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Interview

with

WALLACE H. BRADSHAW

April 10, 1994

by Valerie Pawlewicz

Transcribed by Jackie Gorman

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

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

WALLACE H. BRADSHAW
APRIL 10, 1994

VALERIE PAWLEWICZ: I am interviewing Wallace Bradshaw and Mrs. Ozelle Bradshaw in their home in Graham, North Carolina. The date is Sunday, April 11, 1994. The time is 1:35 P.M.

Mr. Bradshaw, I wanted to start with general questions and the most general question is, when did you start working at White's?

WALLACE BRADSHAW: February 17, 1947.

VP: You remember the exact date?

WB: I sure do.

VP: It sounds like it was an important date.

WB: Yes, it was an important date. Of course, to verify that, I had to check back with the personnel there at the plant just to confirm the date that I did start work. It was confirmed that I went to work with White Furniture on February 17, 1947.

VP: What job did you first do?

WB: Well, I went in the machine department, and they put me to sanding the edges on some casings, I believe it was. That's where I started. I worked on that for awhile and then just shifted kind of from job to job for a few days until they thought that maybe I might could learn to operate a molder.

VP: A molder?

WB: Yes, a molder is a machine that has cutter heads on it--four cutter heads on the one we had there at the plant at that time. You could dress the lumber on four sides at one time or put the straight shape on it with that machine.

VP: Is that a more advanced job than sanding or just a different type of job?

WB: Well, a different type job I would say. Sanding is important because you sand your material down so you can put a finish on it--sand it and get it smooth so you can put the finish on to make it look pretty.

VP: Why were you moved from sanding to molding?

WB: Well, evidently they had enough people in the sanding department to take care of the sanding. Since I wasn't experienced in that, why, they just moved me where they needed me hoping I could learn a little bit as I moved from one place to another, from operation to operation.

VP: How did you learn these different jobs? Was there one person who would show you how to do it? Or would each person take you on?

WB: Each person that you went to was experienced on the job, and they would show you about the job and what to do, of course, under the foreman's supervision.

VP: Right. Just to back track a little, how did you get your job at White's Furniture?

WB: Well--I think--I had just come out of the service, and I had tried a job or two. Of course, there wasn't much pay in the jobs that I was working on. So I thought maybe I might enjoy wood-working. I hadn't ever done any. It would be a new experience for me. So I went to White Furniture, and I talked with Mr. Phonse Bean [V.P. of White's/Plant Manager]. Mr. Bean asked me what I knew about furniture work, and I told him I didn't know a thing. I said, "Mr. Bean, I grew up out in the country on a farm, and we would nail boards on the barn once in a while if one came lose. We had pigs there, and I could put up some poles and make a pig pen. I know how to drive a nail, I know how to use a hammer, I know how to use a handsaw, I know how to use a crosscut saw, but you don't have much of that in the plant here. So I don't know a thing about furniture making, I'll have to learn." He said, "Well, I can use you if you can learn." I said, "Well, I've always been willing to try, Mr. Bean, at learning different things. If you will give me a try I'll see what I can do. If I don't do, why, you can just tell me to be on

my way and go look for something else." So he gave me a job, and I stayed with him for almost forty-two years.

VP: So it worked out?

WB: It worked out nicely.

VP: Was it difficult to learn furniture making skills since you hadn't done any furniture making before then?

WB: To some degree, yes. They say it takes several years to learn the basic skills, and I would say that's about right. I stayed on that machine under the supervision of an operator for several years. I finally felt that I could operate it so I got my chance at it. So I did. I went ahead and stayed on the machine for several years.

VP: Was that the molding machine?

WB: That's the molding machine.

VP: How long did you stay on the molding machine?

WB: Roughly twenty-seven or twenty-eight years.

VP: That was a big move for you to move to it and then to move away from it?

WB: Right. I worked under Mr. Zaner Sykes for all those years. When Mr. Sykes retired--for some reason--they thought that I might could step in his shoes, not fill his shoes, but maybe step into his place. Of course, they gave me a chance to do that. I was fortunate and had the opportunity to serve as foreman or work as foreman with White's Furniture Company for about twelve or thirteen years.

VP: What sorts of responsibilities did you have as a foreman that you didn't have as a molding operator?

WB: Well, I had more people working under me. About thirty-five people working under me that were responsible for the cutting of the lumber, the rough lumbers that came in, the ripsaws, the gluing together of the lumber to make panels, the dressing of the lumber on the ( ). Seeing that each man was at his job, performing his job, in proper manner at all times.

VP: How many people did you have under you?

WB: Just about thirty-five so that's a right big responsibility looking after about thirty-five people.

VP: That's a big job. Did you get any training to learn how to be a foreman?

WB: Yes. Fortunately, while I was on the molder during the years we put in another molder so there was two molders there. Each machine had to have two operators. Mr. Bean seemed to think that we would be more efficient if we had two operators on each machine and somebody to kind of see over the operators to keep the work lined up and to keep the machines ready to go. That's what I did for a period of time.

VP: So that was the first step, you watched two operators working the molding machine?

WB: Two operators and two helpers working the machines, right.

VP: So you had four people you were in charge of?

WB: Four people that I was in charge of at that time.

VP: Who were the people that you worked with on the molding machine?

WB: Well, I've had a variety of people. Several different people at different times. I don't remember all their names, but I had a good man there named Ed West that worked with me for a good number of years. I called him "Little Fella"--Willis Pleasant lived way out towards Roxboro--came in and worked with us for a good number of years. I had a fellow that came from up North one time. He married a lady that lived down in this area. He came down and worked with us for awhile. Victor Zdanowicz, he worked with me for awhile there. Herman Cousin worked with me for several years. Right now that's about all I can remember of the ones that worked with me on the molder. There were other fellows there, but right now I can't remember names right off.

VP: That isn't too many people. Did you find that people stayed at a job for several years, or did you have a lot of movement in and out?

WB: We had some movement, but mostly they stayed with it for several years. Of course, you'll note from the picture there that after thirty years some of the coloreds, unless they worked in the machine department, were with us for all their life, practically all their working life.

VP: Yes.

WB: That's probably the way it was at White's. We didn't have a tremendous labor turnover.

VP: That's the impression I've gotten so far. How would you account for that?

WB: Good management, fair treatment for management, giving their employees a family feeling. Steve White and Phonse Bean treated me just like they did their children. In fact, maybe even a little better than they did their children because they'd make the children stand around more than they did me.

VP: [laughter]

WB: So you had that family feeling there.

VP: In what way did they treat you like family?

WB: Cordially speaking when they would come through the plant speaking, "Hey!" Calling you by your first name, "Hey Wallace, how you getting along today? Anything you need to help you along with your job just let us know." Just general conversation, just the cordiality shown.

VP: About your molding job, I wanted to ask some specifics. What exactly did you do? Did you first take a piece of lumber and then did you have to carve it down at all or did you apply it right to a machine? I don't even know the process involved in molding.

WB: Alright. The lumber that we ran through the molding machine was rip cut into certain widths.

VP: Why do you think that is?

WB: Certain thickness or certain widths.

VP: Was that three inches?

WB: Well, three inches, five inches, or whatever depending on the furniture part that particular piece of lumber was to make. You had your dimension stock ripped to a certain size, and, of course, it was a certain width. You would just feed that right into the machine just continually. On the run maybe you would have five hundred pieces of a certain thing to run. The lumber would be consistent in width and thickness. You would feed it into the machine and of course the machine was setup to cut at a certain thickness and a certain width. Usually your lumber was oversized about a quarter of an inch and you would dress off the quarter of an inch off your lumber as it went through the machine. Dress it and smooth it down to the finished size.

VP: How long did it take you to do five hundred pieces?

WB: Well, it would depend if you were putting a shake on it. If you were putting a shake on it, it was a slower process, but if you were just squaring it up like you were running, say maybe, back rails or inside parts on the machine you could run those pretty fast, maybe a hundred feet a minute.

VP: Wow!

WB: You could just go right on with stock like that.

VP: You said there were two people that operated a machine. Did they have different jobs or the same job?

WB: No, they had different jobs really because one man would feed the material in the machine, and the other man would be on the other end of the machine catching the material and stacking it on the factory truck so it could go on to the next operation.

VP: Did they ever switch or did they usually keep the same job the entire time?

WB: Well, not much switching. You usually kept the same job.

VP: You mentioned that if you just squared it off it would go much faster, but if it had to be dressed down in a particular way it would be slower?

WB: Right.

VP: How slow could it be?

WB: We could slow down to just letting the stock go through the machine at about twenty feet per minute.

VP: Okay. A fifth of . . .

WB: Just about a fifth. Four-fifths longer if you were shaping some materials than it would be to just square it up.

VP: To shape the material did you have to adjust the machine? Whose responsibility was that?

WB: Well, that was my responsibility. Of course, we had to make profile knives to cut the profile or the shapes of the lumber. We had to make the profile knife and fit it in the cutter head. That was my responsibility for several years there.

VP: You made knives?

WB: Yes, I made knives.

VP: How did you learn to make a knife?

WB: Well, I learned that after I went to White's. I just saw what was needed there, and I got some explanation as to what needed to be done by somebody showing me so I learned to make it by being shown.

VP: Did you have to make knives with every job? Or did you use the same knives if you had another job coming on that needed the same type of dressing?

WB: Right.

VP: So you didn't make new knives every time?

WB: No. For a particular pattern I would make a knife for that particular pattern and then use it continually as long as we were running that pattern.

VP: Who told you which patterns were happening next?

WB: That was determined by the group of furniture that we were making. We had different groups. Of course, as we learned which group was coming up next we knew what pattern and what knife we would need to use for that particular group of furniture like the Provincial, Early American or whatever we might be running at that time. We

didn't make the same furniture all the time. We made Provincial, Early American, and different groups.

VP: Depending on the order?

WB: Depending on the order, right.

VP: When you worked at the molding machine which job was yours: to put the material into the machine or to take it out?

WB: Initially to start with, my job was to catch the lumber as it came out of the machine. I did that for awhile and then, of course, being there with the machine and helping the operator set up the machine and change the cutter heads and so forth, it was a learning experience. After I learned, the operator either left to go to another job or retired, why then I had the opportunity to get the job feeding the material into the machine and setting up the machine.

VP: Was feeding the machine considered a harder job or a better job than catching?

WB: A better job.

VP: It was a better job, why?

WB: Well, you had advanced in your technology or learning experience. The pay was more, you got more pay.

VP: That's good. [laughter] That was my next question. I hoped you got more. It was a more skilled job.

WB: More skilled, right.

VP: Okay, so then you moved your way up and after a while you were overseeing two machines and four men?

WB: Two machines, right and four men.

VP: Was it usually men who did this job?

WB: Usually.

VP: Did you ever have women work for you?

WB: Yes, we had ladies on occasion to work with us for awhile. The job was a little heavy for a lady at times and for that reason the ladies would prefer to do something else if they could.

VP: I was just curious.

WB: Yes, we had ladies working in the machine department at times and, of course, in other parts of the factory too. They had a lot of ladies working up in the finishing department at times.

VP: I met a woman named Jane Newcomb. Maybe you didn't know her. When did you retire?

WB: '88, I believe that's right.

VP: She came on pretty late. Did you ever know a Cindy Cook? She worked in the office.

WB: Yes, uh huh.

VP: I didn't know or hear about any women in the finishing room, rubbing and packing and stuff like that. It doesn't sound like there were too many women in the machine room although there were some women.

WB: That's right.

VP: I had a question--just because I had to drive out to Graham--have you always lived in Graham, and did you always commute to Mebane to work?

WB: I've always commuted. I've not always lived in Graham. I've lived in Graham since about 1978. I lived close to Saxapahaw for a good number of years and commuted back and forth. Of course, at one time I lived in Mebane for a couple of years.

VP: You did?

WB: I moved from in town Mebane to just about three miles west of Mebane up in the country. We lived there for five or six years, and then I built a house near Saxapahaw. We lived there for a number of years until I came to Graham in 1978.

VP: Why did you move into Mebane and then out again?

WB: Well, I was renting a house in Mebane at the time I lived in Mebane. I bought a house up in the country just above Mebane there, and that's the reason I moved out of town to the country.

VP: The reason I'm asking is it seems that a lot of people who lived outside of Mebane eventually moved into the town to be near White's so I was curious if you had moved in and then moved out again. Did you move to Mebane to be closer to your work?

WB: I did at that time and then to have a place to live. I had just been married a couple of years, and the place we had we needed to move out of because the place was being sold so I rented a house in Mebane.

VP: Okay.

WB: And then after I got to where I thought I could buy a little house, why, I found this little house about three miles west of Mebane. I bought it and moved there.

VP: Could you hear the White whistle from your house three miles away?

WB: Yes, most of the time because it sounded out pretty loud.

VP: [laughter] When did your typical day begin?

WB: Get up at 5:00 A.M. Get ready for work and eat breakfast. I left for work about 6:15 to 6:30 because we needed to check in at the plant between 6:45 and 7:00. In other words, you were suppose to be on your job and ready to go at 7:00. We could punch our time card between fifteen minutes of 7:00 and 7:00.

VP: What happened if you punched in late?

WB: Well, your foreman would be looking for you and say you ought to be on your job.

VP: Yes. So then at 7:00 you would have the machine warmed up.

WB: Be ready to go.

VP: You would have the materials and someone has told you what materials you'll have, what kind of furniture you're making, what kind of order you have, and then you just start loading things in.

WB: Start at the machine and start feeding your material into the machine.

VP: And do you do that continuously?

WB: Continuously, right.

VP: For how long? When do you stop?

WB: Well, till you finished your order or your bill there, and then you would stop that particular thing, and get your next order or bill and get ready to go.

Of course, we had a break time between 7:00 and lunchtime. At 9:30 we had a ten-minute break to get us a coca-cola and a pack of crackers or step out on the platform for the fellows that smoked. If they wanted to step out on the platform outside of the factory and smoke they were allowed to do that.

VP: It's a fast ten minutes! [laughter]

WB: Fastest ten minutes of the day it feels like.

VP: And then you worked again from 9:40 to 12:00?

WB: 9:40 to 12:00.

VP: And you had . . .

WB: An hour for lunch.

VP: A full hour! That was good.

WB: Yes, that was the policy back at that time. I'd have to have an hour for lunch, and then I would start back to work at 1:00. At that time we were working nine hours a day from 7:00 to 12:00 and from 1:00 to 5:00. Nine hours a day.

VP: How much were you paid initially in 1947?

WB: When I started to work at White Furniture Company I believe my starting pay was fifty-five cents an hour.

VP: Can I ask what your ending pay was? Do you remember? You were on salary probably by then.

WB: I was on salary when I left.

VP: Do you remember your last hourly wage?

WB: Right at the moment I can't, but it was considerably more than fifty-five cents per hour.

VP: I hope. [laughter]

WB: Probably between six and seven dollars an hour, just roughly.

VP: Was fifty-five cents an hour comparable to other jobs in the area at that time?

WB: Yes, it was at that time.

VP: Was that your experience during your time at White's? Did you feel that you were getting paid approximately the same as other people doing the same types of work in other businesses?

WB: Yes. They were comparable with the furniture industry.

VP: Okay. When you first got your job in 1947 when you were working at the molding machine did you say, "I can't stand this job, this is too hard?" Or did you say, "I'll learn to do it, I'll stick it out?" What were your feeling the first couple of weeks?

WB: I don't know why, but it seems like I had a good feeling. It was a challenge. I can do this now because somebody did it before they put me here to try to do it, and I can do it. I'm going to let them know that I can do it. I just had a good feeling that maybe I could learn to do it so I just had to get in there and try.

VP: Yes, sometimes it is helpful to know someone else has done it, and if they can do it, well, I can learn. That's a good attitude to have. It certainly has gotten you pretty far from catching wood to watching over four guys, to being a foreman of thirty-five. That's a big leap I'm sure not everybody made just because they were there a long time.

WB: No, that's true.

VP: It took stick-to-itiveness or stamina to keep on going. What was the hardest thing about your job and what was the easiest thing about your job anytime along your career? Were there especially hard jobs for you to do and especially easy ones?

WB: Well, yes, setting the machine up to do the profile work for the shaping work was harder than just setting it up to do a square job like back rails or inside parts or

something of that nature. Especially the big cuts, we would have to set up to shape a lot of wood and run the machine real slow. That was always harder for me than just the simple operation of the machine setting up for a straight line work.

VP: You mentioned that it was challenge for you. Did you see it kind of like a puzzle, "how can I do this better and right", or did you just see it as something you had to do so that you could get to lunch?

WB: No, it was a challenge. I would say I've got to work it out, I've got to get it as good as I can, I've got to make it as near perfect as I can, as nice as I can. I want to produce as much as I can, but still its got to be a quality that's acceptable.

VP: Did you see a change over time at White's in your thirty years? What were some of the bigger changes that you noticed in your forty years of working at White's?

WB: Well, in machinery or in personnel?

VP: In anything.

WB: As the years went on we got more modern machinery with advanced machine technology and better machinery as the years went by. Of course, the personnel that we had advanced in technology of furniture making. As new help came in it seemed like they could take on better. They knew how to come in and get started better in their work. They had more schooling, more education. I don't know, but they seemed like they were better able to come in and take on a job and learn faster.

VP: I purposely asked you very generally because someone might have noticed maybe a change in policy or a change in the physical environment or a change in race relations, but it seems with your job it was highly technical, and that you were very much responsible for machinery and the pieces coming in and out. What you would have noticed would have been how to make those pieces better or what would make the job easier for the people under you?

WB: Right.

VP: It makes a lot of sense to me.

WB: In speaking of race relations, we always had good race relations at White Furniture. We had a good number of colored folk - or black folk - working with us. We had good work relation, good social relation, and relationships. Never ran into any problems as far as relationships for the fellow workers regardless of color.

We had a little fellow from China come in that worked with us for awhile. Seemed like he enjoyed his work and enjoyed being with us. Of course, everybody got along real good with him.

VP: That's been my impression that different kinds of people felt at home there and that they were able to get along pretty well. That this was within the company that there was a sense of unity, and that everyone regardless of color or ethnicity was there for White's and therefore there was a sense of comradery or less division as might have been expected.

WB: Yes, I guess you would notice--bring up the picture now . . .

[photo being shown]

VP: Yes, I was just thinking.

WB: I guess you would notice that from the picture. I mention Joe Thompson with respect and Rudolph, and all those fellows there were very nice. We all got along good. They would do anything in the world they could for you and vice-versa. If you asked Joe to do something Joe would bend over backwards to help you. That was the general attitude of most of the colored workers; the black folk that we had at White's Furniture Company.

VP: Would you tell for the interview who these men are and what this is a photo of?

WB: Yes, that's . . . The photo there is when we got our thirty-year service pins. The company gave a supper for all the employees--White Furniture Company employees at both Hillsborough and Mebane plant. And, of course, the photos were made into the groups of the different year groups. We had people that had worked five years, ten years,

fifteen years, twenty years, twenty-five years, thirty years, and even just a few that had worked forty or forty-five years that got service pins at that time.

VP: Wow, that's amazing! So this is a group of seven men who worked at least thirty years by this point.

WB: Right.

VP: You said your brother, who's in the photo, had worked more than thirty years?

WB: Yes, he went to work in December of '46, and, of course, I went to work in December of '47, and we got our thirty-year service pin at the same time.

VP: Would you name starting from the left in the front row the men in this photograph?

[looking at photograph and naming names]

WB: First, Joe Thompson, Esker Poole, and Rudolph--I can't remember Rudolph's last name right at the moment. That gentleman there worked with the Hillsborough plant and I can't recall his name at the moment. That funny looking fellow behind him happens to be me.

VP: Going from right to left is you and then the middle back?

WB: That's my brother Cecil Bradshaw and then another one of our Hillsborough workers, and I can't remember his name right at the moment.

VP: O.K., but seven were awarded that pin. Were all the pins the same or did they had a different pin for a different number of years?

WB: The service pins were different. Of course, all the thirty-year pins were the same. But it seems like they had three small rubies--the thirty-year pins--plus a little diamond. I have my thirty-year pin back there in the drawer some where.

VP: I would love to see it.

WB: I'll do that when the interview is over.

VP: Sure, I would love to see it.

WB: Of course, the five-year pins just had one diamond, I believe. The ten-year pin had a diamond and a ruby. The twenty-year pin had two diamonds and a ruby. I can't remember about the twenty-five year pin, but anyway, each one had a little more on it to distinguish it from the previous five-year interval.

VP: Right, and you said you worked there over forty years. Did you eventually get a forty-year pin?

WB: Yes, I got a forty-year pin.

VP: Was it still owned by the Whites' at the time you got your forty-year pin or had it been sold?

WB: No. The company had been sold.

VP: But they carried on the tradition of the pins?

WB: Yes.

VP: What was that like that transition of working for the Whites' for so long, and then having it sold and having the same job but for a new company almost?

WB: Well, there was some differences. Overall, there wasn't too much difference in what I was doing. Of course, we had changes after White's sold to Hickory or the company there. I changed jobs a few months after they came. They wanted to help somebody else come in as foreman there, so I went back to machine operating at that time because they needed somebody back on the molder. They asked me if I would consider making a change there; no cut in pay, same pay and same benefits and so forth. I told them I would. I didn't mind the change that badly. I was willing to work anywhere I could. That's what I told them when they bought, I said, "Anywhere I can help that's what I'm here for. I'm working for you folks, and whatever you need me to do or wherever you need me, why, that's what I'm here for."

VP: I can imagine really minding. Did it not bother you that much?

WB: Well, maybe my ego a little bit.

VP: [laughter] Because you're obviously a very qualified man, and I would feel kind of like it was a step backwards instead of, you know, where you were doing your job for so long and so well.

WB: I really can't let that bother me.

VP: I understand, but I think that's a very important issue and that's a very important change. Do you mind me asking if the new person who came in as foreman had been working at White's before or was he someone from the other company?

WB: No, he was someone from elsewhere.

VP: O.K. How long did you work as an operator then?

WB: Probably three or three and a half years.

VP: What happened at that point?

WB: That's when my retirement time came.

VP: Did you choose to retire or were you asked to retire?

WB: No, I chose to retire. No, I could have worked on if I had elected to or chose to.

VP: Did you come of a certain age or did you decide that this was a good time to go?

WB: Well, I took early retirement. I retired at sixty-two. I had some--not serious--health problems. The doctor said arthritis. I was having a problem there with standing all day, being on my feet all day, and it was causing pain in my hip and leg. So I decided maybe it was a good time to retire and get out and relax a little bit and enjoy myself and do some of the things that I had been wanting to do for forty years.

VP: Did you get a chance to do that?

WB: Yes, I have enjoyed my retirement. It's been good. I've been able to relax and do some of the things that I wanted to do. Of course, I still have a boss here at home. I don't know if many folks know about the 'honey do' business, but anyway, whenever you get to retire if you have a boss at home, why, it's 'honey do this and honey do that."

VP: [laughter] And I hear they are just not going to replace this foreman! She's here for good. [laughter]

What was the last day that you worked for White's?

WB: I can't tell you the exact date, but it was at the end of year, December. It was coming up Christmas vacation in late December of 1988. So it must have been along towards the 22nd or 23rd of December, 1988.

VP: Do you remember your last day?

WB: Yes, I do. I remember the last day just vividly. I was in my regular job most of the day. I guess it must have been along towards 3:00 when the foreman came to me and said, "You can quit now. Just do whatever you want to for the rest of the time." So that's what I did. I just stopped work and wandered around a little bit telling some of the fellows that I had enjoyed working with them. I said I wouldn't be seeing as much of them maybe, but I hoped I would be seeing them occasionally. I went out towards the front of the plant and the plant superintendent met me out there. He gave me that watch.

VP: On the back of the watch it is engraved, Wallace Bradshaw White Furniture Company 1947-88. It's a Seiko.

WB: I've been wearing the watch ever since.

VP: I imagine it's very important?

VP: Yes, it is. It's very important and I've enjoyed it.

VP: You'd think it would almost be harder to be told that I could leave early on my last day. I wouldn't know what to do, and I would kind of feel cheated out of my last hour, but at the same time maybe relieved.

WB: He didn't tell me I had to leave the plant, he just told me I didn't have to work anymore.

VP: [laughter]

WB: So I could just go ahead and wonder around and talk to some of the fellows a little bit.

VP: Say your good-bye's?

WB: Say my good-bye's, right.

VP: Did you ever go back to White's after your last day?

WB: Yes, I would go back occasionally. They would call me sometimes to come down to see if I could help them maybe check on a piece of machinery that they were having a little difficulty with. Maybe I could help get it lined up and get it to running good for them again.

VP: So you were a private consultant?

WB: Well, occasionally.

VP: Independent operator, contractor.

WB: Just go back occasionally.

VP: Would it seem like you had never left or did it seem very different when you visited again?

WB: It was different, a little different, going back in you kind of had to get the feel of it all over. Yes, they wanted me to come back and work some a time or two, but my sister was quite ill at that time, and I was trying to spend some time with her. I didn't feel like I could get back and help them at that time - work a month or two right at that time. So I didn't get to do that.

VP: It sounds like you went back occasionally and did help out with some of the machinery which was what you knew.

WB: Right.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

WALLACE BRADSHAW
APRIL 11, 1994

WB: . . . . period of time.

VP: For a long time. I spoke with one woman whose grandfather had worked there and lived in Mebane, and she listened. Life ran around that whistle blowing, and it was very hard for her when the whistle wasn't blowing anymore. She didn't walk to work and walk home for lunch. She had to drive to a different town to get a job. It was a big change for her.

WB: It sure was.

VP: You said when you drove past the factory you thought about the times that you had worked there. What sort of memories come to mind when you drive past?

WB: Well, I would say, there's where I went in and talked to my friends a few minutes before time. That's where I talked with the fellows about their jobs for the day and what they needed to do. That's where I would tell them the importance of what they were doing and the importance of doing a good job, and trying to accomplish as much as we could while we were on the job.

VP: So it wasn't a particular memory that would come to mind and make you chuckle, but it might more of a general feeling that you had towards the place?

WB: More or less, right.

VP: Attitudes that you carried with you?

WB: I remember the time that Mr. Bean brought the two black snakes in the plant there one day at lunchtime that he had found down on his place there. The colored fellow there, Tass Cousin, of course, Tass is just as scared of a snake as he could be and Mr. Bean brought the two snakes in there and dropped them out on the floor at Tass's feet. Tass jumped about two feet in the air and just couldn't say a word. [laughter]

VP: [laughter] That would be frightening!

WB: Of course, that was kind of amusing to all of us at that time even though it scared Tess about half to death.

VP: Were the snakes alive?

WB: No, no.

VP: Even so . . . Were there many pranks that went on at the factory or were they limited?

WB: No, no, they were limited. Of course, this wasn't during work time. This was at lunchtime, during lunch break. No horse play when the machines were running. No, we didn't go for pranks or anything when the machinery was running. Any pranks were at break time or lunchtime. If we were going to pull a prank, why, it had to be at those times.

VP: Did you ever pull any pranks?

WB: Not really, not that I remember right off.

VP: I can imagine you helping someone, but I can't imagine you trying to get back at someone. Are there people in your memory that just stand out as memorable as either memorably crazy or memorably skilful or memorably loyal?

WB: Yes, my foreman there whose name was Zaner Sykes. Zaner is still living. I talk to him on the phone occasionally. Very good man, fair man, he would treat you fair. We were just like friends, you know, it wasn't like you were working under somebody that just wanted to tell you what to do or not to do or how much to do - we were just friends. That's generally the way it was from top management right on down throughout the factory.

Of course, Mr. Bean was just like a father to all of us. He treated me better than he did his son, Bernie. Bernie worked--when he got old enough to come in the factory--in the factory with us. Mr. Bean would get after him a whole lot more than he would the rest of us, it seemed like. He would just tell Bernie what he had to do. He would just lay

it on the line. He would be a little more lenient with the rest of us. So really, Mr. Bean was just like a father. He treated me better than he did his own son, it seemed like.

VP: Yes.

WB: Of course, Steve White was the same way. I guess he was hard on his children. I didn't see as much of Steve's children as I did Mr. Bean's son, Bernie. I guess Steve was the same way--it seemed like he was--in his relation with his employees and his children. He was stricter with his children than he was his employees.

VP: Did you have any children that went into the factory?

WB: No, my son worked occasionally while he was in school, but inside work didn't suit him so he went into something else.

VP: Did other workers have their children follow them into the factory?

WB: Yes, but right at the moment I can't give you names.

VP: Was that a common practice or was that actually uncommon?

WB: Well, that was common practice. If you had a son and he wanted to come into the factory to work, why, they would usually try to place him when we could.

VP: Did the relative usually start with, say, the father in the factory or given a job anywhere in the factory?

WB: Given a job anywhere in the factory.

VP: So a parent wasn't necessarily also a trainer?

WB: No, no. At times they would say they didn't want father and son working in the same department. I don't know why they let my brother and me work in the same department for years.

VP: I was just going to ask.

