

Interview

with

ANONYMOUS

November 2, 1994

by Patrick Huber

Transcribed by Jackie Gorman

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

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FINAL DRAFT

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

ANONYMOUS

NOVEMBER 2, 1994

PATRICK HUBER: Why don't we start out the interview today, by having you tell us a little bit about where and when you were born and about what your mother and father did for a living and any brothers and sisters that you might have.

A: I was born in 1947, in Graham, North Carolina. My mother, she was a housewife all her life. My father, he was a carpenter by trade. I had one sister and two brothers. All are older than me. [pause]

I attended schools here in Orange County. I graduated from Orange High School. Spent four years in the military in the United States Navy. I came out of the military and I went to work at Winn-Dixie. I spent approximately ten years with them cutting meat and left there and went to White Furniture Company in April of 1975. I started out in rub and pack and spent approximately twenty years in finish or rub and pack area.

I started out as drawer sander and when I left I was supervisor of the rub and pack department. Probably nine years of those were spent in finishing area and then transferred into, well, at that time, it was all in one unit. There was no distinction between all three departments there. I was in the finish approximately nine years. Then I got in the rub and pack department and became assistant supervisor. I stayed in that capacity for a few years until a supervisor I worked under retired. Approximately two years after his retirement, they closed the Hillsborough plant down. At that time White's had two plants, one in Mebane and one in Hillsborough. And after closing the Hillsborough plant, they

transferred quite a few to Mebane out of the Hillsborough plant, and I was one of them. I went up to the Mebane plant and went to work in the rub and pack area as assistant supervisor to the supervisor that was there.

PH: What was his name?

A: Carlton Atkins, Carlton Atkins. Probably a year and a half being in Mebane, Carlton left the company to pursue other interests, and they made me the supervisor of that department, where I remained in that capacity until the closing of the Mebane plant in July of 1993. That was our final day at White Furniture.

That about covers my career as far as job wise.

PH: Do you remember how you got your job with White's? How old were you at the time when you took the job?

A: Twenty--. I'd say around twenty-four or twenty-five. I don't know cutting meat at the Winn-Dixie was a good job. It was just too much odd hours and everything and all, and I just got tired of weekend work and night work. I decided to change careers. Unfortunately today, I mean, if I had foresight enough to know I'd stayed in the meat cutting business. That's something that we don't know about. If we could all tell the future I don't reckon it would be no surprise to anybody.

PH: Why do you think you would have stayed in meat cutting if you knew what you know today?

A: Well, knowing that after spending twenty years with a place that they just abruptly shut the door one day on you--. Of course, I seen it coming, you know, long before it even happened. You could tell that the quality of the work was gone down and our sales had gone down. Overall, just the furniture industry all together at that time was

in poor shape. There's only so many pieces of pie, you know, and so many companies in North Carolina make furniture that we just had the market flooded with it. And us being a high-end maker of furniture, by high-end I mean expensive stuff, when the economy got in the shape it was in, it affected the people that normally buy our product line, and when the economy got so poor like it was, I mean, couldn't nobody afford it, you know, couldn't buy it. Everybody was watching what they spent the money for.

They made the decision that there wasn't enough work for our plant and Hickory to justify keeping both of them open, so they made the decision to close the Mebane plant and put approximately two hundred out of work. Of course, some had the option to go to Hickory, but that was quite a long transfer if anybody wanted to go. I don't think anybody went, maybe one or two that were right at retirement age or something.

It was a shock to a lot of people at that time, I'm sure. I seen it, been through it in good times, bad times, and we always worked it out, and things would get better sooner or later. We'd have some short time. We never just had a complete shut down.

PH: When did you start noticing the quality of the furniture going down and sales dropping?

A: Well, when the economy got bad. You just can't keep building furniture with no place to put it, I mean, you can only warehouse so much. When sales go down it's either short time or lay offs, which a lot of that affected us. I think Hickory done what they could to keep enough there for people to at least have some type of income coming in.

It's been there a long time, White Furniture. Built in 1881, when the White family had it. To my knowledge they never had any shut down periods, you know, for long

periods of time or anything. They had a little short time once and a while. It was pretty well run when the White family had it. They thought a lot of the help. This day and time the bottom line is that dollar, and, of course, in any business it's like that. You've got to make a profit to stay in business.

PH: Did you notice any differences between the way the White family ran it and Hickory ran it?

A: Oh, yeah.

PH: What sort of things did you notice?

A: Well, from day one when Hickory bought them out the production went up. They increased the production with the same amount of people. They were right there to tell you one thing, to tell you put out a quick product, but it was less quality in it than when the White family had it. When they had it--the White family had it--when it went in the box, it was ready to go. I mean, there was no question about it. If it was in the warehouse you could pull it out of the warehouse a year later and it was just like the day it went in the box. It was in good shape. We had very few complaints when the White family had it. When Hickory got it they-- I think from day one they had in mind just to, more or less, to buy in competition. That's all it was for. That's what they done. They bought the name, and I think all their intention was to buy it and run it and make a little money off of it and sell it. From what I've observed, from what I've heard that's what they done.

I know it put a lot of good people out of work. A lot of good craftsmen, people that, you know, really believed in putting out a nice product and everything. They took a lot of pride in their work and all. It's hard on people that had been in there twenty, thirty,

and forty years and just abruptly one day say, "Well, you don't have no job." It's hard for people like that to go out and learn a new trade and everything after doing that a long time. Some of them is less educated than others and the way the world's gotten now it is high tech and it's really hard for a man to walk out the next morning and start looking for a job. It's just not that many unskilled jobs or whatever or low skills in the world today, to pay anything, I mean. There are unskilled and low skilled jobs there, but the pay is not like it was when a man had a job to start with.

PH: What were wages like under the White family?

A: Good.

PH: Were they good?

A: I don't recall. It may have been once or twice or so, but I recall every year that I was working when the White family had it they always give a general raise. Very seldom--I don't recall--every year that went by that we didn't get a general raise. They did what they could. It was nothing extraordinary, but they had a bonus system. They would give bonuses at Christmas. That was one thing that was cut out as soon as Hickory had it, there were no more bonuses. There were some years that went that there was no general raise, either. A lot of people looked forward to having Christmas bonuses and general raises in particular.

That's something you didn't see when Hickory had it. They may have given one or two. It was just the cost of living, nothing extra.

PH: Do you mind telling me what you started at when you went to work?

A: Two dollars and sixty-five cents, I believe it was. I went to work in Hillsborough--and Ted Smith was the superintendent of the Hillsborough plant--and I

went in that day and asked him for the job. Back then, it was just about to the point that if you didn't see somebody's name in the obituary, you didn't get a job at White's cause very seldom did anybody ever quit. They just kept a full schedule of people. He told me to come back and I told him that day, "Well, I'll go to work somewhere today. I've got to have a job." He said, "Well, I'm going to give you a job." He said, "I usually start people at two dollars and a half, but I'm going to give you benefit of the doubt, and I'm going to start you at two sixty-five." Which was nice of him, I mean, it was quite a pay cut from what I'd been making, but I knowed over a period of time I'd get back to where I was at.

PH: What were you making as a meat cutter at Winn-Dixie?

A: I believe in 1970, I was making four dollars and fifty cents an hour. Which back then was pretty good pay at that time. I would say over a twenty year period I guess my salary would be, oh, [hesitation] five or six times what I started out. Of course, that didn't come easy. Like I say, it was a long period of time getting there.

PH: As a supervisor what sort of-- How did the takeover--Hickory buying out White's--how did that affect what you had to do on the job day to day in terms of increasing the production and that sort of thing?

A: Well, when Hickory bought it they upped the production and naturally when you up production you've got to put out more product in the same amount of time or less time. And they want the same quality of the product. And you're trying to do all three at one time and it gets pretty hectic at times. Sometimes-- You can put out quantity, but you can't put out quality. A lot of times you can't do that. But I think the very bottom line was they wanted quantity. They give a little bit of the quality, and I think that's where it just finally run it into the ground. It got to the point where the product, you know,

wasn't like it was when they first come in there. And they started building cheaper furniture. When you start cutting corners, sooner or later the people see it. If a customer is buying nice furniture and high-end furniture, they start looking for them things and buy them another brand of furniture.

Our sales went down-- I don't know what the sales figures were there at the last, but my understanding we were still making money, but Hickory was losing money. They just didn't have enough product buying to keep both plants operating. They took our product line and gave it to Hickory, and I assume to get the people in Hickory on a full schedule up there. Somebody had to lose, so I reckon it was us.

PH: How did some of the older folks who were there react to the closing when they knew the place was going to close?

A: It was pretty sad really, when you see a man with two or three years from his retirement-- Like I said, he's not highly educated or, at the very minimum, minimum educated, to see him have to leave three or four years maybe from retirement, and it's hard for a man like that to go right out and pick up, you know, to keep going till he does reach retirement. Of course, I mean, a lot of the younger people, I mean, you can always learn different skills, but the older people, it's hard to go out there and find a job because people are not going to hire them. They know they're not going to be there but a short period, and they're not going to take the risk of someone on the job that age getting hurt or health get bad or something. It's a lot involved.

PH: Do you remember where you were and when you found out that the place was going to--when they announced that they were closing the plant?

A: Well, they called us all—all the supervisors--into the conference room one morning. The president of the company, Mr. Randy Austin, he come down and he called us all in the conference room, the supervisors, and made the announcement. Of course, like I say, there was devastation right then for everybody to hear that. And he said he'd gather everybody in the warehouse and make a general announcement to all the employees. And that's all he did that morning, he made his announcement and he was gone right quick. He didn't linger around for questions. Now whether he had any feelings about the place or shutting it down, I have no idea. I can't speak for him. But I'm sure it hurt him in a lot of ways, but it sure didn't look good on his record--having to shut down plants. To me, he was always, you know, after the dollar. That's all it was. They didn't take a lot of interest in the employees, I don't think.

PH: Do you remember how you reacted when you heard, what you thought?

A: Well, like I said, I'd say probably a year, two years maybe prior to that, after closing the Hillsborough plant, you get a feeling that sooner or later, well, if you close one, sooner or later you're going to close the other one. You could sense it coming. At that time it was short time and we were trying to make do with what we had, I reckon. But you could feel it. You was hoping it wasn't going to be like that. Finally, the day came and they decided to close it.

A month or so before then in a meeting, my superintendent had made a comment one morning, on one of our meetings, had anybody heard a rumor of the plant being closed down. Nobody had heard it--maybe one or two—and he said well it was just a rumor, no truth to it. It wasn't thirty days later, sure enough, they closed it, and I think it caught him off guard just like it did anybody else because he just signed papers on a brand

new house the day before the announcement and he had asked the president of the company--our president at White's--was anything going on that he needed to know about. He told him, "No, everything was fine." So he went and closed out the house and to my knowledge he's still living in it. He's a well-educated man. He left and went with Wyman Industries as plant manager. There wasn't any problem for him finding a job. Like I say, he's well-educated.

But it hurt the little man, it really did, everyday employees. It sure did. There is some out there today that still hasn't found a job and it's been close to two years now, going on a year and a half. There's some that hadn't found other employment. Like I say, cause of age and their education.

It's not that many furniture places in the area. Craftique was close to us, but they can only employ so many people. I understand a lot went to work there. [pause]

Yeah, it was really rough hearing that, I'm telling you, it really was.

PH: Do you remember how you broke the news to your family?

A: Well, I just came home and told my wife, I said, "Well, they're shutting the place down." She said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I don't know. I'll worry about that bridge when I get there." In a few days after the announcement the unemployment people came to us--the employment agencies--and said they'd offer job training and schooling. If anyone wanted to go to trade school they'd pay for that. They offered a self-employment school or program. I told my wife, I said, "Well, this would be a good time as any for me to find out if I can make it on my own."

So I took them up on it and attended school for a year. The self-employment program was more or less just a crash course in business administration. The way it was

explained to us it was just a four-year program fitted into a year, and people would go out and feel self-employed, start their own business. So I took them up on it. I've tried it and I'm doing it today. And have been very fortunate so far. I hope things continue as good as they have been. But if necessary, I guess, at some point if I had to I'd go back to public work in some capacity. I don't know what it would be. Not likely furniture, [laughs] even though I know the trade, but there's just not that much job security in furniture.

PH: The Hickory Company paid to have the workers--? Offered them the opportunity to go to get this training?

A: Yeah, Hickory paid for two quarters of training, and the state would pick up the rest. Well, the state paid for it, but Hickory said that if, you know, they didn't meet it all they would pay for it. They gave severance pay depending on how long you'd been there and your years of service.

One thing that really hurt in laying people off like they did was the insurance. I mean, you could carry your insurance for three months after leaving the plant then the holder took over. Of course, when I left mine was a hundred--around a hundred dollars a month just on me and my wife. No, just on me because I couldn't carry it on my wife after I left the plant. Within a three month time period I was told it would go to three hundred and twenty dollars, I think, somewhere around there on the fourth month. I was notified prior to the third month ending that it would be four hundred and fifty some dollars. I mean, that's how quick it jumped.

PH: Just for you or for you and your wife?

A: Just for me individually, and it was no way I could carry the insurance. I had-- being a veteran I mean, if I needed insurance I could always go to the Veteran's Administration.

PH: So are you insured now under some sort of VA plan.

A: Oh, yeah. Yeah, fortunately.

PH: Where did you take the training at?

A: Alamance Technical College.

PH: Uh, huh.

A: Institute of Alamance. Alamance Community College. ACC, or whatever. It was a lot of classroom work, and it was on-the-job training, or more or less on-the-job monitoring. It was a right good program. People that taught it, they seemed to know what they were doing. They thought a lot of the people that was enrolled there. I think it was approximately seven of us out of the White plant that attended the self-employment school class. I know for a fact there's four that is in business for themselves now. I haven't checked on the other three lately. I haven't been in contact with them. But everybody tried it. Which it is a pretty good success rate if you get four out of the seven, so at least if the other three is not in business they've got the knowledge to know how to be in business.

PH: Had you always worked on furniture even on the side?

A: Yeah, more or less.

PH: For pay when you were at White's?

A: More or less for a hobby. Now I put it into full-time work now. It's enjoyable if you can take something old and make it look good again, restore something that's an

antique, and see the people that you do the things for that they are pleased with your work. It makes you feel good. It's not a lot of money in it. Of course, I didn't go into it to make a killing, just to make a living. I've been pleased so far with what I've accomplished. Of course, I was saying, you know, some days are diamonds and some days are coal. That's the way it is in any business. It's good being your own boss, though. Sometime you have to chew your own butt out to get things done. It's enjoyable.

PH: How does it compare to working for Hickory?

A: Well, it's night and day difference as far as working for somebody else and working for yourself. When you work for yourself you've got a lot of responsibility. You can set your own hours, that's one thing. If you decide you want, you know, to take an hour off you ain't got to be asking to get off or whatever. When you're at public work a man expects you from seven to four or eight to five or whatever. You're at his beck and call at all times. Just whatever he wants that's what you've got to give.

But being self-employed you get out of it what you put in it. If you put a lot of work into it, it's rewarding. Has been so far and everybody has been pleased with what I've done. That's a reward in itself, knowing something you've done pleases somebody else. When you're in public work it's hard to please a man all the time and even if it's right a lot of times he's going to find something wrong with it for some reason.

PH: When Hickory started speeding up--pushing the production--did you have to--? Did that put a lot more stress on you? Did you have to push your workers more?

A: Oh, yeah, yeah. I was just an ordinary worker. There was not a lot of stress in the job. Course you get into management position there's a tremendous amount of responsibility, and the man expecting you to get it done, regardless. If he wants it done

you've got to get it done. There's a lot of overtime put in, which was unpaid for. Anytime you get on salaried position you're his seven days a week, twenty-four hours around the clock. That's about the way it got to be.

It was just for a short time and I was fixing to give it up before they give me up. It had become too stressful, I mean, I could cope with it, but I guess that in part was to blame some. I was just growing tired of it. I didn't like the job I was doing at that time. I just didn't have any freedom, more or less, you could say.

PH: What do you mean you didn't have any freedom?

A: Well, to make plans, I mean. You could say, "Well, I'm going to the beach such and such day or something," and if anything come up, I mean, you know, the plant come first. You'd have to change your plans. You just couldn't make any plans being in that capacity and everything.

PH: So what did you want to do? You wanted want to resign as a rub and pack supervisor?

A: Well, I thought about it several times of just giving it up and just going back to being a regular worker. I know it'd have been a lot less stressful and everything. If you get in that position you get irritable and cut people short all the time, especially your family members. You don't do it intentionally, but a lot of times it happens that way.

People think you make a whole lot of money by being in management. That's not necessarily true. I, for one, didn't make a lot of money in it. It has its privileges and it has disadvantages, too. There's more disadvantages than there is advantages to it.

PH: What are the disadvantages besides not having any freedom?

A: Well, you more or less are there anytime they want you to be, you're there, you have to be there. You had to work people--. You have people, some people that's just good people to work for and to work with. Of course, you're going to always have one that gives you trouble from day one. At that time I had two or three in my department that wanted things done their way. If you tried to explain to them that's not the way we are going to do it--. It made you drive a lot harder. But other people in there I would say, maybe five percent was like that, but the other ninety-five you'd have no trouble with them. They enjoyed, you know, the job you was doing. At least they said so, anyway, I hoped they meant what they said that they enjoyed working for me and everything. I enjoyed working with them. I never minded helping anytime. If they needed help I was always there to give them help. That's one thing I believed in. Just being a supervisor I know I didn't have to work, but if the need be I got in there and worked with them. A lot don't think that way, though.

PH: A lot of the other supervisors--?

A: Yeah, there was a lot of them--. A lot of them was like that. Didn't believe in putting their hands on anything.

PH: What did the workers think about that?

A: They didn't particularly like them, I mean, just to be quite honest with you. A lot of them they didn't have no respect for, no regard for or anything.

PH: Were these men who had worked their way up or brought in from the outside?

A: Well, both. Some from outside and some from within. You take being working with people so many years and then working beside them, you know, everyday

and then all of a sudden you're working for him. It's hard to work for a man that you're expecting the same out of him as you are yourself. Some of them didn't, though.

Overall, it was a good bunch of people. I'm sure it is just like it is any place. Like I say, you've got that five percent or whatever percentage it is that makes it hard on the whole bunch overall.

PH: What sort of things would they--? What sort of problems would you have with people who--?

A: Well, attendance problems--the ones that made the things--is trying to get people to realize that, you know, they are hired to do a job, and you expect them there when they're scheduled to work. You've always got that percentage that got to be somewhere else. Then why when their paychecks come up short and why this and why that and why they're not making any money, and they just start realizing they had the opportunity to make it, but you can't make it by not being there.

PH: So how would you handle folks like that?

A: Well, it would handle itself. They had a point system there at the White plant. Then after accumulating eight points you automatically fire yourself. Of course, if you get a point you can work it off by working twenty straight days, you drop that point. Several stayed right on the borderline all the time at seven and a half, just one step away from being fired any day.

PH: So they played the numbers?

A: They would play the numbers. Know when to take a day off and get by with it. Worked just long enough to get one off before you get another one back on.

PH: What sort of things do you think, in your opinion, it took to make a good supervisor there?

A: A lot of patience. Patience was the number one thing. A lot of temperament. Patience especially when you had to-- You had to be patient with people. The old saying goes, "You can drive a mule to water, but you can't make it drink." It's the same way with people, you can't make them work, they've got to have in their own self to want to do something. You can ask, but that's about all you can do.

It was really hard to fire a person really today, I mean, you've got to have a pretty good cause before you can terminate somebody at the job now. Got to be something extraordinary. I had several that fired themselves. I never did have to fire anybody. Well, I did fire one, but personnel let her come back.

PH: What did she do? Was it a she?

A: It was a she.

PH: What did she do?

A: Nothing towards women, I mean. I enjoyed working with women and everything. Get along as same as the men. I treated them all the same. No partiality was showed either way. Like I say, you've got one that always keeps something stirred up and that was one of them.

PH: You mean by keeping something--?

A: Well, just keeping everything-- Distractions going on everywhere. You can't have that in a public work place.

PH: You mean like screwing around on the job?

A: Yeah, yeah, loafing and keeping people bickering and fussing and carrying on. Yeah, you can't have that.

PH: What was it like--under Hickory--to have sort of these expectations that you get out so much product and then sort of be stuck between them and these people who you had worked with for a lot of years?

A: It was a lot of shock to a lot of people there when Hickory took over and stepped the production up. Them people hadn't been accustomed to that. A lot of them balked at first, but over a period of time they found out they were going to have to do it to keep their job, and they eventually came around and put it in another gear, I reckon you would say. Some of them there had been working in one place all their life and that's all they did, and nobody ever bothered them. Like I say, I mean, they're not responsible, you might say, as long as they showed up for work they thought they were doing what the man required. It's a lot more involved in it.

PH: [hesitation] When it came down to starting to let people go, did you have to make any of those decisions when they started weeding out people near the end?

A: Yeah. I made about all my decisions in my department. Starting out they asked for volunteers and naturally you've always got that few that say, "Yeah, I'll do that." Then it come down to essential people, what you needed, you know, to complete what they wanted done. At times you had to let some go that you wanted to keep, but they just didn't have, wasn't qualified enough to do all the things that had to be done. So that eliminated a few. Of course, with any of them you hated to let any of them go. I did. But it was just a matter of time, I mean, it was just prolonging the misery that's all it was doing

with any of us. You know it was coming to a certain point and then everything is going to stop completely, which it did.

PH: How would you go about telling people that this was their last day?

A: Well, they would know maybe a week or so ahead of time that Friday would be their last day or whatever, and then they would be picking up their check or whatever, termination papers. I mean, there wasn't any surprises to anyone, I mean, as far as telling them it would be their last day or anything. Once it was announced that everything was closing, I mean, that was it right then. That was the surprise.

PH: What sort of changes did you see after they broke the news among the workers in the plant?

A: Well, I mean, in my department I'm the-- We had to keep up standards and everything and quality till we run out of, you know, product to run. Which we did and we did a good job of it. We closed it out.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

ANONYMOUS

NOVEMBER 2, 1994

A: ... a wonderful job at it. As far as closing one I don't think you could ask for no better than the way we closed it. It was done in an orderly fashion. Of course, hated to see it coming, but it finally got there.

One thing I miss from closing is the people and everything. You made a lot of friends and everything, and you don't see them anymore. You worked with them everyday. That means a lot to a place, you know, being around people. Of course, I see some on a regular basis and some I hadn't seen since we left that I'd like to see again.

PH: Would people do things together when you were all working there? Hunting or fishing?

A: Oh, yeah. You had your groups and everything, you know, golfers and fishermen and whatever. It was a great bunch of people, really. A lot of country people, you know, everybody enjoyed the outdoors, I think. A lot of sports fans, Monday morning quarterbacks or whatever. They'd argue over why they didn't win or this, that, and the other.

PH: What sort of things would you do with the people at the plant outside of work?

A: Well, you'd have cookouts and things like this. The plant and everything would have cookouts--supervisors and whatever--would get together and have meetings and have a cookout, which we enjoyed pretty good. We'd do that pretty regular. And

they'd have company picnics and Christmas parties and this, that, and the other. Just always seeing people, I mean, you know, you worked there everyday and you'd see everybody you knowed sometime during week or some where or another. Everybody just went their different ways now.

PH: Any other things that you miss about the job?

A: Well, just the people, mostly. I guess seeing the people. I enjoyed working with everybody that was there. I reckon I was friends with everybody there. To my knowledge I didn't have any enemies. I got along with everybody.

I don't miss the job I had. Of course, it would be nice to have the job, but I don't miss it. That's one thing about it I was fortunate enough being able to work here for myself. Own my own work and everything. I may one day regret it, but I haven't yet.

PH: Do you think about it a lot?

A: No, not really. Don't need to think about what could have been. I try to think about what's happening to me now, instead of what's happening then.

PH: How do you think the closing affected your life, I mean, your family's life?

A: [hesitation] Well, anytime you've been at a place for twenty years and then you loose your place of employment it affects the whole family, I mean, it's not just an individual thing. My wife, she's seen fit to look at it as if what I want to do is what I want to do and she backs me one hundred percent in what I'm doing. Of course, she may not tomorrow, you know, if the money quits coming in. So far it hadn't, and I had to live without. I guess I'm doing better than I was when I was there. Maybe a few less benefits or something or other, but overall it has been pretty pleasant.

PH: So you are happier now?

A: Oh, yes, yeah, sure. I'm outdoors a lot. Of course, I didn't mind working inside, but as the saying goes, "You need to stop and smell the roses once in a while." I reckon I have enjoyed life more in the last year and a half than I have in the last twenty-five years as far as knowing what's going on or whatever. Being able, you know, to be a part of it. See the seasons change and whatever. Kind of hard to do that when you're working inside day in and day out, but I really enjoyed the last year and a half. It's been real nice. I'm sure there's a lot of them that wish they was in the position I'm in today, I mean. I wish they could all be like this. At least with this type work there's a little bit of security to it. If what you're doing's failing you can always do something else. But I really enjoy it, I really do.

PH: I was going to ask you, what sort of things did you do or your department do in the final weeks before closing?

A: Well, we finished running the product line, whatever we had cut and coming through and closed it out. Worked up any returns and repairs and whatever. Just started cleaning up and then finally got it done and cleaning out the place, more or less, just shutting it down. There were a lot of empty shelves when we left there. There wasn't anything left after they had the auction and everything and sent off the equipment. Sold everything in it. That's the sad part about it--one of the sad parts--just go back in a place that's been busy all these many years and everything and all the machinery and stuff out of it. Just look at it and it just looks like ghost town or something. Pure devastation, that's what it was.

PH: Do you remember what your exact last day was there, the date was?

A: Somewhere around the [hesitation] 30th of July, I believe. It seems like it was around the 30th or 31st, something like that.

PH: That was when Bill photographed you?

A: I believe that was the last day.

PH: Bending over with the--. You're sweeping up?

A: I believe it was.

PH: Do you remember what you thought that last day that you were there?

A: It must have been--. No, it wasn't July. It must have been June 30th.

PH: June 30th?

A: Yeah, June 30th. We all left that week, yeah, I believe it was June 30th. I know it was at the end of the month anyway. Being on salary you got paid twice a week, no twice a month, and I was paid through the month see I might have left a day early or something, but still the final termination date was the 30th of June, I believe. Then we got a check for vacation if we had worked the prior six months.

PH: Do you remember what your last day was like?

A: Boring, very boring. Sitting around eating, telling lies and whatever.

PH: Who was still there at that time? Fletcher?

A: Well, it was Fletcher Holmes, myself, John Fuquay, Larry Williams. Robin Hart, he was still there. That just about did it. Ernest Richmond, he was there. I think that's about all of us that was left. Ernie, he had to stay on a little longer than the rest of us cause they were still shipping out of the warehouse trying to clean it out. But for the rest of us more or less the 30th of June was everybody's final day except for Larry

Williams, he stayed on to be watchman. If I understand he stayed up until the 5th of July. But it was pretty boring that last day, except, like I say, eating. Just knowing that was it, going out the door for the last time. We had a lot of fun. We had a lot of fun.

PH: Did ya'll do anything after work that day, anything special?

A: No, I didn't. I came home. As far as I know everybody else went home. It wasn't much to celebrate. No, it wasn't too much to celebrate.

PH: I was curious to get your opinion of why you think the plant closed. Do you think it was something that could have been--?

A: Well, you can always look back and say, "Well, if they had done this and done that things would have been different," but like I say, at that time the economy had gotten into the shape it was in--. I can see there from their business sense they tried to maintain both plants, but it just wasn't feasible to do it. So I reckon we had to be the one to go, so that's the way it happened. We made good furniture. Everybody there took a lot of pride in the work. [pause] I'm sure there could've been other things done to help the situation, maybe better management or--. Like I say, the economy really brought it to his knees, I think. They tried other lines of cheaper furniture or whatever to try and reach the market in some areas and that didn't work. You just couldn't compete on the scale with low end furniture. There's no way you could do it.

PH: But they had tried that, Hickory?

A: Yeah, they tried everything. They tried motel furniture--occasional--which White's never run any occasional. The old White family didn't. All they ever run was living room and dining room. Then Hickory got into it and started making a little occasional and there at the last it was making a whole lot of occasional stuff. I don't know

whether they're still carrying the occasional line, what we were running, or our product line. I know they dropped some of them. The people at Hickory just weren't capable of running it because they weren't familiar with it. Like I say, there was a skilled craftsman there that knew what they were doing.

It's a shame all that skills and everything can't be put back into use, you know, in another area, but it's just not a market around here for furniture. Not in this area, I mean, there's furniture plants--plenty in North Carolina--but like I say, they try to get other people to come in and buy it and people wouldn't do it. Not the way the economy looked like at that time.

PH: Do you know who else had been interested in buying the place?

A: Well, they had several people come in from Tennessee and other states. They looked it over. The building being as old as it was and all, equipment and everything, it was pretty well used and everything. I don't think they could see investing into it. They done the right thing by selling it out and getting rid of it.

[There is a dog barking in the background]

Maybe the town of Mebane is better off, you never know, I mean, it's a landmark, I'm sure, and it still is. Today there is new industry coming into the area. I'm sure they'll offer, you know, better paying jobs and higher skilled jobs. Yeah, our closing, there'll be another opening somewhere. That's the way it works. Might be the end of this day, but there's always tomorrow.

PH: I want to-- I don't want to keep you too long. I brought some photos that-- Bill gave me some photos that you had picked, and I was wondering if you wouldn't mind if we looked at a couple of them.

A: Sure.

PH: Maybe you could talk about them or why you picked them.

A: Sure.

PH: This one has been in all the papers of you sweeping up. [45]

A: Oh, that's me. [pause] Well, I don't recall picking this one, but like I said, once they sold the place out, I mean, it looks just like a ghost town. Nothing there anymore. Barren walls. Empty floor. Been a many a piece of furniture that went through here.

PH: Do you remember Bill taking that?

A: Uh, huh. Yeah, he surprised me that day.

PH: You didn't know he was going to be there?

A: He caught me in the act.

PH: What was it like with Bill coming in and photographing you all?

A: It was nice. He kept everybody entertained a lot of times taking their pictures and whatever. Going for milk shakes and this, that, and the other.

PH: Uh, huh.

A: Helped to break up a lot of the monotony and everything around there.

PH: What did you think of the--? You went by and saw the exhibit down there, the drug store?

A: I think he done a real good job of it. It really impressed me, I mean, it was really nice. He did a real good job of it.

PH: Then there's a--. That one there is on--. Is that break time? [Lunch Break #35]

A: Yeah, break time out on the sidewalk.

PH: A lot of people went outside on breaks like that?

A: Yeah. [pause] Oh, Billy.

PH: Then there's that one. [Layoff Meeting, Cabinet Room #17]

[Someone is talking in the background]

A: Yeah, that's telling everybody the bad news.

PH: Is there a reason that you picked that? Is there something about it that you liked?

A: Well, just the way everybody was, you know, all together and everything and to know what they was going to have to do. You can see a lot of expressions on people's faces and how it affected them and all.

PH: Uh, huh. That's Ronnie there, isn't it?

A: Ronnie Wright. Ronnie Wright sometimes, Ronnie Wrong a lot of times.

PH: And do you know what that is? [Destroying Templates and Patterns The Month Before The Closing, Machine Room #16]

A: Cutting up the--? Cutting up the molds.

PH: Was that near the end there? Were they burning those?

A: Cutting up all the templates and everything. I don't reckon there's any special reason for them cutting them up, forms and whatever, just keep anybody from getting a hold of the pattern, I reckon.

PH: You were saying the other day that they didn't let the workers take any parts?

A: No, they didn't let the workers have the parts and things. Any case goods and everything that were sold, carried out to Hickory. Some discontinued items. I'm sure they were sold to some people. As far as these pictures, though, that's the forms and everything they used when they--.

PH: I've got just a couple more.

A: Uh, huh.

PH: What's that of, a shot of? [Empty Machine Room And Rough Mill, The Month After Closing #48]

A: That's the machine room.

PH: Machine room?

A: Part of the machine room in the rough end. "We must do it better at White Furniture Company." [reading a sign in the photograph] I remember that sign.

PH: Does that picture say anything to you?

A: I tell you, it's all over with but the crying, right there. That's exactly what it is. Everything that was there was gone.

Some of the last cutting was coming through. [Rub And Pack, The Day After The Auction #73]

PH: Is that in finishing there?

A: Yeah, coming through the finishing room. On the finish line, 805 Halifax bed.

PH: What did the workers there think about the furniture?

A: Oh, they thought it was good. Nice furniture. It's the end of the line.

PH: And there, that's the last one. [Four Post Beds And Mirrors On Conveyors,

Finishing Department #76]

A: Is that a--? Where is that at? Cut and rub and pack?

PH: Is that a--? Where is that at? Up in rub and pack?

A: Yep. That was the end of the line right there. No more product. Nothing left.

PH: I wanted to ask you if there was anything that you wanted to say that you didn't get a chance to say during the interview since this will be a permanent--?

A: No, I think I pretty well covered it.

PH: Speak your peace.

A: Like I say, it was a sad time for everybody. Mr. Butler (?) would come up one day and say, "Well, you ain't go a job tomorrow." It was a tremendous impact on everybody. Like I say, it was probably better for a lot of people. Some, I'm sure, are still trying to cope with it. More or less, I think everybody found some kind of employment after leaving there. Maybe not exactly what they wanted, but I'm sure they're getting by. A lot of good people were there, a lot of good people.

I believe if the White's had still had it they'd have never closed it. They went through a lot of rough times, but they always seemed to make do someway or another. And they cared about the employees. Employees come first with the White family. But I

can't say the same when Hickory had it, though. It was night and day difference.
Different strokes for different folks.

[There is a dog barking in the background.]

I believe that's about all I can tell you, Pat.

PH: Well, I appreciate you doing the interview for us.

A: Well you sure welcome.

PH: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW