

Interview

with

TRACY L.H. BURNETT

November 15, 1994

by Jeff Cowie

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The Southern Oral History Program
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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

TRACY BURNETT
NOVEMBER 15, 1994

JEFF COWIE: This is an interview with Tracy Burnett with Jeff Cowie at his home in Snow Camp on the fifteenth of November, 1994, about his experiences at Hickory-White Furniture Factory and the subsequent closing.

Let's have a little family background. When and where were you born?

TRACY BURNETT: I was born 11-12-66 in Burlington, North Carolina. My mother's name was Carolyn Burnett. My father's name was Lester Roger's. I was brought up in a single parent home. My mother did a real good job, I think. My father wasn't around that much, but she instilled a lot of values in me. I think I turned out fairly well.

JC: How did she manage to support the family?

TB: She worked, and she provided for us fairly well. She did an overall excellent job. She worked at a factory in Burlington called Culp.

JC: Was that a textile--?

TB: Textile mill, yeah.

JC: Tough work. Were you raised in Burlington?

TB: No, I was raised right around the corner from here in Snow Camp.

JC: How did you come to work at Hickory-White?

TB: Well, my uncle, he started working there, and he told me about the place. At that time I was working at a place called Quality Molding in Siler City. I wanted to work at a place closer to home so he mentioned Hickory-White to me, and I decided to give it a shot. So I went over there and filled out an application and got the job.

JC: Had you had any experience or training in woodworking?

TB: None. None whatsoever. On the job training.

JC: Was that your first job the molding in the Siler City job?

TB: What do you mean? As far as employment history?

JC: Yeah, uh, huh.

TB: No, no, I'd worked at-- The first job I had I was a counselor at the Rec Center at Eli Whitney Gym. That was my first job. I had that. The second job I loaded a truck at Siler City Mills. It was a dog food factory. We made animal foods. Quality Molding was the second job. We made plastics and all kinds of plastic materials and stuff of that nature. From there I went to White's, Hickory-White's.

JC: Did you regard that as a job you wanted to stick with for a long time or was that just kind of another job and you were searching out what was right for you?

TB: Well, I was kind of fascinated with, you know, the craftsmanship, you know, because I'm an artist, too. I like stuff of that nature. When I got there at first I was just taking it as another job, but I learned to like it. Appreciated the people that I worked with. Yeah, it kind of grew on you.

JC: What sort of art work do you do?

TB: I do sketches, paint, water colors. [laughter] None around here.

JC: None around here. [laughter]

TB: I don't have much time to do it now, but I've done some stuff.

JC: Huh, that's great.

TB: Not recently.

JC: What were your first impressions when you went into the factory at Mebane for the first time?

TB: Well, when I first went in there I wasn't too sure about it, but it's something different. It was a new experience. To tell you the truth, I didn't know what to think. It was just a job when I got there.

JC: That's absolutely fine. What position did you start at?

TB: When I first got there I started out making these things called skids. That's used in packaging the furniture. I had that job.

JC: So that's pretty much rough carpentry building a frame to ship it?

TB: Actually, it's no carpentry. Well, a little bit, I mean, all I had to do was like cut, make a pretty much a rectangle shaped thing to exact specifications so it would fit the furniture so they could mount the furniture to the skid and then put a box over the furniture and the skid so it would make it sturdy so it would stand up.

JC: How long did you stay there?

TB: Probably about a year. Yeah, about a year.

JC: And then?

TB: And then I got laid off. I was laid off. I'd say I was gone approximately two months. Then they called me back. When I came back the second time I was doing-- I was working in the finishing department. I started learning how to apply the finishes and the steps that you take when you're finishing furniture. I thought that was really interesting the way they done that. I always wondered how they done that. Learned about the different kinds of woods, you know. I couldn't tell any kind of wood. The only kind of wood I could tell you about was pine. That was it. I could tell you that's a pine tree. That was it. But they taught me about the different kinds of woods and stuff, yeah.

JC: It just occurred to me we didn't get on tape when you started, what year you started.

TB: At White's?

JC: Yeah.

TB: It was 1987 or '88. Somewhere along in there.

JC: Okay. And did you stay in the finishing department until the end?

TB: Yes, that's where I ended up, yeah. I done the finishing for a while, and then I went over to inspections, and then I had my own inspection department. One-man staff. I inspected furniture as it come from the cabinet room which is the place where they assembled the furniture. Then it leaves the cabinet room and goes to the finishing room so I was the person in between those two departments.

JC: What would you look for at that point?

TB: Any kind of imperfections or anything. Defects and defective parts and stuff of that nature.

JC: In both materials and workmanship?

TB: Uh, huh, yeah.

JC: What sort of things would you catch at that point?

TB: Like doors that were rubbing. Drawers that weren't fitted properly, wasn't flush with the cabinet. Rotten places in the wood, and just anything, you know, scratches were one of our main problems with our furniture, you know. Those scratches would show up like a sore thumb after they sprayed that lacquer on them. Glue, anything. It was a real learning experience.

JC: Being in that position you were sort of in an unique spot to answer a question that has come up several times amongst--in our interviews with other workers. Many, not all, seem to suggest that as Hickory came in the quality--there became more and more quality problems.

TB: Right.

JC: Is that your impression or not?

TB: Well, I couldn't speak, you know, when it was White's. I came in when it was Hickory, but as far as quality, yeah, you could say it was a decline in it. Quantity seemed to be more of thing instead of quality.

JC: So then you stayed in that inspection position or you went back to finishing?

TB: Uh, huh, I stayed in inspections to the end.

JC: Okay. And so you worked alone, pretty much, in that spot?

TB: Uh, huh, yeah, I didn't have that much supervision.

JC: And you didn't have a lot of interaction with other workers?

TB: Oh, yeah.

JC: Oh, you did.

TB: Yeah, because like if say it was a problem with having a lot of glue on a certain spot on the furniture I would know who is working with the glue. You know, I would go back and say, "Look, you're having a lot of glue." You know, I would either through their supervisor or go to them directly and talk to them about it to try to get it rectified. Yeah, I interacted with a lot.

JC: So you got to know a lot of points in the plant that way.

TB: Yeah, every point, every point.

JC: Interesting, interesting. Were there any particular areas for whatever reason would have more quality problems than others? You mentioned glue.

TB: Oh, the main problem that I would say would be, yeah, glue, because, you know, if the person--. You know, the wood would have like open pores in it, and like if the person got a lot of glue, like they had excessive glue on an area, if they wiped it off the glue would go down into the pores of the furniture. Then it would be hard to detect it with the naked eye, and as the furniture would go around the line and different applications were being applied to it that glue would change colors. It would like show up as an orange spot. You know, you'd have a nice brown finish and you have an orange spot where the glue was. It's sort of like that stuff they use to detect blood, you know, traces of blood. It was like that.

JC: So you'd need a pretty good eye to do the job.

TB: Yeah, it was rough. The glue, yeah, it was very hard to deal with.

JC: From your experience of being around the plant a lot did you find that men and women did different jobs or were they pretty integrated in terms of the jobs?

TB: Yeah, I would say so. There were lady inspectors, yeah. Except, you know, if it was a job that entailed a lot of heavy lifting and stuff it was more apt to have a man there instead of a woman. Yeah, but I would say it was pretty much equal.

JC: And how about racially? Were blacks in any one particular part of the plant or Chicanos or whites or were they pretty integrated as well?

TB: When I was there it was even. Yeah, I would say it was fairly integrated, yeah.

JC: While you were working there did you have any ambitions to leave or had you decided, pretty much, that Hickory-White was where you wanted to be?

TB: No, I always knew I would leave because me and my wife are very ambitious people. We are always thinking of something to do. I knew I wouldn't be working for someone else all of my life. I knew this was just a stopover. I wasn't going to be there no ten years, I knew that. I knew that for a fact, yeah, it was just a stopover, pretty much. It was a fun stopover, but it was a stopover nonetheless.

JC: What was fun about it? Many people don't regard factory work as fun.

TB: Well, [laughter] the folks made it fun. I don't know. It's hard to describe.

JC: Who did you hang out with there at the plant?

TB: Everybody, everybody. Yeah, we interacted, you know, outside of the mill, too. My job it was easy. I guess if I had some of those ladies jobs that were on the line actually rubbing the furniture, some of those real nasty jobs, I couldn't say that it was fun, but my job it was pretty much fun.

JC: What sort of stuff did you do outside the plant?

TB: We played basketball and stuff like that. We had a softball team.

JC: Did you know Andy Foley?

TB: Yeah, he's one of my best friends.

JC: I did an interview with him, and he talked about playing softball.

TB: Yeah, until he broke his arm.

JC: [laughter] Did he break his arm?

TB: Yeah.

JC: Playing with you guys?

TB: Slid into home and broke his arm.

JC: I got the impression from his interview that he was a real prankster.

TB: Oh, man, yeah. We had some good ones.

JC: Oh, so you were in on some of these?

TB: Oh, yeah, with the water bottles. Yeah, we had fun. [laughter]

JC: [laughter] The water bottle, that's when you would spray each other?

TB: Uh, huh. Yeah, we'd put notes on each other coats and stuff, you know.

JC: Like?

TB: Like, Kick Me. [laughter] Andy was crazy.

JC: I got the impression he spent almost more time horsing around than working.

[laughter]

TB: He did, yeah. He kept me on my toes, though. Sure did. [laughter] I miss him.

JC: You don't see those folks from the factory much anymore?

TB: No, not that much.

JC: [hesitation] The sports teams weren't officially sponsored or anything, you guys just did it yourselves?

TB: Uh, huh, yeah.

JC: Did you ever have many run-ins with management?

TB: Oh, yeah, constantly.

JC: Over what sorts of issues?

TB: Quality.

JC: Huh.

TB: Yeah, they accused me of nit-picking all the time.

JC: Can you explain that a little bit?

TB: Like they would say, "Well, this--". Say you had a problem on the lower part of a piece of furniture they would say, "Well, you're not going to see that unless you're down on the floor looking up under it." I'd say, "Well, you know, that's not quality. I'm quality control, not quantity control." All the time I would throw it up in their face. They

didn't like it too much, but it was nothing they could do because they wanted me to--. That's what they hired me for to stop, you know, stuff like that.

JC: So, they wanted more to slip through. When that came up would you end up giving up and just letting it go through?

TB: No, I would shut the line down. Yeah, I would shut it down. See, what I would do is like the plant manager, the Marshall, he would come up, and he would say something like, "Well, I think it will go." Which he didn't know that much because he was fairly new to the company. I would say, "Well, I don't think it will go." What I would do is I would shut the line down and call the president, and he would have to come up there, and let him make the decision. Because if he says let it then I'll let it go. But as far as anyone else, no.

JC: So you'd actually get the president of the company in there to look at a specific piece of furniture to see whether that was acceptable or not?

TB: Uh, huh. Done it quite a few times. A lot of times.

JC: And when you say you'd shut the line down, how would you do that?

TB: I would just stop the furniture. You know, I was between this part of the plant which was making the furniture and sending it this way, then you'd have me, then you'd have the guys over here finishing it. I would stop it here so they would have nothing to go on the line so they'd have to stop it.

JC: So you wouldn't really stop the line, but the furniture would back up behind you?

TB: If they didn't have anything it was like--. You've been in there, right?

JC: No, I haven't unfortunately.

TB: You hadn't? Okay, it was like tracks. It was like a track, and it had carts that would come around. You couldn't let no cart go by without any furniture. So, you know, you had people at stations along spraying different things, and you couldn't let any empties

go by. So you would have to stop it there. If you didn't have anything to load you'd have to stop it there. If you didn't have anything to load you'd have to stop it.

JC: And everybody would just sit there and wait for you guys to resolve this issue?

TB: Well, if it was a glue problem a lot of times they would send them out there, and they would have me to take chalk and circle all the spots where I thought it was glue. They would have the people out in finishing or wherever to sand them, to try to sand the glue out or whatever needed to be done. Drawer fitted up and stuff like that.

JC: I see. And how was the pay there? You said you had worked at a few other places. How did the pay at Hickory-White compare?

TB: It was considerably more than what I was accustomed to, yeah. I was pretty well satisfied with it. You can always get more.

JC: Do you remember what?

TB: Yeah, I remember. I was making like-- I think I was making like eight seventy-one or eight eighty-one, something like that, when I left. Yeah, I believe that was right.

JC: Do you remember what you started at?

TB: It was probably about six something. Six dollars an hour.

JC: I'm going to return now to you and Andy playing jokes. Did anybody retaliate on you guys and play jokes on you or were you pretty much in charge of that department?

TB: Why, everybody played jokes on everybody.

JC: Okay.

TB: Yeah, I mean I didn't never see anybody getting mad or anything about anything. No. There was quite a few of us joking around when we had time.

JC: Are there a lot of folks from around here that would drive into Mebane to work there that you were aware of?

TB: That did work there?

JC: Yeah, from this area that worked there from Snow Camp or--?

TB: No, no. It was just me on this side. There's a couple of folks from the Saxapahaw, Eli Whitney area working over there.

JC: [hesitation] How long have you lived here?

TB: Six years.

JC: So you bought or you moved here--?

TB: Yeah, I bought.

JC: You bought this when you were working at Hickory-White's?

TB: Yeah, yeah, sure did.

JC: When it closed were you left a little--?

TB: No, actually I was glad that it closed, I mean, in a sense. See, I didn't plan on staying there, but I needed something to make me leave, you know, needed something to push me on out. When they told us in November that it was closing down it didn't--. I knew I was going to miss the people, but I knew I had to have something to help me get out of there. I hated it for some of the older people that, you know, that's all they did, you know, their whole life. Yeah, I was ready to go.

JC: Do you remember the day that they announced it?

TB: Oh, yeah.

JC: What do you remember about it?

TB: I remember they called us down to the warehouse. I remember a couple of people saying, "Well,--" I think they were talking about, "Well, we're not going to get a raise or something." That's what they thought the meeting was about, "We're not going to get a raise," or something of that nature. I remember this other guy, he was joking, he said, "We're probably going to get a pink slip." And that's actually what it was. [laughter]

JC: How did they tell you?

TB: They just came right out and told us point blank, which was the best way to do it. They said they were going to have options, you know, for us to go to school,

transfer to the other plant, and stuff like that, retraining so that made it a little better. They didn't have to do all that, but that made it a little better.

JC: Were you offered a job at the other plant?

TB: Yeah.

JC: You were?

TB: Yeah.

JC: Why didn't you take that?

TB: [laughter] I don't know.

JC: You were ready to go?

TB: Right, ready to go.

JC: What was the atmosphere on the line that day or in the plant?

TB: It was quiet. There wasn't any cutting up. That was on everybody's lips, you know, "what are you going to do?" People were just like, I guess you would say, they were in limbo. They didn't know, I mean, you could tell what was on people's minds. They were concerned. You could tell they were thinking about their kids and stuff like that.

JC: So even though you had pretty much just bought this place (Tracy's home) you were ready to go?

TB: Yeah, I wasn't worrying about nothing.

JC: What was the first thing you thought about in terms of what you would do?

TB: Well, when they told us about the options of going to this Self-Employment Training Program, you know, I knew that I would eventually one day own my own business so I knew that I would do well. I would make it doing that.

JC: They announced this Self-Employment Training right at the day of the closure or did that come up later?

TB: Yeah, the day they announced that we would be closing down they announced that. They said they would have another meeting with more information about

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it, and if you wanted to attend you just had to sign up, sign this sheet and attend the meeting.

JC: That clicked with you?

TB: Yeah, that was it. That was made for me.

JC: [laughter] That's great. Do you remember having an idea right then what you wanted to do? Or did you just want to own your own business?

TB: Well, I knew I wanted to do something for myself because I knew that you didn't get wealthy working for nobody else. I always knew that. I didn't have an idea what I wanted to do. My wife had an idea of what she wanted to do. I kind of went on her idea of what she wanted.

JC: And what was that?

TB: She works in the recreation-- She's got a recreation degree. She's a recreation specialist. She works at Chatham County, and she notices a lot of the kids they don't have stuff to do, and so she come up with the idea of opening an arcade to give the kids something to do when they get out of school. So we run with that idea, and we opened up the T & T Arcade in Pittsboro after I finished the Self-Employment Training Program.

JC: Okay. Before we get into the opening of the arcade, tell me about the program. What did it involve?

TB: It showed you how to do analysis marketing and stuff of that nature. How to operate a business. Everything that you would have to know to run a business successfully. It was good. It really was.

JC: You had to come up with a complete plan?

TB: Business plan. We did the business plan, we did research, we did everything from the name to the opening of the store. They went through it with us step-by-step.

JC: Do you think it's stuff you could have learned on your own?

TB: No.

JC: You really needed training for this?

TB: Yes.

JC: How long did the training last? Do you remember?

TB: We started in-- I think it was about five months.

JC: And during that five months how were you--?

TB: Well, during the five months they had it set up where we could draw unemployment while we were in school or so. I was getting quite a nice sum drawing unemployment. [Chimes from a clock in the background] We were making it pretty well.

JC: And your wife was still working?

TB: Yes, she was working.

JC: In Chatham County?

TB: Yeah.

JC: So tell me about your arcade. Obviously, it's named after you two, T & T.

TB: Yeah. Tracy and Tracy.

JC: Where is it in Pittsboro?

TB: It was at the Food Lion Shopping Center. I said it was at the Food Lion Shopping Center. We opened it up in April of '93. Everything went great. We were making lots of money. Kids were coming in. It was a clean place. It was doing good, real good. The people at the Self-Employment Training Program, they would like keep tabs on us and come by. Financially, the place was set. It was doing great. I mean, we was even thinking of expanding it to other cities, you know, like franchising. I had an unfortunate accident, incident rather, on December 21 of 1993. This guy came in there and he shot this guy.

JC: Oh, no.

TB: I got evicted the next day. So we're in litigation over that now because I had a three-year lease, and I was only there about ten months. Fortunately, before that

happened, about a month before that shooting happened, we bought a video store. We had T & T Video Store.

JC: In Pittsboro, also?

TB: No, it's up here. It was up here in Eli Whitney. So we bought the video store, and it is doing good. But I got kind of bored doing the video store. It was getting boring, and I was just sitting there watching videos all day, but it was still money to make money doing it. You didn't have anybody looking over shoulder or what, you know.

This guy came by and he wanted--. He took an interest in it. He was willing to pay me twice what I paid for it so I unloaded it on him.

JC: [laughter]

TB: And before that happened--about two or three months before I done that--I took an interest in the insurance business. I went and got my insurance license, and so I started selling insurance, too, while I was at the video store.

I sell the video store, and I go open up my own insurance business. And currently that's what I am doing now. I've got my own insurance business--agency--rather.

JC: Wow! What types of insurance?

TB: Life, health, disability. I do equity loans, home equity loans. Debt consolidation loans. Getting into the property and casualty field which is car insurance and home owners insurance. At the moment I'm just doing that, insurance.

JC: How do you like that in comparison with the other?

TB: Oh, I love the insurance. I love that.

JC: What do you like about that?

TB: I like to meet people. I like that. It's a lot of money in it, a whole lot of money. You get paid by the person instead of by the hour. You see a lot of people, you make a lot of money. [laughter] Sixty-five percent of the wealth in this country is in the insurance industry or it comes through the insurance industry.

JC: So do you have any ambitions to get back into any of the other retail trades that you were in before?

TB: Well, I know that the arcade will be opened up again, but as far as the video, no.

JC: How did Pittsboro react to, first of all, the arcade being there?

TB: Oh, they liked it.

JC: They liked it?

TB: They liked it.

JC: Not just the kids, but the community?

TB: It got the kids off the street, yeah, I mean, we had it going on. It was great. I mean, we had like incentive programs for kids. If they had a good report card they would get free games, ice cream and stuff of that nature. We had it structured fairly well.

JC: That's your wife's influence it sounds like.

TB: Uh, huh. I wouldn't have had it no other way.

JC: That's great. I hadn't heard that you were in the insurance industry. That comes as a surprise.

TB: Yeah, Mike got shocked the other day when I saw him. He said, "You still got your stores going?" I said, "Man--he knew about the shooting incident and he didn't know I sold the video store--I'm selling insurance now." He said, "Man, you just do everything, don't you?" I said, "I got to keep moving."

JC: Do you think you will stay in the insurance business?

TB: I know I will. Yeah, I've got five agents already.

JC: Below you?

TB: Yeah, uh, huh.

JC: Do you use a lot of your community connections? Have you been here a long time for that? Or do you sell it, you know, by beating the bushes?

TB: Yeah. A lot of people they know me, and they know what I'm doing now so they call me when they want me. As far as references or referrals and stuff of that nature I don't have any problem getting those. I'm always on the go.

JC: You made an interesting comment before. You said you wanted to be wealthy, and you knew you wanted to be wealthy.

TB: I'm going to be.

JC: What do you expect--? I mean, how wealthy do you want to be, and what do you expect to get from it?

TB: What do you mean, what I consider being wealthy or something like that?

JC: Yeah, sure.

TB: Man--.

JC: You just seem really ambitious.

TB: I couldn't put it in a figure, a monetary figure.

JC: That's fine.

TB: I think being wealthy is telling your mom that she doesn't have to go to work the next day. Man, just jumping up and going somewhere. Just jump on a plane and just go. You don't have to plan it in advance. Not have to worry about anybody controlling, you know, my life or saying, "Well, I want to sell my plant, and you're out of a job." Wealth just comes to me in all kinds of different ways. I think when I think about wealth, gosh, just being free, I guess, to do what I want to do. I've got a lot of things that I want to do in a community, and by being wealthy I could do them.

JC: What sorts of things do you want to do?

TB: Oh, man, shoot, gosh, like homeless people, I can't stand to see homeless people. That just tears me up. I can't stand it. I'd like to build a shelter.

The kids, they don't have like no where to go. No gyms. No place where they can just go and just be together. I'd like to build a gym or something like that or a rec center.

There's just a lot of things that I see that the community needs that I would like to provide which I know one day I will be able to. I'm just a giving person. [laughter]

JC: As an entrepreneur yourself, you're obviously ambitious and you've learned how the system works quite a bit. How do you feel about Hickory having shut down the factory?

TB: What I think about--? Well, I'm pretty sure it was in their financial-- financially in their best interest to do something like that, I mean, you know, I couldn't understand why they did all those modifications and repairs to the building and then close it, but I'm pretty sure that they thought it through before they closed it down.

JC: What sorts of modifications?

TB: Like they installed this new elevator system. They were always building new stuff. Adding on machinery and stuff of that nature. I mean constantly.

JC: So there were no indications that--?

TB: No, just out of the blue.

JC: It sounds like you feel they handled the lay-off well, I mean, I get that impression from you.

TB: Yeah. Yeah, they did it tastefully, I think. So I mean a lot of places they would have waited to the last day and then say, "Well, you don't have a job. Don't come back tomorrow." You know, but they gave us like six months advance notice, and then they done all this other stuff. Yeah, I thought a lot of them for them doing that because, I mean, you could tell they did care about their people--a little bit, at least. Well, a lot I'd say. I give them that, yeah.

JC: Did you know any of the upper management?

TB: Oh, yeah. Uh, huh.

JC: Like who?

TB: Richard Hinkle, when he was there. Jim Murray, personnel. Gosh, it was so many that come through there. Charlie, this guy named Charlie.

JC: I heard they had a high turnover in management there towards the end.

TB: Yeah. I can't remember.

JC: Were they a pretty respectable group? Did you get along with them?

TB: Yeah, I got along with them pretty well.

JC: So that day the plant the closed, you came home--excuse me, the day they announced the plant was going to close--you came home, and how did you break the news?

TB: I wasn't unhappy about it. [laughter] I mean, I felt bad for the other folks. I kind of had, I guess you'd say, I kind of had mixed emotions because I was glad and I was sad, too. It was all in the best as far as I was concerned. It was in my best interest to get out of there then. It just helped me out of there.

JC: Did your wife feel the same?

TB: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

JC: Now, did you go to the photo exhibit that Bill [Bamberger] did?

TB: Yes.

JC: What did you think?

TB: It was nice. It was really nice. He did a great job.

JC: Were there any pictures of you?

TB: I think so, yeah.

JC: Do you remember him taking pictures?

TB: Oh, yeah, [laughter] yeah. I remember that. He was all over the place.

JC: He put a lot of work into that.

TB: This guy put together a tape the last few days that we were there. Have you saw that yet?

JC: No.

TB: It's called, "The Last Days of Hickory-White."

JC: Oh, really?

TB: It's a video tape. Do you want it?

JC: Yeah, do you have it?

TB: Do you want to take it with you?

JC: Do you have it?

TB: Yeah.

JC: Oh, I would love to get a copy of it.

TB: I will give it to you. You can take it, and you can just send it back to me sometime.

JC: That will be great. Yeah, I will make a copy and get it back to you.

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

TRACY BURNETT
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JC: So you are showing me this ad from Architectural Digest and there's a picture of you back there looking at what, a bed post?

TB: Yeah, a foot board.

JC: Oh, a foot board, and who's this?

TB: That's a guy. He's name is T.C., and he was retired. He was in charge of this department that put the furniture together. I was back there showing him something. That's the way they had the thing set up. That was the way it was suppose to be.

JC: Now, what were you telling me about Richard Hinkle?

TB: Yes. Strict on the quality. He really meant that. He stressed that quality.

JC: And you think it would have been different if he had stayed around, huh?

TB: Yeah. I'm pretty sure a lot of people that if you asked them that they would agree with that because he was--. He [laughter]--. I would always keep it in the back of my mind when he was there, you know, you better not let nothing bad go through here because if it goes by you and gets on his line, he's going to come to me. And boy, he had a temper, but he was good and everybody liked him. He was respected, but those other guys when they come through there they didn't care, they were just getting paid. He cared about what he did.

JC: How would he show his temper?

TB: I saw him take like end tables--little end tables--and pick them up and just throw them and just watch them just explode on the floor. I saw him do that. I saw him kick holes in them and take an axe and just bust one of those things just all to crap.
[laughter]

JC: [laughter] What would he get upset about, the quality?

TB: Yeah, the quality, yeah.

JC: And what happened to him?

TB: I think he got another job offer or something or another, and he left, but he was the man.

JC: You know, this ad certainly stresses quality, doesn't it?

TB: Uh, huh.

JC: Did they give this to you?

TB: Yeah, they gave me that, yeah.

JC: So how often would you see guys like Hinkle on the floor?

TB: I tell you what, if we had a problem with quality he would take that coat off and tie off and he would come up there and work with me. Me and him would work together all day. He would do the same thing. He wasn't above getting down and getting dirty. He would do it in a minute.

JC: Oh.

TB: I saw him all the time, everyday.

JC: Why was he spending so much time there as opposed to in the Hickory plant?

TB: Why, his office was there at our plant.

JC: I see.

TB: He was just over our plant then, and then he took over the whole thing for a short period of time.

JC: I see, okay. What were the folks that came after him like?

TB: It was just like a job to them, I guess. They were coming in there to get paid.

JC: Did you experience any other periods of lay-off other than that one you told me about at first?

TB: Short time we were like--. It was right after Christmas every year we'd go like, you know, we'd work a week and be off a week. We'd go through that for a little while and then the furniture market would come around and everything would just boom, pick-up. We'd liable to be working six, seven days there a week.

JC: Did you get overtime?

TB: Oh, yeah. And everyday. I hated that. [laughter] I was ready to go at three-thirty. But as long as they were producing I had to be there to inspect it.

JC: Did you ever end up buying any Hickory-White furniture?

TB: Yeah, I bought that table over there.

JC: That one?

TB: Yeah.

JC: Did you get that in the plant?

TB: Uh, huh. I finished it. They were going to throw it away. I bought it. I sprayed it, and I did everything to it.

JC: Oh, really? On your own time?

TB: No, not necessarily. [laughter] Yep, I bought it. I think I paid like fifteen dollars for it or something like that.

JC: No kidding. What's it made of?

TB: Gosh, mostly, what's that stuff called? Hickory-White, they started using cheap material, and they started, you know, using like that mesh wood that's like mashed together.

JC: Press board?

TB: Yeah, press board. That's what they call it. It's made out of press board, and I forget what else it's made out of.

JC: So do you miss working with your hands anymore or are you free?

TB: Mine was mostly with my eyes.

JC: Yeah, that's true.

TB: Chalk, yeah. Yeah, I miss it. Not enough to go back. [laughter]

JC: [laughter] That's what key, man.

You mentioned earlier that you don't see folks from the plant to often anymore. Like how often would you see people? Where would you see them?

TB: Maybe in the mall, walking through the mall. Saw quite a few of them when we had that thing that Bill had, you know. Like Andy [Foley], I've talked to him a few times on the phone, but other than that I haven't saw him. We might just run into him while we are out in town or something like that.

JC: But you wouldn't go out of your way to get together it sounds like, really.

TB: Yeah, I would. I mean, if it was convenient for them. My schedule is pretty flexible, but, you know, it's hard to catch those guys.

JC: So what do you miss least?

TB: Least?

JC: Least.

TB: [hesitation]

JC: What did you not enjoy very much?

TB: [hesitation] Samples for market.

JC: Can you explain that?

TB: Well, for one thing, when we did the samples, you know, they might design this new piece and no one would really know how it was going to come out so they couldn't really tell me what to look for, you know, specifically look for, and it would always be problems. You could never get it right because this one guy over here--in management--might say, "Well, that's it. That's the way it's suppose to look." And this other guy say, "No, it's not suppose to look like that." So neither one of them knew, and I didn't know. It was just a bunch of confusion when we done samples so I hated that, you know, whenever we had something new, something new that they just created. I hated that.

JC: That makes sense.

What would you miss the most?

TB: The folks. [hesitation] Yeah, it was tight group over there.

JC: What are people doing now, do you know?

TB: A lot of them went to--. Let's see, some of them went to this place called Craftique. It's in Mebane. It's a furniture factory. A lot of others went to--a few others--went up to the Hickory plant in Hickory. I would say about eight of us went into Self-Employment Training Program. Some others went to this furniture company in Ramseur called Wydman's, Wydman's Furniture Company. Some others went to this other furniture which I can't remember the name of it, but it's like going towards Greensboro.

JC: Is that Kay Lin?

TB: No, Kay Lin, that's a subsidiary of Hickory-White. No, they didn't go there.

JC: I didn't know that. Can I--? If you don't feel comfortable answering this it's fine, but I'm curious of whether when you started at the video arcade and then later at the video store whether you were making as much money at first as you were at White's?

TB: At White's?

JC: Yeah.

TB: I was making more.

JC: So right off the bat you started making more money?

TB: Yeah, yeah, which I--. You know, when you start off in business you're not looking to make a profit until at least the second year or first year at least. Yeah, we started making a profit immediately. We was making, I would say, like twelve hundred a week.

JC: But you had taken out a small business loan of some sort?

TB: No.

JC: No?

TB: No, we completely funded the whole thing with out income tax return.

JC: Wow!

TB: Yep.

JC: That's impressive. How did you get linked up with the insurance?

TB: Well, this guy he came by when I was in the arcade, and he was trying to get me into the insurance business as one of his agents. So I went through the class, and I end up passing him, and he ended up quitting. Well, I got my license for insurance, and he quit. I kind of liked it. I mean, I saw the money. I saw the potential. Gosh. I stuck with it.

JC: How long was that training?

TB: Oh, it was just-- Well, like you had to go two consecutive weekends to the class in Raleigh, forty hours. Take the class test, take the state test, and you're licensed. It's highly regulated though. You can get into a lot of trouble if you don't know what you are doing, though.

JC: What do folks who live out here--? I mean, I'm sure they do a variety of different things, but is there much local employment or do they pretty much go down to the I-40, 85 area?

TB: Well, we're pretty much at the center of everything like from here to Chapel Hill, eighteen miles. From here to Burlington, fifteen miles. Greensboro is only like twenty-two, twenty-three miles. We can go in either direction and be at a job in less than thirty minutes.

[In the background there is a clock chiming]

There are just a few jobs around, you know, out here in the country.

JC: [inaudible]

TB: Yeah, most of the people from this end, they work in Burlington, Graham and Burlington in the textile mills and stuff of that nature.

JC: I see. All right. Well, anything else that you would like to add?

TB: No, [laughter] I'd just like to see everybody again. I would like a reunion or something.

JC: Did you spend a lot of time together on breaks and things?

TB: Oh, yeah.

JC: Was there a break room?

TB: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, they had a commissary.

JC: Is that where you really did your socializing? Or was it after work or on the job?

TB: [laughter] All of those, gosh.

JC: Well, I hope you get the chance to see some of them soon.

TB: Yeah, I'm going to. I've got to go see Andy. I've got to get up with him.

JC: I think he would like to see you, actually.

TB: I'm going to try to get him in the insurance--. He told me he was going to be a park ranger or a game warden or something like that. I don't know if he did it or not.

JC: Well, that would make sense. He spends all his time fishing, it sounds like.

TB: Yeah, he loves to fish. He kept that boat on his truck all the time. Yeah, he used to come down, you know, when we'd have softball practice he lived way out in Roxboro so he would come from work. He would come home with me, and then we'd go from here to practice.

JC: How often was practice?

TB: It was about twice a week I'd say. Yeah, we had some times.

JC: Well, it has been a great interview, Tracy. I really appreciate you taking the time out to help us out.

TB: No problem.

END OF INTERVIEW