WB: We seemed to get along good. I could tell him what to do and he could tell me what to do. We didn't have any friction between us so there were no problems there. We got along real well.

VP: So he also worked in the machine room?

WB: Yes, he worked in the machine room.

VP: Did he work on the molding machine?

WB: No, I think he worked on the planer, the surface planer. Of course, he did that most of the years that he worked for White Furniture, planing, surface planing, and dressing the panels. Of course, he did the maintenance there on the surface planer and some of the other machinery there in the machine department.

VP: So you got along with your brother who worked in the same area as you?

WB: Yes.

VP: So for several years I guess it would have seemed like home if you had a relative right there.

WB: Yes, my brother was right there, and I could talk with him when we had breaks and lunchtime. Just had family right there.

VP: Were you his foreman ever?

WB: Yes, he worked under me for twelve or thirteen years. I say worked under me, I mean, worked with me rather than under me.

VP: Were there ever times that you had to give him a talking to, say, if he came late?

WB: Well, no, no. I knew I could depend on him and trust him like I could most of the other fellows there in the machine department. If he didn't come in I knew something was wrong. If he didn't get to work on time I knew something was wrong. I would call his home, "What's wrong with my brother, what's wrong with Cecil?" "He's sick, he had to go to the doctor."

One day there--I don't remember if his wife called or somebody called me--one of the neighbors called me and said, "They just took Cecil to the hospital." I said, "Well, what's wrong?" They didn't know, but said, "He might be having a mild heart attack. We're not sure, but they just took him to the hospital." I asked my supervisor, I said, "Look, they just took my brother to the hospital and they don't know what's wrong." He

said, "Get on out of here and go on up there and see about him. Don't stand around here and be concerned. Go and see about your brother. If he's alright, why, come on back when you can. If he's not alright, why, stay as long as you need to."

VP: That's amazing!

WB: That was the general feeling amongst the personnel there at White Furniture Company from management right on down. If something was wrong, why, they didn't tell you to get on back in there on the job and work. They'd say for you to go see about whatever that is and take care of it and then come on back when you get it straightened out.

VP: Sounds odd that in some ways--I'm glad to hear that--when White did close it didn't close because of practices like that, it closed because of a furniture slump in the economy.

WB: Right.

VP: Because some people might say, "Well, that's bad business." But I think it sounds almost like good business. It keeps people coming back to the job. It keeps them invested in their work. They know that their supervisor is concerned with them and wants them to be thinking about their machinery, not about their brother, so, for me, it sounds like it was a concerned environment for you as an individual, and that it might even make the furniture better.

WB: Right.

VP: Because, if you were there you were there and you were obviously there because you clocked in before 7:00 and had the machines going.

WB: Of course, you don't make a general practice of being away from the job. Of course, if you need to be away from your job for a time for sickness or something like that you know somebody is concerned as well as you. Your foreman is concerned, top management is concerned that you've got a problem there and you need to look into it and

get it taken care of, and then you can come back relaxed with a good working attitude and get your job done.

VP: Did it feel that way to you? Did you come back clear-headed?

WB: Sure, sure.

VP: Did people ever take advantage of that attitude?

WB: Well, possibly, but it didn't take you long to learn who was maybe taking advantage of it and who was sincere.

VP: How would you talk to someone if you had to call them over, say, they were clocking in consistently late or their mother was always dying and had to leave? What would you do? What was your general practice?

WB: Well, first you would talk with them about it "If you've got a problem we want to know about your problem, but don't let your problem, if it's not important, interfere with your work. We need you on the job at starting time and we need you to be consistent as much as possible." Of course, if it persisted, why, after a couple of warnings I would have to take some other discipline, further action. Maybe after two or three times of warnings if you didn't get any results, why, maybe you would have to ask the person just to be away from their job a day. "Just take a day off and think about it."

VP: Did you ever have to do that?

WB: On occasion. I have on occasion or two have had to do that.

VP: Did you ever have to fire someone?

WB: Fortunately not. That was something that the personnel manager did. That was up to personnel. Personnel did the hiring, and if you had a problem, why, you took it to personnel and said, such and such has happened and we're having problems. You would explain the problem and maybe personnel would ask for your recommendation, and they would take it from there. I never had anybody to say that I did anything unjustly. Usually they would come back and say, "You were right. I tried to take advantage of you."

VP: That can be a difficult position to be in?

WB: It can. Not many times we had to go to Employment Security about it. Not many times. Occasionally, but not many times.

VP: Ozelle, what was your experience being married to a foreman of a major furniture factory, one of the oldest furniture factories in the South? Did you have any memories you'd like to share?

OZELLE BRADSHAW: Well, I tell you. . . . How many years did I have? See, I'm his second wife.

WB: You had from 1978.

OB: Yeah, about ten years?

WB: Yes.

OB: I can't tell you too much. He'd come in sometimes pretty worn out. I would have to kind of console him about something. He's pretty good. He'd come in and think things that I'd do to him not thinking somebody else would. [laughter] He's pretty good-hearted - he's a pretty good fellow.

VP: So it sounds pretty typical, you'd come home and maybe you would let off some steam about what happened today. I do that with my housemates.

Was there anything different about the fact that he worked in a furniture factory?

OB No, I don't think so. I didn't know much about his work. He would come in and tell me about such and such a thing. I'd say, "What's that?" And he would have to sit down and explain things to me to know what he's talking about.

VP: Did he talk about White's very much?

OB: Oh, yeah. He'd come in and let me know what was going on down there. We talked right free in the families. He was very well satisfied with his job and so he didn't have too much to say about it other than just what was taking place.

VP: Did you know many of the other workers at the factory?

OB: Not too many. He would come in talking about such and such a person. I would say, "Who's that?" [laughter]

VP: [laughter] I'm the same way. Did you have a chance to meet with the workers when you weren't at work? I guess I was thinking of how you might see people in another town. Were there picnics or birthday parties or weddings that you attended together?

WB: Yes, we had picnics maybe once a year. Ozelle went with me on two or three occasions that I can remember. We would go down to the Chestnut Ridge Church Camp. They had a good campground there and we would have company picnics in September. Of course, most of the employees would go. Ozelle would get to meet a good many of the people at that time.

OB: Yeah, they were friendly people. I enjoyed it.

VP: Did you ever work in a factory?

OB: I used to work in hosiery mills. At that time I was a 'looper'. I don't know whether you've ever heard tell of 'looping socks' or not.

VP: I haven't.

OB: Sewing the toe across. . . . Now they sew it on sewing machines, but back when I did so much work I was 'looping' them by putting them on a machine. You had to put every stitch on a needle. That was really hard on your eyes and your nerves too. So when we got to talking about doing away with that I got to looking for some other kind of work to do. [laughter]

VP: Was that also in the area or not? Was the hosiery mill in the area?

OB: Yes, it was in the hosiery, but it was in the office part.

WB: You actually worked for another?

OB: Yes, as a 'looper' I did.

WB: When you were working at ( )?

OB: I was in so many places when I was 'looping'. It's hard to name them all. One place I worked was down at Makistens in Haw River.

VP: So you had one skill, you had learned one job and were able to move from different mill to mill and do the same thing.

OB: Right, I had several different places where I worked socks. Most of them have already gone out of business now because most of them were just small places. One place I worked was pretty large, ( ) Hosiery Mill. I don't know whether that is there or not right where ( ) Western Electric used to be. I held a job there for several years. Baker-Cammack used to be up on ( ) Avenue. We'd make socks. Griffin Hosiery Mill was just a little bit farther down. They make socks there. You name it I expect I've been there. [laughter]

VP: [laughter] So you knew about mill life or factory life in clocking in and doing your job?

OB: Yeah.

VP: So it wouldn't have been too hard to imagine what Wallace's life was like?

OB: No, I understood pretty well outside of the lingo and what furniture is all about.

VP: There's a lot to learn about furniture - the more I heard about White's and all the different rooms and all the different processes. Did you have a good sense of what the whole factory was doing?

WB: Yes, after awhile, after I worked there awhile I did. Of course, in the department I worked in we--at that time--called it the machine room now I think they call it the rough end. Of course, the machine room is where they do the different finishing. Not only complete case finishing--I don't mean putting the finishing on--but where they do the finish work on the parts. I was there in the machine room, and, of course, we started out with the rough lumber and cut it to length and dimension and started 'dressing'. The 'dressing', what we called the 'dressing' or the sizing of the part. Of course, from

there it went on to where they did the 'miter work' and the sanding on the drum sanders, the band sawing, and the shaping on the profile parts. From there it went to sanding, from sanding it went to the cabinet mill--that's where they put it together. From there it went up to the finishing where they sprayed the finish on it. From finishing it went on to packing and from packing to the warehouse on out. This is a pretty general idea of what was going on.

VP: Did you ever have a desire to move and work in a different department?

WB: No, not really because I knew the work in the machine department. I didn't think the other work was harder or easier or anything like that, it was just the place for me. That was my place. It seemed like each person in each department had his place and seemed pretty well content.

VP: Those are my questions, are there other things that you would like to tell me that I missed that you would like remembered?

WB: Well, just generally, I enjoyed my years with White Furniture Company. Enjoyed meeting and working with all the fellows that were in and out at different times. A number of them stayed there for years, all their working life. In other words, we were just kind of family and friends. Just got to know each other and enjoy each other over the years. Maybe up the street somewhere or over in one of the stores in Burlington somewhere I'd hear somebody hollering my name and I look around and there's Paul Bumgarner (foreman in Veneer Department), "Beadie" Wynn, or some of the different fellows that worked down at the factory for years. Of course, we go over and talk awhile. Ozelle may be back somewhere waiting for me. She's pretty patient usually.

I don't know, it was a good life. I enjoyed it. Of course, I didn't get rich, I didn't become a millionaire working at White's, but I made a good living and they took care of me.

VP: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW