traveling to the Research Triangle where they got better paying jobs. I think they had one thing in mind was to buy the name of White's so they'd have that high-price furniture and tie it in with Hickory as they did, and then they moved everything back to Hickory.

I'm not aware of very many employees moving up there. I was aware of one of the managers, and he was a designer. He moved back up to Hickory. As far as some of them in the office was already in, I believe, it was High Point where they got the central office,

you know, where they do most of that out of. I think it's out of high Point. As far as any of the other employees I don't recall any of the people that was good to White's really moving up to Hickory with them.

PH: Do you remember when this new company came in what the workers were saying who would come in here and get their hair cut?

P.Hunter: Well, they were saying about what I just basically told you, that they didn't feel like it would long that they'd have a job there because they had the same feeling that I had that these people come in and bought it and the first thing they were doing they were moving out some of the older management that [inaudible] was up and moving in their own people. And they could see the quality changing in the furniture and see how fast they wanted it out. So it caused a lot of the old employees to really get the point that they, you know, they just didn't care about their jobs because they felt like they weren't going to have a job long. And so that's what mostly took place, and that's what really happened.

PH: Do you know of any of the older workers leaving there when the company came in?

P.Hunter: When the time come? Yeah, I know of about fifty that left shortly after the new company moved in, you know, because quite naturally, you know, they come in and see a lot of people that they didn't need so they just moved them out right from the start. But other than that, you know, that's just some of the employees' attitude towards companies just about like any other company when somebody comes in and buys out they don't feel like they going to be with the company long. Some of the people had been there probably thirty-five and forty years or some of them even longer than that are still working.

PH: What were the new supervisors like who came in?

P.Hunter: Well, most of them, you know, were personally good people, you know, from listening at them and talking to them in the barber shop here, you know, but

they had a job to do to turn out. They had a certain amount of furniture that they had to turn out down there and so, you know, they had to get it out. That was just kind of pushed down and that's the only thing they could do. So they had to push people to get it out, and they had to push them to get it out. Sometime, you know, they maybe didn't look quite as far into the type of quality that they was pushing out as it was years ago. Of course, you know, as the time goes on the pace goes on, too, you know, so you either got to keep up with the times or get out of it in a hurry, too, you know. So I think that's what just took place in that order. They came in and really seen they had to turn out a certain number of furniture or amount of furniture and, of course, they had to keep the overhead down along with it, you know.

But as far as even down to the president that came here and the plant manager and a lot of the supervisors--. You know, I cut a lot of them's hair. They all seemed to me very good people. I had no problem getting along with them at all. I don't know how many of those people that were here then is still with the company. I'm not sure there're very many of them still with the company that first came here. Some of them might still be in the office part up there. The Robinson fellow, I think, he was kind of over the financial part up there. I far as I know he's still there, up at the office. Richard Hinkle and some of the other people are not with that company anymore.

PH: Do you remember rumors going around town that the place was going to close up?

P.Hunter: Well, you know, when somebody buys a company out, right after they start the first thing some of the older [ones], they get, you know, people who've been there a long time they start seeing some changes. Maybe the changes that needed to be changed they already, you know, "Well, it's not going to last long." So it was quite a few of that going on. "We're not going to have a job long. We're not going to have a job." I guess they were there probably--I may be wrong in my timing--but I would say probably maybe five years that they were they. It may have even been longer than that before they

moved the plant to Hickory. Still yet, like I said, there was a lot of people that had been with White's a long time didn't have a job after that because, you know, it's not easy for people working or living in a small town to just jump up and move that far to Hickory, you know, just to keep employed.

PH: Uh, huh.

P.Hunter: Some of them just had to get jobs some other place, and some of them retired.

PH: Had you heard anything about that Mercedes-Benz plant that was supposed to come here?

P.Hunter: Yeah, I heard about it. Well, shortly after they had talked about coming here and so, you know, it was real big. Kind of kept everything quiet and so, you know, I was the last person that was going to say something about it if they want to keep it quiet, although I knew about it at the time. I think the difference-- They still said on down to the last this was the best location for the Mercedes plant. I think that all the state of Alabama give them they just about couldn't turn that down.

PH: Uh, huh.

P.Hunter: Since North Carolina didn't offer that much, and I'm glad they didn't. [laughter] I don't know where it would made such a tremendous difference area. I'm sure it would had had a lot of effect on it. It would have brought more people in. You know, if you got to grow you got to grow. You grow with everything, crime rates, and the whole works, everything. High cost of property taxes and everything else that goes with it. So you can't stand still. If you don't have something here for the youth as they grow up they have to go somewhere else to work.

PH: Have you seen a lot of that with younger people?

P.Hunter: Yes, I've seen quite a lot of young people that I give first haircuts to I see them when they come back to visit. [laughter]

PH: Where did they go to? Where are the best areas?

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P.Hunter: Well, a lot of them went out of state to work, and some of them was in the area of Research Triangle. Some are in the Winston-Salem area and Greensboro area, but a whole lot of them is out of state. You know, it just wasn't that much to offer here for a person when they came out of high school and went to college and after college there wasn't that much to offer in this area. But it seemed to be taking our future. The future seemed to be like we're going to might be able to keep some of the youth around here and get enough employment here, quality employment here.

PH: How did the plant closing down effect your business here?

P.Hunter: Well, I lost quite a number of the new management because they had to relocate, but as far as the help that was here, you know, the employees that were there a lot of them are still in the area. They are working somewhere else, but they are still in the area. And it was quite a few of them that I had customers there were able to retire so they are still in the area. But, you know, you see some difference. I was a little bit fortunate than others that I had quite a few of them at the retirement age. I'm hoping that I can get retired by the time they get to where they can't come to get a haircut. [laughter] I, you know, I can see most of the new management that was here, I just see a few of them that are still in the area.

PH: A couple of guys who I talked to said that they used to, when the White family it, they could come off of work and get a haircut. Would people come down during the middle of the afternoon and get a cut?

P.Hunter: Well, it was some of the management. Now, when White's was first-- When the older White's that owned it, you know, they had a break time, but there weren't many haircuts during break. They got a haircut a lot of times during lunchtime because they had an hour for lunch.

PH: Uh, huh.

P.Hunter: But as the next generation took over, yeah, some of them would just walk out of there and come out and get a haircut. [laughter] Because they were able to get by with it, you know.

PH: Uh, huh.

P.Hunter: You know, like I said, that was a lot of White's downfall, too, you know, there just wasn't enough authority in the next generation that come along to get the work out of the people. They let them get by with a lot of things. Not that they wasn't good people or anything, it was just a lack of that authority of being able to get the best out of the employees or the best for the company. It just wasn't there. If you have people that you are paying and them on the streets, you've got to go into the hole. There's no other way to go.

PH: Is that why you think they had to sell the place?

P.Hunter: Well, I felt that a whole lot of it was because of the management of the second generation, I'll put it that way. And it was just a matter of the authority, not having the authority to get the work out and keep the overhead down.

PH: So you think they went in debt--in the hole--because of the way it was run?

P.Hunter: Well, see, I wouldn't say they went in debt. I'd say they lost money. I know they lost money two years in a row.

PH: Right before they sold it?

P.Hunter: Yeah, that's true.

PH: Did that surprise a lot of people in town--?

P.Hunter: That they were selling out?

PH: Yeah.

P.Hunter: Yeah, it did. They said they never thought they'd ever see the day would come that the family wouldn't own White's Furniture Factory. But it's a possibility for if it had been under the full leadership of Charlie Millender, if he had of been the president and by being out there in close contact with the employees there might have

been some difference. I'm not saying that it would have been, but it could have been. I'm not saying that to the fact that the president, Sam White, wasn't a fine, fine man because he was a very fine gentleman, and just like Bernie Bean, he was a fine fellow, but, you know, being fine and getting the work done is kind of like two different things. If you don't get-- If you're not making any money, being fine it don't help you very much, not as far as keeping the company going.

PH: When would most workers then come in and get their hair cut?

P.Hunter: Most of them would come in during the lunchtime or, you know, they had an hour for lunch and we'd get a lot of them during that time and shortly after the plant closed in the afternoon.

PH: What would a lot be, say, during lunch hour?

P.Hunter: Well, most of them during lunch hour would mostly be talking about, you know, sometimes the quality of the furniture that was going out. But it was just a difference. You could see a difference in the people at that time when they'd come in. They had a little bit more sense of assuring of having a job as it changed. As the leadership changed over from the fathers to the sons you could tell that they could see that the company was going down. The employees could see that.

PH: Do you think the workers weren't as happy?

P.Hunter: Naw, they weren't as happy.

PH: They complained more?

P.Hunter: Well, they were a little uneasy. And, of course, quite naturally when the other company came in and bought it out, when Hickory bought it out, they were a whole lot uneasy especially a lot of the older people there because they just felt they were going to be without a job, you know, sooner or later, and sooner or later they were.

PH: So how many would come in, say, over a lunch hour? What would be a lot of people?

P.Hunter: Well, most of the time if I cut four by being-- Of course, a lot of times during that time I had been in the shop where it was three barbers in it and so you might get quite a few of them in during lunchtime. But as an individual barber if you cut four during the time that they were out for lunch you were doing good, you know, as just one barber. But most of the shops down here at that time had three barbers in most of the shops and there was four on this street at one time and two of them had two in the shop. Well, it ended up being two barbers in each shop when it was four on this street, and I think it was three in the shop around Front Street. So at one time it was five barber shops here and now it's only two and a barber in each shop.

PH: So they would come in and sit around and wait for their haircut and tell stories and talk.

P.Hunter: Oh, yeah. A lot of them even if they weren't getting a haircut would come by and sit down and talk. During that time-- Especially during the time the farmers were bringing watermelons and stuff in, they would bring me some watermelons and a lot of times some of those employees would come up and cut my watermelon. I might get a slice out of it and I might not.

PH: Any other stuff? Did they play checkers or stuff like that in here?

P.Hunter: Naw, I never had a checker board in this barber shop. I think most of the checker games in Mebane at that time was at a service station down by the Ford dealership down there. The Rice brothers was running a service station down there and a lot of them would run in there and get a checker game going. A lot of them spent time in the hardware down here during their lunchtime. Then you had quite a few of them after the second management that spent time in the pool room and the bar up there. [laughter] Quite naturally, that was going to cut out on some of the quality of furniture.

PH: One of the guys told me that if you wanted to know anything about the company you needed to come down here to this barber shop.

P.Hunter: Come down to this barbershop. [laughter] Well, I'm not so sure about that, even after all I had to tell you it might not have been a whole lot. I had a pretty close relationship with most of the employees down there at White's, you know, and kind of had a real good friendship base, along with the [inaudible] hair cuts and all, and we got along real well. I don't know whether you could find out a whole lot or not [laughter] if you were here.

[In the background you can hear the snipping of scissors.]

PH: One guy told me that you had a joke about when you used to walk by--when the White Company owned the place--you could hear the saws going "murr, murr, murr," and when Hickory bought it out you would walk by and then they go "yip, yip, yip."

P.Hunter: [laughter]

PH: Do you remember that?

P.Hunter: Yeah, I remember telling some of them that. I think what brought that about was because of the fact that I told them I didn't see them up and down the streets quite as often as I used to when they were down here after the second generation of the White's took over. I said I seen you on the streets a lot, and I said you could go by the plant and hear the saws in its lower gear "zoom" and as the new company bought it out then the saws were saying, "zip, zip, zip."

It made a difference. It put some of them to work that had been loafing for a few years, I mean, it put some of them out of work. Some of them lost jobs that wasn't working. [laughter] But I didn't see as many of them on the street, walking up and down the streets, after Hickory took over.

PH: Could you get a--?

P.Hunter: They stayed on the job. [laughter]

PH: Uh, huh. Could you get a sense of who the slackers were?

P.Hunter: Oh, yeah, I knew most of them.

PH: Uh, huh, just by local reputation?

P.Hunter: Yeah. But, you know, in any company you go in most of the time you're going to have a certain few of people that's going to go in there to see how much work they can get out of doing. [laughter]

PH: Sure.

P.Hunter: It doesn't make no difference who they are.

[In the background there is a hot lather machine running.]

PH: Do you remember any other sort of stories or jokes like that from the years that the workers used to tell?

P.Hunter: Well, I don't know. So much was told during that time. Some of it you remember and some of it you didn't.

PH: Uh, huh. What was that place like at closing time when the whistle blew?

P.Hunter: It was about like a mad house. [laughter] Everybody was trying to get out of there, either to get to the barber shop or to go home or something or get to the pool room or someplace. The traffic's a lot different there since the White's closed down because I used to think we was at a drag strip sometimes when they'd come up through here after they'd get off from work. [laughter] It's a lot different now at four o'clock in the evening. I used to tease some of them. They would be up here so quick after the whistle went off, I said, "I just don't believe you done any work." I said, "Anybody that can move that fast to be up here and the whistle just blowed and you're up here this fast." [laughter]

PH: Did a lot of them come in on Saturdays?

P.Hunter: A lot of them on Saturdays. Most of them would try to get in after they got off from work or during lunchtime. You'd get some on Saturdays, too.

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PH: How do you think--? You talked a little bit about how it's affected your business, how do you think the closing affected the downtown of Mebane?

P.Hunter: Well, quite naturally, you know, when you take any company that's been in town a long time or in the area a long time and close it down then you're going to lose constantly the faces all the time that you've seen everyday. You're just not going to see them everyday. Even in the shop here I can see people that used to get haircuts on every two weeks basis because they were working at White's and I see them once a month or once every two months now, you know. It's how the difference has changed.

PH: Do you think it hurt a lot of other businesses in the area?

P.Hunter: It probably hurt some, you know, when you take a number of people out of the plant, you know, White's had quite a number of people working for them and you take all those people out and they have to relocate. The new people that was here under the new company most of those people wasn't retirement people, you know, that come, especially the management, and they had to relocate. Most of the time when you see of them it's just simply they are in the area, you know. Because some of them probably, you know, built here and still live here, but most of them are working out of town. When you take those people out of town and work somewhere else, a lot of times they do their shopping somewhere else and whatever they got to do. Nobody has a lot of time to wait anymore. Got to make good of what time they got. So it has made a difference in the business part of the town especially during lunchtime. When White's was open you could see the stores being busy and all during that time. It's just not there anymore.

[Pat Huber turns the recorder off while Mr. Hunter takes the money from a customer.]

PH: I was going to ask you if you had any relatives or really close friends that worked there at the company?

P.Hunter: At the company. I had quite a lot of close friends that worked there. Didn't have any relatives that worked there at White's because the relatives that I had in

Mebane-- I live in Graham now, but, like I say, I worked here since 1959. The relatives that I had here in Mebane they were already in the barber shop so as far as having any of them working at White's Furniture, I didn't have any relatives that worked at White's. Had quite a lot of good friends there.

PH: Uh, huh.

[Mr. Hunter is talking with a customer about how he wants his hair cut.]

PH: I also wanted to ask you how the workers were regarded by the townspeople? I know in like textile mills sometimes they were looked down upon by others who didn't work in the mills. Was there anything like that?

P.Hunter: No, I don't think White's had that much problem, that White's Furniture had that kind of problem because one thing, back even now when I first came here in Mebane, they weren't paying that much as far as hourly wages, but they paid some big bonuses. Christmas bonus, vacation bonus, they got some big bonuses, you know, so the only people that could maybe look down on White's at that time any were the people that went to work at Western Electric in Burlington, and some of those same people that went to work up there had one time worked at White's, a lot of them.

But far as the city or the town commissioners or people like that because one of the people from down at White's was on the board for the town of Mebane--Board of Commissioners--and that was Mr. Selph. He spent a lot of time on there. As a matter of fact, when I first came to Mebane there was one from Dixie Yarn and one from Kingsdown and one from White's were all on the board. I had a feeling--I could be wrong in my thinking--I felt that a lot of times that other employment that would have probably come into town didn't get an opportunity to because they didn't let that much come into town, maybe.

PH: Oh, really?

P.Hunter: Simply because of the fact that maybe the fear of losing employees or maybe having to pay higher wages, but as the Alamance Owens Water System came through and they were able to get water, then they started building on the outside of town. A lot of companies like GE and Dan Rivers, a lot of those places built out-- Mebane Package, they all built out after that Alamance Owens Water System came through. Since then it's just steadily growing because they've got different people on the board that really started caring about the growth of Mebane.

PH: Uh, huh. You were talking about the bonuses. Did you have any idea how big they were?

P.Hunter: I knowed some of them that-- You know--and you're talking about the late 50s--which meant a lot to some people back then to get a bonus of eight or nine hundred dollars at Christmastime, you know, because a lot of families they didn't have any Christmas until that bonus was there for them, you know. They had to plan their Christmas after the bonus that they were going to get from White's, you know, especially if they had large families. Even the people that hadn't been there that long during time for Christmas probably got as much as two or three hundred dollars for Christmas bonuses.

[Mr. Hunter is talking to someone that walked into his barber shop.]

PH: I was wondering if there was anything else that you wanted to say. You have answered all my questions.

P.Hunter: I just hope it was some help to you in some way or other in your book. I wish you good luck with it.

PH: Oh, yeah, well, thank you. I appreciate you doing the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW