

Interview

with

IVEY C. JONES

January 18, 1994

by Jeff Cowie

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

IVEY C. JONES

JANUARY 18, 1994

JEFF COWIE: This is an interview with Ivey C. Jones about the White Furniture Plant closing. This interview is being conducted by Jeff Cowie on January 18, 1994, at about noon.

Ivey, I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about when you first started working at the plant, how you found the job, etc.?

IVEY C. JONES: The way I found the job was when I was in high school my senior year in 1977. It was an ICT program that I was involved in. It was ICTOJT which was In Class Training and On Job Training. The ICT teacher that I had was going around to different organizations, different companies telling them that there are some kids that want to work and can they hire them? That how I got the job at White's in the later part of 1976. 1976-1977 was my senior year in high school.

I went an interviewed for the job and got it. It was the type of thing where I was only working three hours a day. I would go in at one o'clock and then get off at four o'clock in the afternoon. It was a fifteen hour a week job. That's basically how I got started at White's.

JC: You were living in Mebane?

IJ: Yes.

JC: Was White's kind of a center for the town?

IJ: White's was the type of place that if you couldn't find a job anywhere else you could always go to White's Furniture Company and get a job. A lot of time people used White's as a last resort for finding employment. If you went to other places like Burlington Industries and you couldn't get a job there or if you went to some of the other plants in the Burlington area and couldn't find a job you could always go to White's. It was always like a fall back thing because they always needed help. They were a large

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company. They were a solid-based company at that particular time. You wouldn't have made a lot of money, but you still had the security of a job.

If you had been unemployed for a period of time and couldn't find any work anywhere else rather than going to a Hardee's or a McDonald's you could always go to White's. Even though they didn't have a lot of benefits like Burlington Industries at least they did have an insurance program which was important especially if you've got a family. You were just about guaranteed work because at that particular time the furniture industry was going real good. All the furniture companies in the area were booming; Craftique, White's, and Melville Furniture down below Mebane. I guess you could say that White's at that particular time was the king of the furniture companies especially in this area. They were always in competition with Craftique.

When I first went there I was always told that we were in competition with Bassett Company that is based in Virginia--"Bassett's eating us alive, Bassett's eating us alive." Bassett and White made two different types of furniture. White's made high-end and Bassett made middle- end to high-end type furniture.

JC: Did you have any family members that had worked there?

IJ: No. I was the first and last one to go to White's. I was the only one in my family that ever worked at White's Furniture Company.

JC: And you worked right up until--.

IJ: Right up until the plant closed last March. That's the only public working job I've ever worked. I've never worked anywhere except at White's because once I graduated from school I started working full-time then. I became interested in furniture work, the different procedures, the different techniques, and I always had a knack for wanting to build things myself. That's one of the reasons that I wanted to stay. I just kept learning more and more and more.

JC: Where did you start?

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IJ: I started blocking drawers. That was a job where the guy who worked on the other side would build the drawers. That consisted of once you picked the drawer up you'd turn it upside down and shoot staples in the corners all the way around the drawer. Then you would go back and put two blue blocks right beside the center piece that went down the drawer called the mont. You would put a little glue on each side of that and then glue the blocks in and then stack it on the load. It was a very menial job.

When you first went to White's that's basically what you started on, menial jobs. It wasn't a job where you had a lot of responsibility. It wasn't a job where it took a great deal of skill. It was just basic employment. Then you had to work your way up from there. You had to prove that you could do more, and you had to prove that you were willing to learn to advance up the ladder.

The menial job wasn't too bad. You learned a lot about drawers because basically you just take it for granted when you see a drawer that it's just a drawer. You don't know what actually goes into building it or you just think that's a one-man job. It was a great experience.

JC: How did you progress from there?

IJ: I went from blocking drawers to building drawers. The guy I was working with retired and so I started building drawers. I built drawers for five years. Then there was a clamp position that came open--that was the job I was on when the plant shut down. You had a lot of different parts that would come to you, for instance, a dresser or a night table and it was your job to assemble everything, glue up all the case ends, put it in the clamp, and work it out. You and one other person would do that. When that job came up my supervisor thought I would be good for that and advised me to try. It would be more money also. I worked that job for eleven years. I blocked drawers for five and then I was on the clamp for eleven.

JC: That's a big commitment of time.

IJ: Yes, exactly.

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JC: Were most people promoted from within? You usually wouldn't hire people from outside at the higher level positions?

IJ: No, not at all. It was the type of thing where if you were an assistant supervisor, for instance, it was always thought if you were an assistant supervisor and something happened to the supervisor you automatically moved up. That's the way it used to be done. After White's was sold that wasn't the case at all. If you were the assistant supervisor that didn't mean a thing. They could pull somebody else from the outside if they wanted to. They could pull somebody from inside the plant that hadn't even had assistant supervisory training. It didn't matter and it was just basically who they felt like could do the best job the quickest.

It was the type of thing where people used to base their employment record on seniority. Once White's sold out there was no such thing as seniority. Seniority went right out the door with White's. It was the type of thing of who could get the job done the fastest. That was seniority.

When White's was bought out a lot of people had been there for years. Some of the people had thirty-five years. Some people had twenty-five years. They lost their jobs. Management felt like the positions they had weren't important and somebody else could do their job so they were let go.

JC: Do you think that has anything to do with the fact that they were senior and were making the most money and so they were trying to cut costs?

IJ: That's a possibility, but I can't necessarily say that would be fact, because some of the people they laid off weren't making that much money. It was just a position that they had that was drawing a check, and drawing a check didn't justify the job that they were doing. Even if they weren't making but three dollars an hour if the job didn't justify making three dollars an hour management saw that as a loss, we're losing money, we're paying this guy three dollars to do a job that doesn't even need to be done.

JC: Did efficiency increase after the buy out?

IJ: Yes, a great deal. Before we didn't have a production rate to run and then after maybe a year all of a sudden we had a production rate that we were running at the plant. I mean, the employees had been cut in half. Production had been increased maybe three to four times the amount we were running with a full crew.

JC: That's amazing!

IJ: It is amazing and the amazing part about it is that more work was being produced with half the people than it was with all the people that was there. Everybody was caring a load. It wasn't the type of thing where you were just doing one particular job; I mean, like the people they laid off you had to pick up and do part of their work, too. So the work load was divided out among everybody; where you used to do one job you were having to do maybe two or three jobs, and you were still getting the same amount of pay.

JC: What was the impact of that on the feeling in the shop and the people overworked?

IJ: Oh God, it was astronomical. The attitude of the people just went to the pits. Everybody felt like they were being overworked. Everybody felt like they were being pushed.

One thing you have to realize is that the people who had worked at White's had never been used to this type of pressure before. It was always the type of thing where we need to get this amount done so how about coming on and see if we can get it. Then it was the type of thing where we've got to have this whatever the cost is, I don't care, just get it done because that's what we've got to have. To put that type of pressure on people who hadn't been used to it they were just completely crushed. They were just like running around like chickens with their heads cut off saying, "I don't understand why we have to do it like this." Then we had a whole lot of people that were set in their ways and had been doing this particular job twenty years this way and now it's different, you do it my way or the highway. There were some people that were fired for that particular

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reason. They didn't conform, they didn't do the job the particular way that management wanted it done so they were let go. It didn't make any difference how many years experience you had, you were gone, you were out the door. Even people who had been there for twenty to twenty-five years were constantly being threatened, "Well, if you can't do your job, we'll just find somebody else that can."

It came down to the point where we even had our whole department threatened one time. We were called together to a meeting because we put out some bad work. They said, "We have a mess out in finish, we can't run it, and we are going to send all of ya'll home today. If you can't come back tomorrow and do a better job don't even bother coming back."

This is the type of thing we had to deal with.

JC: That could make a guy nervous.

IJ: Exactly. And then too, by the same token, it can make a person extremely rebellious. I mean, when you are an adult in the work place you are not a child. You don't expect to be talked to like a child. A lot of times if you treat people with dignity and respect you can get a whole lot more out of them than to say, "I got to have this." It's just like going back to the days of slavery where you say, "This has got to be done because the master has said so and that's just the way it is." With no say so that caused a lot of animosity at the plant.

Another thing, going back to the supervisor and assistant supervisor positions, they were making a lot of people assistant supervisors that had been at the plant that really didn't deserve the position because they hadn't done anything. I know several cases where I had been there sixteen years and a lot of guys they offered these positions to didn't do nothing, they hadn't done anything. They basically hadn't carried their workload or anything.

JC: How do you think they were chosen?

IJ: It would be hard to say. I don't know whether they were chosen because they were liked by different people in management or they just felt like maybe this person can do the job if given the opportunity. I really don't know. In some cases I'm quite sure it was favoritism. That's in all jobs you go to where it's going to be that type of thing where someone will say, "I like him, I think he can do a pretty good job. Let's give him a shot." It doesn't make any difference that this other guy has been ahead of him by fifteen years waiting for this position or probably more qualified. That's basically how business is run. That's basically how business was run at White's.

One thing I can say when White's was bought out was that there were more blacks put into positions than when White's own it. When White's Furniture Company owned it there were not that many blacks in supervisory positions at all. There were no blacks in management. There were no blacks in secretarial, to my knowledge, during the time I was at the plant. None whatsoever.

When Hickory bought White's out I don't think they looked at things as a black and white issue. I think they looked at things like, if this guy can do the job, let's get him to do the job because we want production. We don't care about color or the way things have been run a hundred years ago. We want to make the green because that's what counts. If this guy can get it done, I don't care what color he is; as long as he can make us the green, that's the one we want on the job.

I don't feel like it was that way at White's. I think they just basically had the 'good ole boy' attitude. That's the way they ran the company and that's the way it was. I think during the time I was there was only one black supervisor and he was in the stock room. He was a stock clerk. Later on they had one black supervisor that was in shipping. When Hickory bought out then they started having some black supervisors, but before then that wasn't even thought about.

JC: Were they bringing management from outside?

IJ: All management was brought in from outside.

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JC: How far down?

IJ: All the original management that was in White's when Hickory bought it, by the time the plant closed, were all gone. There was nobody left. Basically all the supervisors that White's used to have were gone. They were replaced by all new supervisors. Everybody in upper management had been replaced. There was nobody left in management or supervision that was originally at White's except maybe one or two people. We had what we called "imports" to come in, and that was just people from the outside and we referred to them as imports.

JC: Did they come from Hickory?

IJ: They came from all over. We can't necessarily say they came from Hickory because we know for a fact that some were recruited from Virginia, some from Oklahoma, and some from Tennessee. They came from all over the country.

The main thing about it was that all these guys knew each other. All these guys had worked together at some particular company, because at one time my particular supervisor and the guy that was the production manager had worked together at another company in Tennessee. It was still the buddy-buddy system-I've got a friend and he would probably make a good supervisor so let's call him in. Like I said, all these guys knew each other. They all have worked together even in upper management at some particular point in time in their furniture careers. Sometimes they even referred to themselves as migrant workers because they had worked all over the country in furniture companies. I mean, that told me something right there, that if you've gotten to work at a lot of different companies that means to me that maybe a lot of these companies are shutting down.

We had one particular guy that was in management that said he had worked for three different companies that had shut down. I started thinking then that if he had already worked for three other companies that shut down and he's managing this company, eventually this one is going to shut down, too. I mean, that's one thing I wouldn't want to

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put on my resume if I was going to apply for a job that I was in management for three other companies that shut down.

JC: When did you start to think about that?

IJ: I had my doubts that the plant would continue right after White's was bought out.

JC: Which was '85?

IJ: About '85. I had my doubts from then on because I felt like White's had run this company for the mere fact that it was a family business. This family business was important to them. It was important for them to keep this in their family. It was important for them to keep this from generation to generation. If you think about it, a company that had been in your family for a hundred years you wouldn't just want to give it up.

I felt like when Hickory bought the plant it was just basically a dollar figure and that's it. We will run it until we can run everything out of it. Then we will shut it down and consolidate everything into another business. Keep building the product, keep the same name, just build another company.

I don't think the company had long-term plans to run after Hickory bought it. I felt like it was a short-term type thing. That's my personal opinion even though they updated the plant. They did a tremendous amount of updating to bring everything up technologically. They did a fantastic job figuring out systems to make everything run smooth, but still I felt like it was a short-term type thing.

JC: You described the work environment as getting real harried. What about income? Were there raises?

IJ: Yes, there were raises. The income went up because there were a lot of people who had worked there for years and years who had never made eight dollars an hour. Some of the people had never made nine dollars an hour. Your wages depending on your job description were increased up to where some of us were making nine dollars an hour.

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Some were probably making more than that, like an assistant supervisor. I imagine they were making more money than that. By the same token, you can look at the amount that your work load was increased and the amount of stress that you were put under. You were basically working under the gun everyday. There was constantly someone breathing down your back and looking over your shoulder. There was a lot of pressure.

At one particular point we had to fill out a production sheet. It had every hour on it with fifteen minutes intervals and you had to write down what you were doing. For instance, if you built drawers from seven o'clock to eight o'clock you had to write on the sheet that you built drawers during that time. If you stood around and waited for fifteen for your next job, you would have to write that down.

Then it went from that to having this big production board up on the wall that you had to fill out on how much you had run per hour. That was one of the things that was hectic to keep up with, because you had a production rate that you had to run that was already over your head that you couldn't barely get then you had to be worried about keeping this board filled out too. Whenever the production manager walked through, he could look at this board and say that they were not getting production down here. You had production tickets that they tagged on the furniture at the very end of the line once the piece of furniture came off the conveyor belt. When they looked at production tickets they knew how much you were running. They just wanted to know what each station was doing.

JC: Did that put you in competition with other workers or was that mostly just for supervisors?

IJ: It was basically just for supervisors. It didn't put you in competition with everybody else because everybody that wasn't management, everybody that wasn't supervision, you had to work. It wasn't the type of thing where you were in competition, it was the type of thing where if you could do your job faster than somebody else it would pile the work up on them. That's just all. Everybody still had to run the same amount.

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If you had fifty cases to run, as far as production rate, it didn't make any difference whether I built fifty cases or not; if they didn't get it up on the end of the line, it didn't mean anything. I mean, we didn't run production. Even if I basically run production and the line didn't run production, we still didn't get production. It didn't make that much difference because I was at the beginning of the line. We had to put the case on the line for everybody else up the line to be able to do their job.

JC: The case is the frame.

IJ: Right. It's basically the carcass, the outside ends. For instance, that night table sitting there, my job was to assemble the ends and these rails. At the next station they would have to fit the drawers in. The next station would have to put the top on. The next station would have to put the base, etc., all the way up to finishing.

My job was to get everything started off. Another guy would build the case and then the case would come to me. As far as the actual case work, that started on my job. This actually started the assembly for everybody else up the conveyor line to start working.

JC: Did that put particular pressure on you to produce because you were at the beginning?

IJ: Yes. Me and this guy, Graham Gouch, that worked with me. Yes, it was a lot of pressure on us everyday. It was the type of thing where, "Ya'll really need to get it today." Or, "Ya'll need to help me out." It was that type thing. There was a lot of pressure on us, because if we didn't do nothing nobody else up the line did anything either. There were a lot of times when we had cases we just couldn't get production on because we had too much work to do. There would be people standing up the line just looking down at the clamper. After awhile that would get you a little on the ill side because, you know, it would look like you could pull those people down here and put them to doing something else. If that was your job you had to get it.

JC: With that kind of pressure did quality go down?

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IJ: God, yes, because the main thing is production. They always preached quality, that's what management said, "We want quality, but we've got to have production at whatever the cost. That's the way we get paid. If we don't produce it, if we can't get it out, we can't get paid. We can't pay the light bill, we can't pay the water bill, etc., etc."

Yes, there was a great deal of pressure on you. Yes, the quality did go down.

JC: Did you start seeing returns come back or defects?

IJ: We had a lot of returns come back. We had a lot of returns to come back in our department. We had a lot of returns to come back to the plant. We even had people send in videotapes that was showing us the defects in the work that they had gotten. We had to sit down one day and watch a fifteen minute movie where this lady had bought this piece of furniture. It was the type of thing where she didn't like it and she said the craftsmanship wasn't good and the work was bad. So she documented it with a videotape and sent it to the plant. Each department was called in and we had to sit down and watch this videotape while this woman complained about the work.

After getting those videotapes back, we knew we had to do a better job, but we still had to keep our production rate. It was the type of production rate that you just had to run. It sure did put a lot of pressure on you.

A lot of times you would say, "Well, I'm going to lay this piece out because it's bad." When you lay pieces out then at the end you may need two or three of these pieces to get out, to complete the amount of cases you were suppose to have completed. For instance, if you had a hundred cases to run and you had run ninety-five of these cases, and you didn't have enough good parts left to get the other five but you had enough bad parts laying there that could be patched and fixed up to get these other five cases, go ahead on and use these five cases so you won't come up short on the cutting. We would go ahead on and use these bad pieces to get these other five cases, so we could say that we ran the complete hundred cases for this particular cutting.

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JC: Very interesting. Earlier you said something about the supervisor coming down to you and saying, "You've got to help me out."

IJ: Yes, it was the type of thing where some of the supervisors, like the last one we had, Harvey Thompson, was a pretty good guy to work for. He would say, "I really need you to put out and help me out today so we can try and get production." In that instance we didn't mind doing that, we didn't mind doing that at all. Because at least he came down and said, "I need you to really help me get production today." Whereas, Jim (), the other supervisor would come down and say, "You've got to get it or else."

JC: Both of these guys were under Hickory?

IJ: Right. It was the type of thing where he would say we have to get it or else. He was a real horse's rear end. Nobody really liked him. I particularly didn't like him. He treated you like you were nothing, just a nobody. "You get paid, you do as I say do, that's it. I know everything, I'm Jesus Christ and you're nobody." That's just basically the way things were run. There was a lot of resentment for that particular fact. I mean, had he treated people like decent human beings it would have been a lot different.

That was just the atmosphere at White's. I mean, management was God almighty, and you were nobody. You just had to do as you were told. It was basically like being in the service--you don't do as you think, you do as you're told, we get paid for thinking, you just get paid for doing and your opinion doesn't mean much so just keep it to yourself.

Even if you gave them your opinion about something they didn't really take your opinion into consideration because they had the type of mentality of "we know it all, you're just a lowly furniture worker, what do you know?" We have worked for companies all over the country, we have all kinds of degrees, we helped bankrupt and shut companies down everywhere so what can you tell us? It was that type of thing.

JC: How does that contrast with before Hickory came in? What was life like before? You said it was slower paced, it was more of a family business.

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II: Before Hickory came in it was basically like family. You basically got along with everybody. You practically knew everybody at the company. I guess there were close to three hundred employees and you practically knew all these people by name.

Your work load wasn't that difficult. By not having production rates set you would just work at your own pace. A lot of times that would work out pretty good because a lot of people like to work steady to stay busy to make the day go by. It's just like anything else; you would have some people that were deadbeats whether they are working in a pie factory or not.

It was easier then and a lot less tension. Everybody seemed to have gotten along a lot better. It wasn't that much animosity towards one another. If you were working beside a guy, doing the same job, making the same thing, you didn't think that much about it. But if you were working beside a guy, both of you doing the same job he might have been making anywhere from a dollar and a half to two dollars more per hour than you were, it would create a lot of animosity. You would think, we're doing the same job why should he be making more than I'm making? Some people were really just busting their chops.

Some people had these positions as inspectors. They didn't have that much to do and they were making good money. They would just stand around and watch everybody else while you were just busting your butt and making a dollar or a dollar and a half less. It created a lot of animosity.

When White's was there it wasn't that bad. It was a whole lot easier because then too you didn't have a point system. The point system means as far as absences or tardiness goes at the plant. If you have something like three times or eight times within a month period, you were automatically terminated.

At White's--before Hickory bought it--it wasn't like that. I mean, if you needed to be out for maybe a week or two weeks you could go to your supervisor or go to management and tell them you have this situation come up and you need to be off for two

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weeks. A lot of times you would get it. I know when my first child was born, my son, I asked for a week off to be at home to help my wife out and they said, "Yes, no problem, go ahead and take the week off." After Hickory bought the place out I wouldn't have asked for a week off if my wife had died.

JC: [laughter] I think I have the picture. You also mentioned that "green" was the primary color they were worried about.

IJ: Money, money, make production!

JC: Right. Now back when it was White's was there more racial segregation in production? You said there were no black supervisors, no black officers.

IJ: In my department in the cabinet room, when I first went to White's Furniture Company, the highest paying job in the cabinet room was case fitting. That was the highest paid job you had. At that particular time there was only one black case fitter. I wouldn't say it was a racial type thing, but back during that particular time that's just the way things were. Not only at White's, but other companies that you went to blacks didn't have the upper jobs. A lot of businesses you go to now and this is 1994, blacks don't have the upper jobs. That's just basically the way things went.

The comparison I was making to Hickory and the way White's used to be after Hickory bought the plant out, a lot of blacks started getting more assistant supervisory positions and more supervisory positions than they did when White's owned it. I can only conclude that it was the type of thing where White's wasn't particularly fond of putting black people in these particular jobs. I mean, you think about it, it was tradition. This was a family-owned business and they wanted to keep it as close to that as possible.

I wouldn't necessarily say it was racial motivated, but it just happened to be that particular thing. There were black people in our department but more white case fitters than there was black. I'm pretty sure some of the black people had to be qualified to fit cases. It was just the fact of being able to fit drawers into a case. It wasn't complicated like doing brain surgery or something like that.

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JC: [laughter] You mentioned Graham Couch.

IJ: He was my comrade, he was my buddy.

JC: Tell me about him.

IJ: He and I had worked together for a long time. We had worked together for so long that we basically knew what the other one was going to do. I guess that's why we made a good team. If we weren't working together we weren't basically that much good. We had worked together so long with each other. We were happy when we were working together. If he had to go do one job and I had to go do another job and not work together, we both basically stayed mad because we liked working together. We were close friends. Some days we would have our problems. Some days we would get peeved at each other, but basically overall I considered he and I good friends, and I still do now.

We were good working partners, too, because it was the type of thing where we would decide to run so many today because surely we can do it.

JC: Just to test yourselves?

IJ: Just to test ourselves. We know they think we can't do it, let's show them that we can do it.

Graham was an extremely good worker. He was an extremely conscientious worker. He had been there a long time. I think Graham had been there for twenty-two or twenty-three years. He had been there longer than I had.

He and I worked together on the clamper. We had some good times and some bad times too. Overall I would have to say that he was one of the finest people that I've ever worked with and one of the nicest. I consider he and I close friends and I still do.

JC: Do you remember any other stories or anecdotes about things you did, besides trying to speed up to challenge yourselves, to produce as much as you could?

IJ: One of the main things that he and I both always had was a concern about the quality. He was a person that wanted his job done right. Even if it was the type of thing

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where they said that we had to have such and such amount, he still wanted his job done right.

He had worked at other furniture companies, too. He had worked at Craftique. I had considered Graham not just a furniture worker but a craftsman. He was good at what he did. He knew the way the job was supposed to have been done. He knew the type of materials that were supposed to have been used. That's the way he wanted the job done.

A lot of times it would just teetotally disgust him that it couldn't be done that way because we had a production rate to run. We just had to get it done. That was the main concern of the company at that particular time.

There were a lot of times where pieces that were chipped off, that were broken, he always wanted to fix those pieces before we built the case, and a lot of times he did. He would say that he didn't care about production, it needs to be right and that he was going to fix it. That's just the way he was. He wanted his job done right.

He could run production, too, because he was a fast worker. He was running the clamp before I was. When I first went to the clamp, I ran one clamp and he ran another. After Hickory consolidated, they put us all at one clamp. At one particular time there were four people working on one clamp. Then it finally got down to where it was just he and I working on one clamp. That's the way it was when the plant shut down, it was just he and I.

JC: When you say one clamp can you describe that?

IJ: There was a big machine that, once you assembled your case on the table, you set it in this clamp. It was pressurized where it would squeeze the case to make sure all your glue joints were tight. Then you would work it out, and what I mean by that was, like, the back rails have to be shot with a nail gun. The front rails may have to be shot with a nail gun or by hand. After that was done you would hit another switch and that would take the pressure off the clamp, and then the guy on the back would set it out on the conveyor belt. So, that's what I meant by that; there were two people working on the

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clamp and you would work it out in the case clamp, and then it would go on the conveyor belt to the next station.

Yes, he [Graham] was a real good guy to work with.

JC: It doesn't sound like he would have gotten along too well with the Hickory philosophy of management.

IJ: He didn't get along with them. Very few people that were at White's before Hickory bought it out got along with the philosophy at Hickory. Hickory's philosophy was to just get production and White's philosophy was to do it right. White's didn't use anything that wasn't top quality. If we were going to use it or--the White's name was going on this--then it had to be top quality. That's just the way it was.

After Hickory bought it out it was more a less a commodity--this is a business where we are going to get so many pieces back, that's just business, we can deal with that when we get them back. We're going to sell more pieces than we are going to get back. I think that was basically their philosophy and that's the way things ran.

JC: Throughout your sixteen years was there any talk of unionization in the plant?

IJ: I think at one particular point there was talk of a union before I went there, when White's owned it; but I think it was such an anarchy about that it was completely swept under the rug and quickly forgotten about. I have heard some of the older people at White's talk about it, and at one time having a meeting. There was such a big mess about it they just swept it under the rug, and it never was brought up again.

The sixteen years that I was there, there was no talk of a union. I don't think anybody had been approached in the plant about unionizing or anything like that. When it was White's, basically everybody just felt their jobs were secure. The bills were being paid. There was no need in raising a stink, just let things go on as it is.

JC: A guy could raise a family on a wage from White's?

IJ: You would have to have a part-time job.

JC: In addition?

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IJ: Yes. I guess that depends. If you didn't have that many bills, if you didn't have that many financial obligations, yes, you could raise a family. But if you had financial obligations--especially with the economy like it is--now you had to have something else. Even if you were making a decent wage but you have a house payment, a car payment, and a family to raise, you needed some supplement to your income. I guess that's the way half of the people in the United States are now.

I was listening to the news the other day where they were speaking about some statistics where so many families are working two jobs. I guess that depends on how much you want out of life and how hard you want to work. Because you definitely need some supplement to your income. That's my personal feeling with any job you go to, especially if you want to pay off some of your financial obligations early to get yourself situated for retirement.

JC: After the buy out you were still looking at nine dollars an hour tops for a production worker, more or less?

IJ: Right. I would say basically nine dollars an hour.

JC: You said you got insurance. Was that health insurance?

IJ: Right. I think that about twenty dollars a week for family coverage. That included you, your wife, and your kids. There was no dental insurance.

JC: No retirement plan?

IJ: There was a retirement plan, but I couldn't consider that a retirement plan because you couldn't retire off of that. They had this program set up where it was named Retirement Program, but it wasn't feasible to retire on. I mean, basically you couldn't retire on that.

Some of the people maybe would draw thirty, forty, fifty dollars a month retirement. You can't live off that as far as retirement goes. No, retirement on forty or fifty dollars a month, I mean, those retirement figures are from the days back in the 20s and 30s, I would think, not in the 80s and 90s.

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JC: Did you ever own any of the products from the factory?

IJ: This table that we are sitting on now was produced at the plant before Hickory bought it out. There used to be a type of thing, like when defective furniture came back there was an option that employees could buy it. If you had some furniture knowledge, a lot of times there were pieces that you could easily fix and make nice pieces out of. This table is one I bought from the plant and I think this is it. Most of the other furniture I have is antiques and furniture that I built myself.

For instance, that china cabinet right there I built.

JC: It's beautiful.

IJ: This valance over here I built. The microwave cabinet, I built that. I have some other pieces in the living room that I built myself. Basically I was looking for antique pieces and building my own furniture. I never did buy that much from the plant.

JC: It sounds like you share Graham's craftsmanship.

IJ: Yes, I guess so. Like I say, I always had a knack for building. Once I went to White's I started learning different procedures to build and different techniques that you could use.

Going into business for myself had been something I wanted to do for a long time, like so many other people. But as long as you have the security of a paycheck coming in, as long as you've got the security of health insurance, then you would say that you would just wait and do it later on. Then, before you know it, the years go by and you never do it.

I guess you could say that this was thrust on me by the plant shutting down. It was either that or go out here and find a job making four or five dollars an hour, like a whole lot of the other people after they left White's had to do. I didn't want to do that.

When the plant shut down there was a self-employment program that you could enroll in. I enrolled in that program. It was a year long program.

JC: Who was that sponsored by or through?

JONES

IJ: It was BTI, the Business Training Institute. It was a new organization that the state of North Carolina was trying. They would come in for companies that had shut down for workers that would be dislocated, and if you are interested in self-employment you can go through the state, through the Unemployment Commission. And if you are eligible for it you can go through this training course to help get your business set up.

I had been doing this part time for the past five years, so I said I might as well go ahead on and go to this thing to get it fine tuned. Then maybe I could go into this full time and make a living. So that's what I did.

It was an interesting program. It taught you a lot of the do's and the don'ts, a lot of the paperwork, the bookkeeping, the tax records, your records as far as materials. It was an enlightening program. I really enjoyed it. As a matter of fact, I'm still enrolled in the program now, but I'm in the monitoring stage. That means after you finish getting your business set up, after the classroom part, then you are in a monitoring stage where they keep in contact with you to see how your business is going and maybe what you need to do as far as marketing goes, advertising goes. The changes that you may need to make to make your business more productive.

JC: How many hours a week were you spending in the business training?

IJ: We were going three hours on Thursday, and then the rest was in the classroom and out of classroom work. I would have to say on a basis of around fifteen hours a week, because you had a lot of footwork to do. You had a lot of research work to do, in addition to your classroom part. Plus you were going through the stage of trying to get your business set up by trying to find the capital that you needed, if you needed capital to get your business going. Trying to secure a building if you needed a building to get your business going.

JC: You started this all after the shutdown?

IJ: After the shutdown. I think it basically started about two to three weeks before my last day at the plant, before I was actually laid off.

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JC: Can you tell me about the end?

IJ: The end of the plant was a sad time. It was like a closing of an era. A lot of these people were like family. You knew everybody by name. A lot of these people you had gone to their homes and they had come to your homes. It was just like a family was breaking up. In the last days it was sad.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

IVEY C. JONES

JANUARY 18, 1994

JEFF COWIE: How did you first hear that the plant was going to close down?

IVEY C. JONES: They called us all together one morning.

JC: Do you remember why?

IJ: Everybody just thought it was going to be another what we called, "butt chewing meeting"--you know, where you get your butt chewed out for not doing something right. They said for everybody to come out into the Shipping Department. We said, "Okay." Everybody went out there.

[inaudible] and I had gotten a tip before we went out there, "look, they are going to shut this plant down."

JC: Where did that come from?

IJ: It was just a tip that our assistant supervisor had given us. I don't know where he had gotten it from, or whether he was just trying to be funny or just speculating, but he said, "They are going to shut this plant down."

We went ahead and went on to the meeting thinking to ourselves in the back of our minds that this is highly possible, because the way things have been going in this company we know it can't keep running like it's going now. When we went out there the guy that was the CEO of Hickory White got up and said that the plant was losing money, they were going to consolidate everything into the Hickory plant, and we could consider this our sixty day notice.

Basically, that was the gist of it, that was it. He said the plant manager will give you all the details and he stepped down. You could have heard a pin drop.

JC: Were there two hundred workers out there?

IJ: Everybody that worked at the plant was in the Shipping Department. You could have heard a pin drop. People had these dumbfound looks on their face. Some of

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the women started crying right on the spot. Everybody just looked around at each other because everybody thought business was going good. Word had come back that the furniture show had gone pretty good. Everyone thought that things were on the upbeat. The market had looked positive and so when they dropped that bomb everybody was just dumbfounded. People went back to their jobs and they couldn't work. They were thinking, this is my job, my paycheck is gone, I've got a house payment, I've got a family, and still management said, "You've got to get your people in gear and get them back to work." That's basically what came down to us, what we were told, to get back on the job and get started back up.

It didn't matter that our lives had been devastated, I mean just totally devastated. Maybe management had gone through this type of thing before, but why people like me? I had worked "short time," a week on and a week off, but to be told, "This is your job and this is it and after sixty days you will have to seek employment somewhere else. I don't know how you're going to make your house payment, I don't care, this is just it, the plant is closed, we are done with you now."

That's just basically the way it was. That's just basically the way it was. I mean, it was the type of thing that we have used you now, we're done with you, we no longer need you, good-bye.

JC: Any compensation, benefits, retraining?

IJ: They said they would pay for sending people back to school for something like a semester. That was just basically it. Sending people to school for a semester is one thing, but see, you have to buy books. I had gone to ACC before and paying for tuition for a semester is fine, but your books could exceed tuition costs very easily, depending on the type of books that you've got to have. It was the type of thing where they say, "We're going to pay for you to go to school--."

JC: Tuition only though?

JONES

IJ: Yes, tuition only. But, if you are unemployed you still have a family, you still got to buy books, you still have to have transportation to go back and forth to school. I think it was just a PR type thing to keep the company from looking so bad.

They also said that they were going to offer the employees severance pay. That was two weeks pay for people that weren't on salary. "We're going to offer these people insurance benefits, you pay your insurance benefits, you have extended benefits under Cobra, but after four months your insurance rate will be three hundred dollars per month, family coverage." That was the Cobra rate.

They said they were going to offer these people insurance, but they didn't say that after four months these people will have to pay three hundred dollars for their insurance.

JC: Up from a hundred or eighty or whatever it was before?

IJ: Right, exactly right. So, I mean, you know, a lot of it was PR. That's just basically all it was, just public relations. I mean, they want to be able to have good standing in the neighborhood, good standing in the community by just saying that they are going to lay these people off, but they are going to do this for them, they are going to do that for them. But they are not giving you any fine print of what the things they're going to do for these people are. This is just basically what we are going to do for them, so they won't be hurting at all.

It had even been rumored on one of the television shows when they were interviewing different people that they said everybody in the plant had been replaced, everybody in the plant had been placed on jobs. Like I said, this was just a rumor. I don't have any concrete proof of that, but it had been rumored that somebody in management said, "Well, all the employees have been replaced." At that particular time I didn't know of anybody that had been replaced.

JC: When you say "replaced" you mean found new jobs?

IJ: Yes, already located other jobs. The company was nice enough to let some of the other companies come in and talk to some of the people that were interested in

employment at some of the other companies like A.O. Smith. Representatives from A.O. Smith came in and talked to some of the people and told them if they were interested in employment after the plant shuts down, they could come to them and put in an application, and they would consider hiring them. Some of the people that did work for White did get jobs at A.O. Smith. Some of them got jobs at DAYCO, some of them got jobs down at the hose plant that makes plastic hoses and things like that. Some of them took jobs for the city and different places like that. Some at this particular point now are still unemployed.

JC: A lot of people in service jobs like flipping burgers?

IJ: I wouldn't necessarily know. The ones I see in Mebane, when I go through Mebane, I know the particular type of jobs they got. But, like some of the others, I don't know whether they are in food service jobs or just what. I would imagine it's just like anything else; once employment is terminated you have to make some kind of move even if it is flipping burgers. Unemployment lasts twenty-six weeks, then you can get a seven week extension, and after that you are on your own. You either have to take one of these four or five dollar an hour job--which is better than nothing if you have no income coming in at all--until you can find something else better.

JC: Okay, we got as far as the big announcement.

IJ: After the big announcement that was just basically it. Everybody was just dumbfounded. People just basically couldn't work. People didn't understand why the plant was shutting down because, "We've got good business, we've got good owners." They just couldn't understand. The point they failed to mention was that this wasn't about the plant shutting down because it didn't have orders, this wasn't about the plant shutting down because we weren't getting enough business. This wasn't about the plant shutting down because we were doing bad work, this was just business as usual. The company had basically run it's course. They had drawn all out of the company they could draw out. They bought the Hillsborough plant and they bought the Mebane plant. They consolidated

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the Mebane plant and the Hillsborough plant into Mebane. They re-sold the building in Hillsborough and made money off that. They had run this plant [Mebane] as long as they wanted to run it. Now they were going to shut this one down in hopes of selling everything out of it and then consolidate Hickory. It is just like a business chain reaction; you shut one plant down and consolidate to another one. Basically, if you think about it, this was associated with Hickory indirectly. This wasn't one of the original plants that Hickory owned, so they didn't have anything to lose by running everything out of it they could run out of it and then shut it down. This wasn't one of their base plants. I mean, it wasn't like Hickory Furniture, it wasn't like Hickory Chair or some of these other companies. It wasn't like they were shutting any of them down. They were just basically shutting down companies that they had just previously bought, so it was business as usual. I mean, we run the companies as long as we can run it, we pull all the assets out of it that we could pull out of it, we pull all the capital out it, we basically made our money that we paid for the company by the stock that was sitting on the floor when we bought it. Plus now we've got the White's name, so we can still keep producing White because we own the name. We don't necessarily have to produce it in Mebane. We don't particularly have to produce it by those people that have those jobs down there. We own the name. We can go to Japan and make White Furniture Company, ship it back over here, and it's still White Furniture Company because we own the name. It is just basically the type of business decision as usual.

JC: Was there a sense among the employees that the plant could still be run profitably?

IJ: Honestly we had had some problems--from my experience at being at White--with production. We had had some problems with quality. I know that in the last few years, just like everybody else in the furniture business knows, the furniture industry had been down. From what I had seen on television this year was one of the most upbeat years it has been for furniture in the past six or seven years, because everything looked

good this year. They had strong sales at the market. From what I could gather everybody did pretty good at the show, especially the high end pieces of furniture. This is the type of thing where people just new to the plant were beat at. It was just taken for granted, well, this plant has always run.

This plant has gone through a depression and survived. This plant has gone through being burnt down to the ground and rebuilt, and it survived. I mean, you think about it, if you went to a plant applying for a job and this plant had been in business for five years and the plant over here had been in business for a hundred and five years, which plant would you want to work at? You would think that the hundred and five year old business would be more stable. Naturally, a new business starting out-- [pause] If you are going to fold the first five years you are in business is when you will fold. That's when the new businesses go under, in the first five years of business. A company that has been based here for a hundred and five years, gone through a depression, gone through the great fire and still is producing, still is employing people, yes, I would want to go to this plant.

That's the sentimentality that a whole lot of people had that this company will always be here, this company will always run. But what they didn't figure on was new people coming in with new business ideas thinking in the 90s rather than loyalty to the employees brought on the base of the 50s thing. I think this is basically the way this thing was to get in here and make money, make a good turnover, make a good profit, be able to buy this name and put it on another product and get out. I feel like it was just a short-term business.

JC: Back to the factory, how did they start laying people off? Who did they chose? When did they start cutting back production?

IJ: Production was cut back to maybe a thousand man hours. That's the way they figure production--by man hours. I figure myself an intelligent person and I never could figure this thousand-hour-type thing.

JONES

It was cut back to a thousand hours and the way that we were laid off was in phases. For example, it started down in rough mill. What I mean by that is where rough lumber is pulled in from the yard down to where the saws cut it rough. That's what we call a rough end. They started laying off from there; like when that particular department had cut all they needed to cut, they laid them off. Then it worked its way on down. It went from department to department. For instance, our department was laid off then. After our department was laid off, then finishing, because finishing was after us. Then after finishing came shipping, because shipping was after finishing. It was like a chain reaction type thing, like from where it started to where it finished, you were laid off that way. If it started on the rough end, the rough end was laid off first. Then it just dwindled on down from department to department to department, until it finally got everybody out.

There were a whole lot of people from our department that were laid off before we were, but at that particular time we were building samples to go to the furniture market.

JC: Basically nice?

IJ: Right. These will be top of the line quality pieces. Then you didn't have the same attitude about working on them because you said, "Why do we have to be so particular in running these samples? We won't benefit from it? Hickory will because their employees, if they sell good, will probably start working five to six days a week. What good will that do us?" It was still the type thing even though you wanted to do the work right, you still had this animosity, where I basically don't care whether it's done right or not because I won't benefit from it. Hickory will, but I won't. Basically after we got the samples out we were laid off.

JC: What was the last day like?

IJ: The last days were dirty days because it was clean-up days. That's what we had to do, that was our job-- to clean up. We had to go down to the basement and clean up. There was so much water, dust and dirt. It was a dirty job. That's the way it was our last day.

JONES

It was sort of an upbeat day because even though you knew this was it; it was a like a challenge to you, too, because you didn't know what tomorrow would bring. You also knew you didn't have to get up early and go to work, because there wasn't any work to go to. [laughter]

It's just like anything else; if you haven't been laid off from a job, it's very scary. It's extremely scary. Even if you get laid off from a job and you've got another job, it's still scary. Because if you have been doing one particular job--for instance, for sixteen or twenty, twenty-five or thirty years--and then you have to change and start all over again doing something different, it's scary.

JC: How about the older people in the plant?

IJ: I imagine they were terrified. For a lot of the people that's all they had known. That's all they had done. It's just like anything else; a lot of places will tell you we are equal opportunity employers. That means for blacks, whites, older people, but that's not necessarily the case. A whole lot of these people are maybe fifty-five years of age and they know it's going to be difficult for them to find jobs. Companies today have this mentality of we want people that can produce. We want people that are healthy. We want people that can be there everyday. It's just like anything else; when you get to be fifty-five years of age, you can't go the same pace as a man that is twenty or twenty-five years. I'm thirty-five now and I can't go the same pace as the guy who's twenty.

JC: You mentioned getting up early, when did the shift run?

IJ: From seven o'clock in the morning until three-thirty in the afternoon.

JC: One shift?

IJ: Yes. You could be asked to work maybe an hour or two over in the afternoon. If you were working over on samples that could mean working, like, from seven o'clock in the morning until seven o'clock at night, or seven o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock at night. It just depended on how badly they needed the sample pieces and how much they needed to get them out.

JONES

JC: Did they give you overtime for that?

IJ: Yes, you got time and a half for that. You got overtime pay for that and you'd also get a break in between, too. It wasn't that we were slaves down here, because you still got a break and you still got time and a half.

JC: On the flip side were you running on "short time" frequently?

IJ: Right before the plant shutdown we were working a four day work week, thirty-two hours a week. Sometimes we were off a week. At Christmas we might get a two week vacation rather than one. If business was going good, we only got one. If business was bad and things were slow, we got two. You could end up getting a week for Thanksgiving rather than just Thanksgiving Day.

Yes, we did work "short time." Maybe a four-day work week and then sometimes we would work a week and then off a week. Some of the people in the plant weren't even getting a four-day work week. Some were working three days a week.

JC: Back in the 70s and 80s before the buy out, were there big fluctuations in the number of hours you would work?

IJ: It was basically still the same way. The furniture business is basically the same way, it fluctuates. Even when White owned it, I had worked a week and was off a week. I had worked some "short time," but I guess I drew the most unemployment after Hickory bought the place than I did before they bought it out. After Hickory bought it, we had just completely been out for weeks at a time, where we could draw full benefits for that particular week. It had come down to where we had worked a week and maybe be off a week. It was just fluctuations, you might say.

JC: Can you tell me who did what on the line? Were there certain jobs for women and certain jobs for men, and things like that?

IJ: I could not say so at all. Women were expected to do jobs just like men were. I don't think there were jobs that were chivalry-type things. It was, we pay you to do this

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job so do it. It wasn't the type of thing where some jobs were men jobs and some jobs were women jobs.

We built tables like this dining room table right here, and women were expected to lift this table and move it just like the men were. It was type of thing that you are getting paid to do this job and you just do it. I can't say they discriminated by saying some jobs were women jobs and some jobs were men jobs, because to them a job was a job; and as long as it needed to be done, they didn't care who did it, as long as you're getting paid do it.

JC: How about breaks? Where would you spend them? How long would you have? What would you do?

IJ: You got a fifteen-minute break in the morning and that was at different times. I think ours, if I can remember, because it seems like it has been so long ago, was from 9:30 to 9:45. Some of the other departments, in order to keep from having so much congestion down in the break room, would go at different times.

Some of the people spent their breaks on their jobs. If you brought your own lunch you could spend your break right on your job. Some people would go down to the commissary, especially people who liked to smoke. For lunchtime you got thirty minutes. That was arranged at different times, too. That could range anywhere from 12:00 to 12:30 or, like, from 11:45 to 12:15. Ours was from 11:45 to 12:15.

We didn't get a break in the afternoon. You had a break in the afternoon if you were working one or two hours over. The reason we didn't get a break in the afternoon was because the people voted that out, saying that we didn't need a break in the afternoon so we could get off at 3:30.

JC: Take it off at the end of the day.

IJ: Yes, that's right. So that's basically what we did, we stopped taking a break in the afternoon and only took a fifteen-minute break in the morning.

JONES

It used to be that you got a ten-minute break in the morning and a ten-minute break in the afternoon. We just traded off about ten minutes and that was basically it.

JC: You mentioned earlier that the workers kept tabs on the furniture market and how things were going. Did they do that a lot?

IJ: Oh, definitely. Anybody that was in the furniture business stayed glued to the television, because basically you could just about predict how the rest of your year would be according to the furniture market. If you listened on the news and you heard that high-end furniture was not doing good, you knew that you would probably be working short time. We were building high-end furniture, and if they said that high-end wasn't selling that well this year, you could probably say that we would be working some short time. We would probably be working four days a weeks or working a week and off a week. That's basically why we kept up with what the market was doing that particular week. If they would say high-end furniture business is doing good, you would have in the back of your mind that we would probably be working some overtime this year.

You basically kept up with it because you wanted to know exactly what was going on. You wanted to know exactly what was selling. You wanted to know exactly what wasn't selling, because if your particular type furniture wasn't selling, then it meant short time and cut backs.

JC: How's your cabinet business doing? Can you tell me a little bit about the business training and then what happened?

IJ: I already had my own building and I already had my own tools. I had been doing this part-time for the past five years. I was doing this to help supplement my income at White's in hopes that some day just going into this type thing full-time. Once I got into the business training program, I guess you may say that the ball started rolling for me as far as thinking on the basis of full-time rather than part-time.

At this particular point in time, my business seems to be doing very well. It's just like anything else; it fluctuates. Some months you have a lot to do, some months you

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don't have that much to do, and some months you can't take care of all the calls you get. At this particular point right now, things seem to be going good. I've got steady work to do, I've got orders steadily coming in, so at this particular point right now business looks good and I'm hoping to have a prosperous '94.

I intend to start pushing my product as far as furniture goes, more so than cabinets, because I like furniture work better. Furniture work is basically what I had done. Cabinet work is easy work, but I would rather build individual pieces where it has a fast return. I can produce the work, do a good job, and get it out quick, more so than being tied up three or four weeks building a bunch of cabinets for a house.

JC: Who are you selling your stuff to?

IJ: Different people. Most of my work now is being sold to individuals that are remodeling their homes or people that are building new homes. I do a lot of work for churches in this area. I've basically gotten the market for all the churches around here. That consists of anything from building furniture to building cabinets, to doing refinishing work for particular churches. Basically my work now is being done to the general public and to individuals more so than contractors.

JC: You remember the talk about the Mercedes Benz Plant coming to town? Were you hoping for that?

IJ: Not particularly because I never looked at the Mercedes Plant affecting me directly. Had it maybe been where there was going to be five thousand new homes, I would have said come in, because maybe I can get some of the cabinet work. I never thought about the Mercedes Plant period, because I never had in my mind going to the Mercedes Plant to apply for a job. My basic concern now is to get my business up and going. That's my major concern. My major concern is not seeking employment somewhere else, but to keep my job, to keep my business going.

One thing one of my instructors told me in my business training course, he said, "One thing about being in business for yourself is that you never have to worry about

being laid off or unemployed again, because whether your business is successful or not depends on you. It depends on how hard you are willing to work, and how hard you're willing to get out there and push your product." That's one of the basic things I keep in the back of my mind. I don't ever want it to be a type of thing where some guy sitting behind a desk says, "You can't work for my company no more." My main goal now is to dwell a hundred and ten percent on my business and not to look for another job.

I have financial obligations just like anybody else. I've got bills just like anybody else; but as long as I can keep the bill collectors off my back and still keep my business going and built-up to the point that I want it, that's what I intend to do.

When you decide to be self-employed, there are a lot of cut backs you've got to make. Your quality of living changes. A lot of times when you can go out to that steak house and get a steak, you have to change that because you have to set common goals that you want to achieve. You know that if that's what you want to achieve, that's what you have to stick with. You can't achieve them by doing all those little extras you used to do when you had a steady income.

JC: How did you capitalize your company? Did you take out a big loan?

IJ: I basically had everything that I needed. The five years that I started doing this business I invested everything I made back into my business. I didn't take a salary for myself. I didn't have to take what I was making in my shop to pay any of my financial obligations. So I invested everything I made there back into buying tools and the things I needed. As far as overhead, I don't have any.

JC: You were in pretty good shape when the shutdown came.

IJ: I didn't worry as much as some of the people did. Yes, I was frightened by not having a steady paycheck each week. I was getting X number of dollars; because even though I was still in the self-employment training program till my business actually got started, I was still able to draw unemployment. It wasn't the type of thing where I was totally without income at all. I still had some income coming in.

JONES

Yes, naturally I was frightened too. It's just like I say, I had been in this plant for sixteen years and it was the only work job I had had. It was the type of work that I loved doing. I didn't consider this a job, I considered this a career. This was a career for me not just a job or a paycheck. I took pride in the work that I did. To me it meant something.

One of the things that used to always piss me off at the plant was when they said, "Well, Hickory does a better job than White. Hickory does this better than White." Hickory didn't do any better than White. I have seen some of Hickory's furniture. They didn't do a bit better than White. It used to always just teetotally piss me off because they always made it sound like, you know, we don't do anything.

If the quality of our work went down, it was because of them and the outrageous production rate that they had set. Not only that but the type of materials that they started using. I mean, they started using defective products. They started using defective materials. Their major concern was that they had to make that dollar and also want quality, but Hickory does it better. That used to just piss me off. I got tired of hearing it. It would just make me sick. I used to say, "If Hickory is doing so well, why don't you just pack-up and move to Hickory? Get yourself a supervisor's job or a management job up there and put somebody else down here that wants White's to run for White's."

It's just like a supervisor I used to have years ago when I first went there who used to tell me, "You have to compare apples to apples and oranges to oranges. You can't compare apple to an orange because they won't taste the same because they are not the same fruit."

JC: Your training as a furniture maker and a cabinet maker that you are using now for your business came from White's?

IJ: Yes, basically from White's. It came from watching what they did right and what they did wrong. The things they were doing right you would want to capitalize on, and the things they were doing wrong you would want to correct in your business, or you would make the same mistakes they made.

JONES

I feel like the downfall of White's basically stemmed from a power struggle within management when the White's owned it. It was the type of thing where the Millers and the Whites were in together. Mr. White was getting ready to step down and he had a son that he thought should run the company. Steve Miller also had a son that was in the company that he felt like was capable of running the company. I basically felt like it stemmed from a power struggle within the company and that's why it ended up having to be sold.

It's just like anything else, if you get conflict in management--you can have conflict among employees and straighten it out because you can fire one. You can say, "Look, you go here and work and you go there and work, or I will just fire both of you." But when you've got people in management that are co-owners, and you get one struggling against the other, then you've got the recipe for a company destruction. That's just basically it.

JC: Do you have any clues as to what the split was over?

IJ: Basically I don't have any idea, but I feel like it was the type of thing where one said, "I'm going to make my son president." And the other one said, "We should have some kind of vote on it."

I don't think it was voted on at all. I think it was that Mr. White said, "I'm letting my son be president." I think that possibly started the conflict, because it wasn't very long after that they started having this power struggle conflict and White's was sold.

We received a letter one week that said for all the employees from management at White's not to worry about your job. There has been some people looking at the company, but the company is not going to be sold. We received that letter on Friday and then Tuesday the company was sold lock, stock, and barrel. That Wednesday a lot of the people at the plant had already been laid off. The plant had been shutdown because they wanted to restructure then.

JC: How long was it shutdown for?

JONES

IJ: They shut the plant down that Wednesday and they reopened again on the following Monday.

JC: Did they retool during that time?

IJ: They did what they call a clean up. See White's had never thrown away anything. They came in and cleaned up and started getting rid of a lot of stuff. They sat down to see who did what, who they needed to do what, and who they didn't need to do what. It just went from that.

There were some jobs there that weren't needed. We had one particular guy there and the only thing he did was to run around and get our drink bottles. That was his job. He got our drink bottles and put them in these drink cartons. They said, "We don't need to be paying this guy to go around and get drink bottles. People can put their own bottles back up."

Some of the jobs that they got rid of were justifiable and then some of the jobs they got rid of I don't think were justifiable. Especially for some of the people that had been there for a long period of time. These people were close to retirement age so these people could take early retirement or take layoff, one or the other.

JC: Before the buy out, before you knew anything about it, did you ever have any personal relationship with Mr. White? Did he ever walk around the plant? Did he talk to anyone?

IJ: He would always shake everybody's hand at Christmas and say, "Have a nice Christmas, have a safe Christmas." That was basically all of the dealings that I had with him. If he walked in the plant he would look up and casually throw his hand up. Some of the people he had close association with, but the majority of them he didn't. It was the type of thing even if he didn't know you, if you worked for his company and someone in your family died or had you died, he was still come to your funeral or to your wake. When Hickory bought the place out, it wasn't like that.

JONES

I know on occasion that people in the plant had been told, if somebody they worked with died to go to the wake that night, because they can't let everybody off to go to the funeral. Once you were dead that was just it, they were through with you, they didn't need you any longer.

JC: Did you ever see this letter that was in The Enterprise?

IJ: Yes, I saw this in The Mebane Enterprise. I remember Mr. White saying, "When the going gets tough the tough gets going."

JC: What do you think of that?

IJ: Well, I guess that's true because whether it's tough or not, when they tell you to go you've got to get going. [laughter] That's basically the way I see it. Whether it's tough or not, when they tell you to get going you've got to get going.

Even after the buy out I think Mr. White stayed in contact with White's and knew basically what was going on. I would see his car by the main office. Some of the people he knew personally by face and personally by name, but I never was one of them.

JC: Is he a pretty important figure in town? You are pretty far removed out here from town politics.

IJ: My son goes to school in Mebane so I am still in town every day. Yes, I guess you could say he's an important figure, but not as important as he used to be. I mean, White's used to be the thing, you know, White's, White's, White's, Mr. White. He owned a lot in Mebane and so when White's shutdown that was basically it. It was just like Mr. White was the pillar of the community. He had a family owned business that had been there for a hundred and some odd years. He was a very respected man in Mebane, a very respected man, he and his family both.

Once Hickory came in that was just basically it. They weren't concerned about family. They weren't concerned about what the community thought. They weren't concerned about what the employees of White's thought. It was just a commodity, we got to make money, and this is it.

JONES

This is just basically the way I felt. It's the type of thing where I wouldn't say anything to a man behind his back that I wouldn't say to his face. That's the way I tried to get along with management. If I had something to say, I would just come out and say it. The worst that I felt like they could do was fire me because I know they definitely couldn't beat me. That's how I got along with them, because I knew to a certain extent that they wanted your opinion and they didn't want your opinion. You just knew how far to go. You would just give it to them whether they wanted it or not.

JC: What sorts of things might you--?

IJ: For instance, if you had your opinion about the way something could be done that would make your job run better or to make the particular line run smoother, they would say, "Yes, that might do it." They wouldn't necessarily take that into consideration, but maybe a day later they'd come back and do it the way that you had suggested and say, "I'm glad we came up with that idea." It was the type of thing that you never came up with the ideas, they always came up with the ideas and you just followed through with them.

JC: Would you get in arguments with management ever?

IJ: I wouldn't necessarily say you'd get in arguments because you didn't argue with management that much. I mean, you might could give your opinion to a certain extent and then after that, that was it. They had the mentality of, "It's my way or the highway, and if you ain't satisfied with the way I told you to do it, just punch out."

It wasn't the type of thing where you could interact with management a lot. With supervisors you could, but with management you couldn't. It was the type of thing where you give some suggestions and sometimes they would listen to your suggestions, but if they had their minds made up to one particular way they wanted to do things, you couldn't change their minds. If you couldn't conform to doing it their way, they would have to get rid of you and find somebody else that would. You could give your opinions to a certain

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extent and they would listen to a certain extent, but that was just basically it. It was the type of thing where we hear you, but we don't hear you all at the same time.

JC: I have one other small set of questions to address. I would like to go back and push this whole closing, the buy out, out of the picture and go back to the 1970s.

IJ: Okay.

JC: You talked about the training program in high school. Was that pretty much your first job?

IJ: Right.

JC: And your only job since?

IJ: That's the only job since. It's the only job I've ever public worked.

JC: Did you go into it with that in mind that this is my career and I'm going--?

IJ: When I went into it I said, "This will be a job for awhile until I can find something else better."

Like I said, White's is always the place that you go as a last resort. I went there and applied for this job. In the classroom training, if you apply for a job and they gave you the job and you didn't take it, then you would fail the class. When you're a senior in high school you don't want to fail a class knowing that you are going to graduate. Even if you have enough units to graduate, which I did have, I didn't want this to be a class I had failed. I was extremely fond of the teacher that was teaching. He and I are still close friends now. I went and applied for the job and I got the job.

After I got there I began to like the furniture work. I had been encouraged by my family, "You're wasting your life at that plant. Go ahead and start looking for another job."

JC: What did they have in mind for you?

IJ: Maybe going to a place like GKN, or GE, or Burlington Industries, some of the big name plants that had good benefits. Basically White's didn't have any benefits. I

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mean, you had your health insurance, a paycheck, and that was it. You had no dental insurance and no life insurance policies.

Burlington Industries and all the other big name companies did. They also had profit sharing. They had profit sharing, I think, at White's before I went there, but from the time I was there they didn't have it.

The other companies had profit sharing, like if you stayed there maybe twenty-five years. For instance, if White's, at this particular point, had profit sharing and these people that had been there twenty-five or thirty years, they probably would have been glad for the plant to sell out. It would have been a lot of money for the people that had been there a long time.

When you leave with basically what you went in with-- nothing--it is sort of sad.

JC: When did you get married?

IJ: I've been married about twelve years. My wife and I have been together for eighteen years. We have been together ever since we were in high school.

I was working part-time for three hours a day when she and I were dating my senior year in high school. I stayed there all that time and I said, "I need to go ahead and find me a better job." Then I became more and more interested in furniture. I got to thinking to myself that I would try and build this. At that particular time I didn't have anything but a jigsaw, a couple of hammers, and things like that. I said, "I think I will try to build a little table." I would build a little table and I would feel pretty confident about that. And I would say, "Well, I can start building something else."

JC: After how many years at the plant did you start building your own?

IJ: After about three or four years I started small pieces like bread boxes, whatnots, and things like that. Then I started getting into the tool end of it, the type of tool you needed to do more detail work.

After I stayed there for the first five years, I really became interested in furniture. I realized then that I wanted to stay in furniture, to stay in that field. I knew it wasn't a

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money-making type field unless you were in upper management, because as long as you were an employee you would get a certain percentage and then that was it. But if you were in upper management, you made a good salary. If you were an employee, you had an hourly wage and that was it.

JC: Did you ever think you might make that jump from production to management?

IJ: No, that was never even perceived. A lot of times you hear tell of jobs having a glass ceiling, well, I knew that was a glass ceiling and there wasn't any need in shooting for that.

In all honesty I had been offered supervisory positions at White's after Hickory bought the plant out, but that was the type thing I didn't want to pursue, because at that particular time supervisors were being fired faster than employees were. If you were a supervisor and had twenty-five people working under you, and your production rate was fifteen hundred dollars one week and you couldn't get fifteen hundred dollars this week, or maybe you went three weeks and you didn't get your production rate--boom, you were gone. You were fired. I mean, it wasn't the type of thing where they would change your job inside the plant, you were terminated.

I got to thinking about that and I didn't want to have to go through that. This way at least I am still getting a paycheck each week. That's the mentality that you always have, paycheck, paycheck, paycheck. A lot of times that's what can keep you. You don't ever think about what's going to happen if this paycheck runs out. Then what have you got? There is a good possibility that the paycheck will run out.

Supervision maybe, but as far as management up here, no. I knew chances of any person of color being out in the office was astronomical. That was just my feeling. I felt like a meteorite would probably hit me before that happened.

By the same token I can't say that it was a racial type thing. I just feel like it was the type of thing where they just said, "We've got people we normally deal with. We've

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got our buddies and that's just the way we want to keep it. We just run things on the buddy system."

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

JONES

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

IVEY C. JONES

JANUARY 18, 1994

JC: This is the interview with Ivey C. Jones on the Mebane plant closing project.

How do you feel about Bill Bamberger [He photographed the last months of the plant's operation as well as the actual shut-down of operations. His photographs were displayed in Mebane in February '94.] taking photographs of the plant? Do you appreciate that?

IJ: When I first saw Bill taking pictures of the plant it teetotally pissed me off. It did. It just completely made me mad. I said, well, you know, it's humiliating enough to lose our jobs. We are already frustrated. We don't know where our next paycheck is coming from and we don't know where we will find a job, and here this guy is looking at everybody's face and taking pictures, taking pictures, taking pictures. I resented it and a lot of the other people resented it, too. A lot of people didn't even want to talk to him. Then too, by the same token, some of the people thought he was a spy.

JC: [laughter]

IJ: They did, they thought he was a spy working for Hickory. He's just taking pictures to find out who's working and who's not. Yes, some people actually thought he was a spy that Hickory had planted in there to take pictures. Then a lot of people said, "I ain't going to let him take my picture."

After I finally talked to him, he was telling me all about what he was doing. It seemed like he was genuinely concerned about the people losing their jobs. Then I thought this guy must be on the level.

Then once we started talking--he began to talk to you everyday or two--it's the type of thing where you may say we became friends, because I consider him a friend now. At first, no. When I first saw him with his camera, I considered him the enemy. I looked at him just like I did management, just one more vulture in here trying to pick the bones of

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the employees. That's just basically the way I looked at it. I guess that's why my wife always tells me I shouldn't judge people just by first sight. That's what I'm guilty of, I judge people the first time I see them. I decide whether I like them or don't like them right from the start. Most of the time I don't even give them a second chance.

In Bill's case I guess he is one of the lucky ones that I did give a second chance.

JC: He was around a lot.

IJ: He was around a long time. He was even there at the very closing of the plant.

Like I said, Bill seems to be an all right guy. I like him a lot. I think what he's doing--if he doesn't help other companies or help other people--at least it will give people a sense of even though I did lose my job, it's not totally forgotten. Somebody will remember this. Somebody will have pictures of this.

That's important because if you've been in a plant where you've all been like family for a long period of time, it hurts when it's disbanded. Even some of the people in management were close to some of the employees. For instance, Fletcher Holmes, he was just like one of the employees. He was a real nice guy. I thought a lot of him, as a matter of fact, I bought a lot of stuff and he was one of the people that was genuinely concerned and hurt by the plant shutting down. He was just as hurt as everybody else was, because to my understanding he was one of the key people and he didn't know anything before the day that we did. He found out the same way we did.

JC: Have you seen any of Bill's photographs?

IJ: I saw Bill at the bank one day and he showed me a bunch of them. It was exciting to see. It was just like old times again. It brought back some of the old people that you had seen and some of the memories and all that you had. Good times and bad times. But I saw him at the bank and he showed me some.

When he called me the other day he said he was in the darkroom working then. He said they were having a showing in February or March--.

JC: I think in March.

JONES

IJ: --For the workers of that plant. I plan to go to that one definitely. I told him I would go by the darkroom and see him, too. I guess I will go by there and get a chance to talk to him again. I saw him at the bank but he was in a hurry. He was rushing, so I didn't get a chance to talk to him very long.

JC: Thanks so much for the interview.

IJ: Well, thank you.

JC: It was great, absolutely wonderful.

END OF INTERVIEW