

Interview

with

WILLIAM L. BAMBERGER, JR.

June 12, 1995

by Jeff Cowie

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

WILLIAM L. BAMBERGER, JR.
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JEFF COWIE: This is an interview with Bill Bamberger in his studio on the 12th of June in Mebane, North Carolina, about his photography and the closing of the White Furniture Plant.

Bill, let's start with a little biography. Place of birth, education, family background.

BILL BAMBERGER: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1956. I grew up there for some years. Lived with my mother's family and her family was Italian and lived in a neighborhood in South Philadelphia in an old Italian neighborhood with my grandfather who had come to this country at a young age and moved to Philadelphia and worked in a lot of the early sweat shops in those days.

My father's family was German and Jewish and they were from Cheltenham Township in Pennsylvania. So when my folks were married we moved in, like I said, with my mother's family for some years and lived there.

Then about five years later we moved to Elkins Park, Pennsylvania where I went to grade school, where I went to kindergarten, and onward through grade school for some years. When I was in fifth grade--I don't remember what year--we moved to Stony Brook, New York, which was out on Long Island about an hour plus from the city. That was where I went to high school and really grew up as a teenager. We were there when the New York Jets won the Super Bowl. [laughter] I don't remember what year that was. And we stayed there until I came to college. I spent two years away from home. I went to the Hill School for two years which was a private boarding school in 1973-5, I believe. And then in 1975 I came to UNC-Chapel Hill. My family moved to Yardley, PA.

JC: What was the transition between the grandparents working in the sweat shops and private boarding school economically for your family? I mean, what did your parents-

-?

BB: Well, we were not poor, I mean, I mentioned sort of my grandmother's sort of time there because, you know, we moved to this neighborhood that was very Italian and very much sort of an immigrant neighborhood. That's sort of where I grew up in the early years, I mean, there were Italian markets on the streets there, and it was very much a neighborhood that was rich in sort of Italian culture. I remember going down to the neighborhood playgrounds and watching the old men in their Italian tee shirts playing bocci ball and smoking cigars. I sort of had that whole world.

My father's family-- My mother's family was fairly well-off at some point. My grandfather ran a furniture store actually, and we have tried to find out if, in fact, he ever sold any of the White Furniture Company furniture. That's not clear. We don't have any of the old records, but he was in business for some time and was fairly successful as an independent business person running this furniture store, and I think for a family that came to this country in that era they did quite well. I mean, they had an automobile when they first came out, and he raised five children in all, and they were all modestly well-off, my father's family. My grandfather, my father's father, was in real estate and they were a little more affluent in a part of sort of a Jewish society at the time. And so when we were raised we were, I think the understanding was that we would go to college and that we would be educated.

On my mother's side of the family all of them attended some kind of college. My uncle was a dentist. My two aunts at that time also went to college and received degrees, so they are all fairly well-educated which I think was probably the exception from that community and culture. So it wasn't that unusual for me to go to boarding school though when I went to the Hill School, you know, I was clearly someone who didn't come from an old established family. So that was a bit of a transition for me, but not remarkably unusual, I think, something I discovered on my mother's family my grandmother was very much Italian, spoke Italian, would tell us stories about sort of the old tradition and about coming to this country and what the trip was like and coming through Ellis Island and

working in these factories and many sort of really interesting stories. You know, I loved that side of her, but my mother and the next generation wanted to be American, they didn't want to be Italian. And so we were sort of removed from a lot of that strong cultural influence.

My father's family, I think, as well, my father didn't particularly want to be Jewish, I mean, he married a Catholic woman. I think there was a side of him at that time-- This is something I don't know, but my sense is that it had some identity issues around that at a time when it was difficult to be Jewish in this country and was a bit of a rebel as well to marry a Catholic woman. So anyway, I have sort of walked around this question. It didn't seem extraordinary or unusual for me to go to this private school for a couple of years, and there was always a sense that I would go to college and that was something that was important for my parents and for me.

JC: And why UNC?

BB: [pause] My senior at Hill School I was basically up for a candidate for the Morehead Scholarship which I received, and I came down and just thought that it was a great opportunity. There was also a side of me that didn't want-- You know, I was looking at a lot of other Ivy League type schools and I felt in Hill School I had had enough of that experience that it seemed like an extension of that sort of private more affluent boarding school--the northeast world--that this seemed like an adventure. It was also at a time when my father had lost his work. He was unemployed at the time and working on some private ventures of his own which never bore fruit. It was a very difficult time for my family. He was on unemployment at the time. It was just a hard time, the idea that I could go, you know, four years to college and have that paid for just seemed remarkable, and it was a powerful sense of independence and just seemed like a great thing to do. So that was an influence, as well. I don't know what a Harvard education cost at the time, but that would have been my second choice and a lot as you can imagine.

JC: You came to Chapel Hill in what year?

BB: 1975.

JC: And there was plenty of social space for a Jewish, Catholic person at that time in Chapel Hill?

BB: Absolutely!

JC: So you didn't feel particularly marginalized or anything with that culture?

BB: No, in fact I felt-- Well, it was different, of course, you know, I mean, like I think it's not difficult. I mean, it's a change for anyone coming from the northeast to the South. No, I liked southerners almost instantly.

JC: Oh, really?

BB: You know, I come from a tradition also where people are really friendly and really warm and really talk a lot and like to offer food to everybody.

JC: [laughter]

BB: And so that Italian side of me, you know, fit right in with the southern way. I mean, it seemed like two remarkably similar cultures and supportive cultures.

And then at UNC, I mean, if anything I tried to hide the fact that I was a Morehead, I mean, there were maybe too many opportunities opened up for Moreheads, little special privileges of sorts, and I felt uncomfortable with that, you know, with that tag.

In terms of assimilating, no problem whatsoever, I mean, from the day I set foot on the campus I really felt like it was a kind of home for me.

JC: And did you come with a field of interest in mind?

BB: No, I really didn't. I mostly wanted to party. [laughter]

JC: [laughter]

BB: I made a good choice. A very regimented school for two years-- Actually in high school in Stony Brook before I went to the Hill School it was a public high school. Very liberal, you know, the days when attendance weren't taken, people would run off to the beach if they felt like it. If anything I sort of wanted some structure and then two years

at the Hill School we got an awful lot of structure. I was just glad at sort of now being probably nineteen years of age to be in an environment where I was free to do as I pleased and academics were a secondary consideration when I first came to school. It took a year or two of settling down for me to think about what I might study.

JC: Not an uncommon story. And where did the interest in photography emerge from?

BB: Well, actually I had wanted to be a writer. If I wanted to be anything it was to be a writer. My parents wanted me to be a lawyer or a doctor or a businessman, maybe not in that order, but, you know, a--

JC: A professional.

BB: A professional, someone who would have no problem earning an income and then some. A very curious thing happened when I was--not very curious, a very difficult thing--a junior and a senior my parents relationship started to come unglued and ending in divorce. They went through such a difficult time, especially my senior year, and it was really difficult for me, as well, and maybe something that I don't even want to get into right now except to say that it was such a difficult time for them that the usual pressure and influence that parents exert on their children to be something and think about careers that they had a momentary lapse. And so sort of during those two years there was very little pressure for me to go to law school or do anything like that because they were so busy trying to take care of themselves. This was just the opportunity I needed to choose something that was really different.

I didn't think I could make it as a writer. I just didn't like the process, I mean, I liked the idea and I like to write the creative side of writing, but the idea of sitting at a typewriter and editing and re-editing and re-working just didn't seem to be for me.

I took two photo courses here when I was a senior, one with Rich Beckman in the School of Journalism and then one with Alex Harris. They were a real strong influence on me especially the one that I took with Alex. We were set free to photograph a community

for the entire semester, and I just found in photography it was a chance to sort of make a statement about the world and the way that we saw it, to look at culture and people, and to say something powerful about all of our lives, but I also love the process. I love being there with the camera, the magic of it. I love the time in the dark room in making the pictures and going through the negatives. So it was very different than writing where the process was difficult, the outcome was wonderful, the creative energy was real powerful. In photography I found that I liked all the parts of the whole, and so I decided my senior year in college that I would be a photographer, try to, at least.

I started my first project in Bahama, North Carolina, photographing people of all kinds from this one community and Leon Fink was my advisor. For my Honor's Thesis I was with Alex, and I actually wrote about that community and photographed it and went on to do my first major body of work about this community.

JC: Was that particularly focused on workers of the community or the--?

BB: It became a project, I think, really that was about all kinds of people. I mean, if anything, it was a project that looked at-- Well, it looked at folks-- It looked at farmers, migrant workers, tobacco farmers, fox hunters, polo players, in downtown Durham street people and businessmen. I mean, it was sort of a wide range of people, and I think the whole point was sort of to look at this remarkable range of people that exist in one community, how different we are, how alike we are. And so it was really a cross-cultural study of all kinds of folks though I think the heart of it was really the rural agricultural community in northern Durham. I mean, I think that's what really drove it most powerfully.

JC: And you said that your first major product came out of that? What was that?

BB: Well, the first exhibition was at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art at SECCA of about fifty or sixty prints. We published a catalogue, "Durham County Photos" which was a pretty major publication. I don't know how many images, eighteen, nineteen, twenty images from the work, and it was sort of the beginning of a career, you

know, putting your work out there. I began to sell prints. I began to sort of take my work out and think, you know, I can do this professionally. I received a National Endowment for the Humanities Youth Grant which was a program that has been discontinued, unfortunately so.

JC: Not to mention the rest of the NEH.

BB: What's next? Who knows. I sort of received some support for my work as well. It was something I did for two or three years.

JC: That's a remarkable success for somebody just beginning, it seems to me.

BB: In my early work I maybe had too much success. It was real difficult, I mean, I felt like I had such--it sounds egotistical, we artists can be--but I felt like I had such refined vision for a young photographer and really had a way of seeing the world that I understood so clearly and so precisely and like I was just ready to keep doing it. I really felt like I knew what I was doing. In my heart and mind it was real clear to me what I was after. Then when I sort of put the work on the walls and saw it I was really taken by what I had accomplished, and I still am.

As I look back on some of those photographs I think some of the best work I ever did I did in my young twenties. You know, I think of particular images like the portrait of Lucy and Floss or Bud Ellis, the leaf burning images or T. Cash and Betty and all these pictures still resonate with a kind of life that has, you know, just astounded me.

It was difficult sort of--I sort of jump ahead and don't know how much you want to stay with this--but it was difficult for me after the fact of having had these successes in this field to try and do something next, to try and continue this, and also to deal with some of the professional jealousies and other things that arise in every field to feel like, you know, there were those other photographers who felt like they had paid their dues and they hadn't had this kind of success and to start to see that was disconcerting.

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Now having had many a rough year and having paid my dues I can understand how the older photographer is somewhat intimated and resentful of the artist who really succeeds sort of almost instantly.

JC: Is that something that you can make a living at that early on or were you just doing your art separately?

BB: I lived in a two-room log cabin that I paid a hundred dollars a month rent for. I bought a couple of cords of firewood a year. Had no water bill, minimal electric bill, so I had very little expenses, and I had some grants in those years and I sort of just managed to get by. I had waited tables and done some other odd jobs at first, but then I managed for like several years where I was able to do this and pay bills because I had such minimal expenses. I had vowed at the time that I wouldn't work, wouldn't prostitute my work, that I wouldn't make money from my photography that I would only do it, you know, in the pure sense as, you know, my art dictated. If I needed to make money I would do it in some other way with some other sort of career, and if the grants would stop coming then I would get some other odd jobs, and I had a few but not a whole lot. I managed to sort of get by with the idea that if I kept expenses really low it didn't take a lot to live.

JC: Do you still see making money in art as mutually exclusive?

BB: No, not at all. [laughter]

JC: [laughter]

BB: If I can't make a little money or more money I don't know what the hell I'm going to do.

First of all, my expenses are no longer minimal. You know, those were the days, too, where I was willing to let a project unfold over two or three years, you know, buy film and whatnot as need be. Nowadays, as time seems more precious and life, you know, moves on I guess you want to accelerate things a little bit. The White Furniture Project, I probably invested--I'm just going to say thousands of dollars before I received any support -- and I don't even want to wager a guess but at one point I did the accounting but

thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars. I found that it is very difficult to do your work nowadays unless you can support it.

The other thing that sort of happened for me a little bit is I don't romanticize the starving artist image anymore.

JC: It gets old fast?

BB: Yeah. I have a family now, and we hope to have children. If anything, I feel like for someone who's accomplished what I have in my lifetime and now at thirty-seven years of age done this well I find it difficult that I never know, you know, how I'm going to be making a living six months down the road. I tend to have support from six months to a year at a time. I look at my Hill School companions and some of my UNC colleagues and, you know, they have already established themselves in middle and upper class-dom. So I think it's difficult sometimes even for identity to feel like at this point in one's life that you are still struggling and that you never know from month to month. So I have no problem with having a stable living. The idea of making enormous wealth from my art seems far-fetched, and I don't even romanticize, I mean, if I could have a kind of stability and be set free to photograph year in and year out and really do what I think I do best and love the most, if I could have that kind of financial support I would be very happy.

JC: Where does a photographer find that sort of financial support these days?
[laughter]

BB: No, that's not really true, but I think that you have to--. It seems like the best way for me to sort of supplement my work is by doing some commercial work nowadays, but my income remains to be a mix of many things. A lot of print sales, mix of grants, some teaching income and more and more commercial work. But I have found in my commercial work that I'm able to do things that are things that I believe and they are important to me. I mean, last summer I worked three months in Tennessee on a project about how housing impacts the lives of ordinary people. It's the kind of project I might have designed for myself, maybe not at a time I would designed and a place that I might

not have chosen to go to, but, you know, I was really well-paid to do something that was wonderfully interesting and I think very important. At the time I sort of didn't want to be there and in retrospect I think it's been really a great experience. I'm really excited about the work. So if things like that start to come my way I will have no problem with that. And then the other kinds of portraits that you do, the picture of Bill Friday, you know, for his book, you know, a designer calls you up to do a portrait for a brochure or something if it's something that's not grossly offensive I tend to say yes. It helps.

JC: While we're on the topic--I was going to save this for a little later--you laid a lot of seed money in for the White's project and then-- Can we talk about how the financing worked?

BB: Uh, huh.

JC: I mean, did you then get enough support to see it clear? Did you actually support yourself at all through that time?

BB: I put--gosh, I wish I could come up with a number because it sort of would be interesting for the record and if we take a break we can add that number later--I guess I invested ten to twelve thousand dollars of money in just materials and supplies in this project.

JC: Not including time?

BB: Not including time. My statement for the Humanities Council probably puts this project up into the thirty-forty thousand dollars of personal investment. It seems astounding, but operating at two hundred--I might have even reduced it to a hundred and fifty--dollar day rate. My day rate for commercial shoots is five hundred to a thousand dollars. Rarely do I get that or charge that, but that's sort of the beginning place. Strike that from the record, I often get paid that.

JC: [laughter] You are frequently bid upward from that rate!

BB: When I was given the opportunity to do this I couldn't believe it, I mean, I thought this is a really remarkable opportunity and rather than try and stop and raise some

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money or get support I just went for it. I was willing to put in whatever it would take, and I've always operated that way when I find something that I'm really passionate about in terms of my work, I find a way.

I had renovated a building in Durham years ago. That's another thing I had done on the side. My family had loaned me the money. My two aunts and mom had chipped in to loan me the money to do the renovation. I was pretty far along in paying them back, and I just basically asked them if I could extend the payment and use that money which was about a thousand a month to pour into the project and did so, I mean, just kept buying the supplies--materials and lab fees and color was a real expense and the printing was quite expensive with the idea that this would come back. I think if I look at a final accounting of this project I will see that I probably have at least broken even and maybe even made some money not counting time, I mean, in terms of all the materials and costs.

JC: Oh, I see. Time is pretty important, very important.

BB: I probably paid my time, as well, to some extent. I mean, I don't know, I haven't sat down and analyzed it. It is something I don't like to do because if I took a loss, you know, it might discourage me from doing it, and that's not what it's about, of course.

You know, I pay some attention to it and how to prepare a fairly detail accounting for both my taxes and for the in kind contribution form. I kept everything logged item by item on the computer so I had hundreds, maybe thousands, of entries for cost in the project and can go to the computer and itemize it.

JC: I'm not trying to, you know, put a price tag on your experience, but I'm more actually trying to explore your commitment to the project and the fact that you put your interest in the project ahead of, you know, how you're going to pay for it in the long run.

BB: Well, it was a project that I was just committed to doing, I mean, there are two phases of this project, and they both were some what capital intensive.

The first was just being there and shooting. When I started the project I was actually still teaching so I had a little bit of income from that. And then I was looking at

the months ahead in January through May of 1993, I guess it would be, just in the year that the factory closed. Then I invested a lot of resources and film, processing fees for the color film--I did all the black and white here--but all the chemicals and support material. I bought some new lenses and other equipment I felt like I needed at the time. I mean, I just knew what I needed and felt like this is the time to go for it.

I also borrowed a good deal. The Journalism School lent me a 4X5 view camera. And you need repairs on your equipment so I invested a lot of those kind of material costs. And like I said, there was no doubt in my mind that at that point that investment which was the investment of film, time and some equipment is something we make all the time and this just seemed so right that I had no problem with that.

The second phase I pledged that we would do a book if we could one day from this work, this is what I told the employees, and also that we would do an exhibit. I had no idea where or how. That became a much more expensive endeavor, the price of the prints, the matting, we didn't actually frame, but readying the space and all and really became a major fund-raising effort as well. I was determined to do it right regardless of budget, I mean, granted you do it right at different levels, there is no right or wrong, but like if we needed something, you know, I would say to Alice--she used to kid me--"one more print sale will pay for that." [laughter]

JC: [laughter]

BB: I was already about seven or eight print sales into debt, you know, above money pledged, money needed, and was just willing to go into debt to a certain point to make it happen.

When we signed the--. When we received the Humanities Council Grant that was a boost, though a good portion of that was for the interviews and a portion for the show, and we had to raise the additional money to do this. In my wildest dreams I didn't imagine we would have raised as much as we did in the community. It was really major.

And then when the grant came or the contract for the book from The Center for Documentary Studies it was something that was difficult for me because I wasn't ready to sort of give the project away to anyone in a way. But I must say, you know, that support came at a time when I really needed it and I think without that I couldn't have produced the show or really completed the project or brought it to the place where I am today without having had to give something up, you know, like maybe sell the studio or something like that. I was pretty seriously in debt at that point.

JC: That was a consideration?

BB: Well, it never was that dire, but it was something I thought about, what would happen if, you know, none of this came through, but I generally operate with a great deal of faith that things will work out for the best. In every instance where I've done that with my work generally, you know, the pay-off has been pretty high.

JC: Well, before we get into exactly what sparked your interest in White's and this project let's back up to Mebane itself and how you arrived here and what the lure of moving to Mebane was for you and Alice. I presume you came together.

BB: Uh, huh. When we returned from the time in Massachusetts--the two years at Deerfield which was a time where Alice was in school in Boston and I was photographing a project about adolescence at the Deerfield School, Deerfield Academy--we moved to the town of Cedar Grove which is about fifteen or twenty minutes from Mebane, kind of northeast of here, and lived in the country and printed. I was finding-- I was printing work and also teaching part-time at the time. I just felt really removed from everybody and everything. I loved living out in the country, but I felt somewhat disconnected, and I didn't feel like I wanted to be photographing there.

So we started to look around and look for another place to live. We found Mebane. We found like this town that sort of perfect in many ways. It was a small community and it sort of felt very rich in terms of local culture, the people, the way of life here. It just felt like a warm and welcoming small town in many ways, I mean, there are

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things about this town I don't like and didn't like at the time. I mean, small towns can also be closed minded and know everyone's business, but it felt like a microcosm of the South.

We found this house here which we are sitting in right now which was going to have been our house. We bought it for \$40,000. Yeah, hard to believe. I see you grimacing. It needed a lot of work. I don't know if I had my plumber's license at the time, but I got a plumber's license. We rewired it. We re-plumbed it. We painted it. We did all the work here. I spend the better part of a year plus working on this.

There was a phase then where I think I was struggling as a photographer trying to figure out what I was going to do. I was doing a lot of renovation to the building in Durham as well, and on sort of some level I was really enjoying that and on another level I was thinking when am I going to get back to my work. I had just printed this work about boys becoming men at Deerfield, that portfolio which has never been published. It never did get out there which has been a disappointment in terms of the dissemination but not in terms of the work itself.

JC: The work.

BB: Yeah, I felt real good about that.

We worked on this house and it was going to be our home and then the house that we live in came on the market. It was next to our best friend in Mebane, Nancy Paddies. We love the house. We just thought we would do the unreasonable and try and buy it. It was ridiculously inexpensive as well. We figured out the rent we were paying to live in the country at the time was about what our mortgage would be. We could pull this off. And the building that I had renovated in Durham and had been working on, which was to be my studio, we would just rent and that would help, you know, one day to pay all the bills and make all this work. So it was a lot of shuffling, but we managed to do it.

Alice had some resources, you know, personal resources, when her father had passed away she was left some money, not a great deal, but it was enough to sort of put

down and really help us to buy both the studio and the house in terms of down-payment money. So we able to do the rest. Then we moved to Mebane.

The other thing that attracted me about Mebane ironically from day one was the factories. When I first arrived in this town I drove by White Furniture. There was like a little sort of momentary reaction of what a remarkable place, and I remember--I don't know if it was the first time--in the early times going by the bench and seeing all the workers sitting out there and thinking what a remarkable and mysterious place this is and how wonderful it would be to be able to photograph there one day. I must say, I never imagined it would be something that I would be allowed to do or that I would even try and do.

Also, there was the Kingsdown Mattress Factory where I did photograph for several months before I was asked to stop that project. Kingsdown and White's are the two oldest factories in Mebane, Kingsdown is the mattress factory. I think I felt strongly that I wanted to photograph in this town, and I wanted to photograph in a factory before White Furniture.

Anyway, we have been here sort of about--.

JC: What year are we talking? When did you decide to move to Mebane, and when did you first see--?

BB: Years are the hardest things to remember.

JC: Yeah.

BB: In fact, if you had asked me my age I figure out my age by asking Alice how old she is and subtracting three so I'm A - 3. And often I even have to ask her--. But she just had a birthday and I will not tell.

But, gosh, what year was that?

JC: I'll accept late, mid, or early 80s.

BB: Okay, no, I'm going to try and get closer than that. We moved back to North Carolina in '86. I think it was about 1989 that we bought, '88 or '89 that we sort of bought the studio, and probably a year or two later we bought our house.

JC: You began to talk about just the fascination you had for the factories themselves and what did that grow out of? What was the allure?

BB: I have always related to people-- How should I put this? I sure don't want to throw out clichés. I think I've related to common people, to ordinary people, but I've also related well to people with extraordinary educations. I think I've always liked all kinds of people, but I've always felt a kind of kinship to the workers of this country. I mean, I think it comes from some of the early stuff with grandmother and sort of that tradition, and I think my mother was always an ally to the working person. I mean, she grew up with this tradition, and I think especially my mother's family has always felt great compassion and connection to people who have had to work in the factories of this country. My grandmother sort of having come out of that tradition and escaped it, but even into her eighties she's just still sort of working and had her own little business and was very much connected to the common person, whatever that means.

And in my work in rural Durham County, I mean, I really loved the time I spent with the tobacco workers, with the farmers, the migrants, with just regular everyday people. I also enjoyed sort of maybe in some ways photographing more than coming to know any of the polo set and the fox hunters and all, but I could relate to all kinds of folks.

My work at Deerfield was in some ways a rebellion to a documentary tradition that has too often looked at the lives of the oppressed, of the worker, that has not looked broadly enough at American culture in sort of all of its aspects.

JC: The Walker Evans/Dorthea Lange sort of thing?

BB: Yeah. Even that early FSA (Farm Security Administration) tradition, you know, has focused on those who have little, and, you know, I've wrestled with this

thematically. I've wrestled with the idea that thematically documentary photographers work is always tied to the poor, to the working classes, as if you know they are the champions, the voice of the oppressed.

JC: Of the populous.

BB: Of the oppresses or the populous. I don't think it needs to be that way in doing the work. Deerfield, I was able to make a statement about how young affluent, in this case, boys are, what their lives are like. I felt there was something more democratic in looking at the lives of the affluent in this country with the same kind of scrutiny that we would look at the lives of those who work, and I would treat a banker as fairly as I would treat someone who works at a machine in a furniture factory. You know, no different, I would give everyone the benefit of the doubt and I think that has marked my work in all cases. I don't take cheap shots at anyone or try not to. [laughter]

JC: [laughter]

BB: I lost my place here.

JC: The theme I'm hearing is more the-- You are more interested in the humanity of the subject than a political commitment to either sector of the populous.

BB: Yes, I think there is some truth to that, though, if I have to choose a side I would probably choose the side of the worker. I feel that sometimes a political statement can come organically out of a body of work that tries not to be judgmental, I mean, maybe we impose our bias without even knowing it. Of course, you know, we have these filtered lenses that we wear all the time as to how we see the world, but I think there are some powerful political statements about what happened to this factory and, you know, how the closing has impacted the worker. There is not much said in this work about how decisions were made on the part of management and, you know, how they maybe feel that they've been the scapegoat of sorts. I mean, that side has not told as well, certainly not told visually, but I would be open to try and tell that if I was permitted.

I think you had asked me, maybe you had asked me, all this had started a little bit around why did I want to photograph the workers in Kingsdown? I had come away from my time at Deerfield and I wanted to get back to photographing people that were more wide open. I mean, I didn't want to work with another affluent sector. I didn't want to do another cross sort of cultural project, I wanted to do something that felt very American and in this case, very much Mebane. You know, one small factory in this town, the Kingsdown Mattress Factory, maybe employees three hundred or so people and I felt it was representative of a kind of factory all over the South and maybe all over the country.

In that project I spent about six months trying to get permission, and it was not easy. And about a month or two photographing before I was asked to stop, and I think at that point-- When I say a month or two, not a month or two like I was at White Furniture, but maybe a month or two where I would go every third or fourth day and was just sort of beginning to feel my way. I believe I was in there fifteen times in all.

JC: Why did they ask you to stop that project?

BB: It's never been completely clear to me. I received permission from the president on down. He never asked the vice president who was in charge of plant management who basically ran the company. I went from the president to his assistant to several supervisors and everyone sort of checked me out and eventually I was OK'd. And I was told sort of that I had to be watched when I was there though I found that I would develop a relationship there with the supervisors as I did in White Furniture by checking in with them and respecting the rules, though I was often given some freedom.

Bill Fulp who was the vice president there, I think, didn't like the idea that I was in there and it was clear that he had not given his permission, and I think that offended him and one day he took me aside and said, "Come on with me, Mr. Bamberger, I going to find out what you are really up to." He led me to his office like the principal leading a student away. I was sort of prepared to stand my ground and tell him what I was up to

and it was clear that I had been given permission but also trying to see where he was coming from.

I felt like he never really listened to me. First, he raised the liability issue, and I agreed to sign a waiver, and, you know, we are dealing in an age where we are all educated enough we can solve these problems. I didn't feel like it was ever a hazard or anything to the workers.

It was also after the fire in was it Holly Springs?

JC: Hamlet.

BB: Hamlet, yes, excuse me, where the poultry processing plant fire killed so many people, and I think that a lot of companies here--. My sense was that this had certainly, you know, gained their attention, and, you know, they were worried about what I might be documenting.

I made an offer to them as I did later in White Furniture an interesting one that they could see what I was doing and if there was anything that felt strongly about omitting I would be willing to omit it, that I would have my contacts delivered on a regular basis, that I certainly wouldn't allow them to tell me sort of what to do or what not to do, but I would give them a first time, you know, one time veto. Because my sense is the kind of thing that they would worry about wouldn't be the kind of things I was interested in anyway.

JC: Right.

BB: I mean, I think the picture of a guard rail out of place could close them down, and that's more what they were concerned about, whereas I felt that there were other hazards of a greater sociological magnitude that might interest me.

I had one really amazing experience in that plant. I had several, but one that I thought was particularly fabulous. I was just at the point where I was starting to bring some pictures back, and I think it was really charging up a lot of workers. I took this one photograph to people who were assembling the coil springs, the frames, and they were just

wowed by it. They started to pass them on and basically the photos went down the assembly line through like a third of the plant, you know, up to another floor and down the line and all this group of photographs was handed around and sort of followed the manufacturing line of the plant. I thought that was really kind of amusing the way that I sort of set them free, and they sort of wandered throughout, and I think it gave me real creditability because people could see what I was about, and they kind of liked the pictures, and everyone started to want one and then it was shortly thereafter that, you know, I had this conversation.

It all ended also, I mean, in another sense of sort of what left me, I think, somewhat bitter about this is that I had invested an enormous amount of time and resources to gain permission to do this project and after being cut off by Mr. Fulp in this meeting I said, "The least you can do at this point is to sit down with me and look at the work I have done. Let's have a meeting with the president. I feel I'm entitled to that. Don't dismiss this without looking at what I've done, you know, give me a chance to make my case. I've invested an enormous amount of time." He promised that he would do that, and, of course, he never did. I would follow-up and there was never any response to my follow-up. It really angered me, you know. I felt like saying, "My photographs will be appearing in worker exploitation magazine next week. I'll send you a copy you asshole." I felt like he really didn't treat me fairly, and finally I called after many calls not being returned and asked to speak to him. I knew he was in because his secretary said, "Hold on and let me check." She gets back and said, "Mr. Fulp asked me to tell you that we are not going to continue this project." I felt like he didn't even have the decency to eye to eye say to me, "I'm not going to let you do this." Even if it was simply because we have control of this place and I can control all the images and I don't want you to have any control. I would have respected that if he had just said it's simply a case of PR, and I'm not going to let anything go out of here that I don't have control of. That was another powerful memory of that place, and one that I was bitter about.

JC: Yet, with that in mind, you still pursued White's.

BB: Well, I was bitter, but I was really excited about being in Kingsdown to be photographing. And it never really got to the point where I felt like-- You never sort of become one of them, one of the people whom you are photographing, but you do reach a point where you are accepted for who you are, and you could become part of that place on some level in some way. I felt like I was just on the verge of that. I mean, you know when you stop at a mini mart and someone who you know is working there comes up and talks to you and takes you aside. I would see people from Kingsdown and be invited to their places and stuff. I started to reach that point and so that was frustrating. I also started to reach a point where technically I began to figure out how to do this work because working in a factory is real different.

When White Furniture closing was announced I figured, you know, this is a place I've always really wanted to photograph. This would have been my first choice anyway. This is more Mebane than anything, you know, right there at the crossroads of town. You can see the size of the plant and a sense of what it's always meant to this community. I figured I had nothing to loose, and so when the closing was announced in the paper, in The Enterprise, I wrote and asked permission to photograph. When I was granted permission about three days later I didn't hesitate.

JC: After one letter you got permission? What's your interpretation of what happened behind that letter?

BB: Several things are my interpretation. I tried to be fairly thoughtful about this letter to be completely honest, but I decided that I would write it on American Studies stationary rather than Journalism stationary because Journalism is more threatening to people, and that I would emphasize the fact that this was a tradition that was a part of this community that was going to no longer be with us and that it was of critical importance that some of this be preserved.

[There is a phone ringing in the background and Bill gets up to turn off the phone.]

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

WILLIAM L. BAMBERGER, JR.
JUNE 12, 1995

JC: So we are talking about what your take is on how that letter was received in White's management.

BB: Right, yeah. Anyway, I crafted this letter almost immediately after reading the article. I wrote it a little bit more as a historian than probably I was, I mean, I emphasized the value of holding onto this, but I also made it clear that there was a real value in holding onto it for this community.

I believe I promised that I would do an exhibition of the work in this community, and that I would contribute some of the prints for the community to the town and for the community to have as a permanent record. I think also the fact that I was an insider. That I was writing from Mebane and that was clear. I made clear that I was a resident.

I think to some extent they figured that this was not a very threatening thing, here's this person, I mean, this was a historic place and the company that bought this and the president of that company at the time, Randy Austin, who was the person I directed the letter to, knew of the historic significance of White Furniture, knew that it might have been the oldest furniture company in North Carolina and perhaps the oldest operating furniture plant in the South. This was something that was said in the articles so I think there was reason to do this.

My other side of this is that I found Randy Austin to be a very decent person in my dealings with him. I have no idea what he is really like as a businessman and how, you know, he interpreted this, but I think there was side of them -- they being the company -- than maybe being the company but of Randy that felt like we're closing this place down and the least we can do is sort of allow this to happen. I think it was a benevolent gesture to allow me in there to take the pictures.

My sense is--and this is all conjecture and I will really elaborate--that once I was given permission--. I was not greeted so warmly at first by some of the people who proved to be my greatest allies. Fletcher Holmes, for one, I think it was sort of, you know, why is this young photographer coming in at our time of crisis and despair. Who is this person and what is he about?

I talked a little bit in my introduction to the show sort of what it was like going through the plant with Fletcher so I won't repeat except to say that a little bit that it was clear to me that he was making a case to me in sort of a subtle way as to the fact that these were people who had spent their life in this place, people with families that they supported, and sort of what were they going to do. I talked about how he would take me and say, you know, Riley Bowes has been working here so many years; James Blalock, you know, he and his wife both work in town at different factories and that they need this income to live. I mean, things like that, you know, named the number of children and sort of give me a sense to humanize this and almost to say, look at what this is about.

But then there was Robin Hart who was the president and the person who I was to report there at first and who I met face to face, you know, when I was asking permission. He sort of pretty much granted me freedom to go in there, but he wanted me to check in at all times. Fletcher became the person that I would be responsible for checking in with.

Some time went through in the plant photographing and I sort of want to skip ahead to the story about Robin, but there came a time where they were having these meetings where people were receiving their pension papers. It was a time where I took maybe the most powerful photograph I think of this whole story, the photograph of four men with their pension papers, two of them sort of having them wrapped up in their hands looking away. Robert Wynn who I later sensed was probably not able to read those papers. He seemed completely lost. It was a very, very difficult photograph for me to look at.

But in that meeting, I mean, it was a very, very powerful meeting and I was very anxious about taking pictures in the meeting. They brought someone in to talk about the pension plan and all the top level management within the plant were there and some other people. I thought, you know, they are going to see me taking this picture and they are going to send me away. I had like this fear, very strong fear, that this was going to be stopped by trying to take a picture that was too daring just like the management stopped me at Kingsdown. So I did something that I think was particularly gutsy and a gamble at times. I went--just after this took place--I took a few pictures in there, and I didn't use much flash to be nondescript, but it was still obvious I was in there. I used a little bit of flash, but technically I couldn't do what I needed to get the picture or be as present as I needed to.

At this point I think most of the workers had sort of accepted me--that's a separate story. But in these meeting that were going to take place with management I was really ill at ease, and I went to Robin Hart and I said, "I took some pictures in that meeting yesterday. You probably saw me," which I knew he did. I said, "I want to have permission to take pictures. Do I have your permission?" He basically said to me, "You can take pictures of anything, anybody, anytime in this plant that you want to." I was a little shocked, but I felt like I would go directly to him and make my case and say this is what I want and not leave any room for doubt. I said that this was an important part of the story of what's happening here as well. I would not have been at all surprised if another manager had said this has nothing to do with the story. The story is about how we make furniture, not about what happens to people when a plant closes.

I think there was a side of Robin Hart that knew that the real story here, that the major story emotionally for him was what was happening to all these people and the fact that he was going to have to tell them that they were losing their jobs, or had told them they were losing their jobs. He had been through other plant closings before. It's not

clear how he really about this. A lot of people pictured him as the bad guy. Jimmy Gross calls him a butthole about thirty-two times in his interview. [laughter]

JC: [laughter]

BB: And Don McCall says that he's a person with real compassion and no one will ever know how he really felt about having to do this. He has cancer now, a couple of years later. He came to see the exhibit after the fact, and I remember him being very excited as he began that first wall and saw the photographs of the people working, and then when he reached some of the images where you began to see how the impact of the closing and in particular, the picture of--the wall that I think is marked by the pictures of the men with their pension papers and pictures of people signing severance notices that sort of gloomed at the sins for a while on that wall I think where you really feel the weight of the closing. He went through the rest of the exhibit with not a single word.

JC: You accompanied him?

BB: Yes, I took him to see the show. He had come back through town and had heard it was up and called me up and said, "Why haven't I gotten an invitation, Bill?" I said, "Well, I didn't know where you had moved, I mean, I had lost track of you. I didn't know where you were. I knew you were somewhere in Tennessee and you would have been invited. Would you like to see it now?" He said, "We're leaving." I said, "Well, I'll meet you over there. I'll open it up. Let's go see the show." It was a real powerful time. I think in some ways he could have been the enemy and in some ways maybe he was for a lot of people.

JC: Well, the enemy needs a face, as well.

BB: Yeah. But my read and again this is all conjecture and Kathy if you are listening and other people I'm a little uncomfortable about some of this being part of the public record because it is dangerous when you presuppose what other people might have thought or felt, but my gut was that he set me free because he knew that this was a

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remarkable opportunity as well, and that I was in a position to tell the story, and he wanted me to tell it fully and completely.

And then there's another side of me or an additional facet that he was also off the hook. That this had been approved at the highest level of management by his boss and while he might have been sort of allowing me the freedom to really do it in a way that was complete he didn't bear total responsibility for this decision. As I thought about this and I thought about it a great deal I did the same thing with him that I have done with other managers like I did at Kingsdown at first. I brought him at some point when I had about a hundred contact sheets I brought a book of contact sheets and sat them on his desk and said, "Take a look at these and let me know what you think." You know, making the statement that I am not hiding anything. This was the same thing I did with the employees when I had enough, I took the work in and said, "Look at this." There the feeling was a little different, look at this and see what you like, you know, we can make you some prints, and that work was looked at a different way.

There was a side of me that knows also that very few managers are going to sit down and look at three thousand six hundred frames and that's what a hundred sheets of contact--. But it gives them the right to do so.

So I sort of jumped ahead. Initially the question was, you know, how was this received and how and why was I granted permission to do it. I think it was a case--. I think there was so real altruism on the part of both Hickory-White and Robin Hart. And I think there was a case of bad communication as well that no one really knew sort of what I was up to. I wasn't up to anything devious or--. But I was up to telling the story of what was going on in this place and part of the story was the closing. There has been some feeling after the fact from folks at Hickory that I haven't been fair to them. I hope we will address that, I mean, I don't know if we can address in this interview, but I hope we will address it in interviews with them as well.

And again, I say some, just one phone call in particular, but to me part of what was going on was not only the magnitude in the history and the strength and the power of what was being made in this place, but how the closing of a place like this impacts workers.

JC: Other than that one phone call you just mentioned you kept pretty much free rein of the process throughout the whole, your entire process?

BB: That one phone call came after the exhibition from a manager named Mike Robinson after the fact, and I can tell you about that later. Maybe we should save that.

But during the whole time I was given real free rein of the plant. I became a kind of curious anomaly there in that I had access to the front office because I was given permission to photograph by Robin Hart and then subsequently by Fletcher Holmes and to report to Fletcher. I mean, that's where I checked in, that's where I started my day. Most workers didn't go through the front office. Most supervisors did and then they'd go out into the plant, but unlike a supervisor people weren't accountable to me. I sort of could be at one with the workers, but I could also go into the office and sit around and have coffee with the folks there or see the paper that they were pushing the phone calls and sort of be sensitive to how this was affecting them. I mean, when the place would close everyday at three-thirty I would go to the office if I wasn't photographing the plant, the facility was empty, you know, a magnificent state, I mean, empty meaning there were no workers there. It was an overwhelming place when it was quiet without any human beings, I mean, you really felt the size of the machinery and the quietness of the place in a different kind of way when everything was cut down. You'd just hear the hisses of the place.

I would go off in it like three-thirty or four and people like Fletcher and Avery and Kay Faulkner would be there sort of talking, reminiscing and feeling the impending closing as well, and also doing their job, they often would work later.

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But it was clear--. At one point I went to Fletcher and said something like, you know, I really appreciate the support that you have given me or the freedom and he said, "Well, the folks really like you out there. You know, I've heard from workers they really like you." Something like that, not a lot said, but it was clear to me that the work had gotten back to him that he had sort of asked, "What is this guy like?" And people had said, "He's all right."

And then something truly remarkable started to happen. Once I got permission sort of from Robin Hart to photograph at meetings I thought, okay, you know, this is wide open. And I decided I couldn't--. I mean, I was trying to photograph this enormous factory with two hundred and some workers in two months. That's not a lot of time and show like all different sides of it, the physical place as well. I started to go there after hours, and then I would find that I wanted to go there after closing, after five o'clock.

(BLANK SPACE DENOTES OFF-THE-RECORD MATERIAL)

You know, one night Alice and I were in the factory until almost midnight doing a shot of the mirrors on the conveyors. It's that picture, that huge picture in the show, with the mirrors in those bright, orange-red lights of the heat lamps glowing. Basically, the place

was like and the impact of those lights in the place. I knew were all the lights were and went in and turned everything on and, you know, it looked like it was running--it was just lights--and so set up for fifteen minutes, set up all our lighting equipment because film doesn't see the world the way the eye does and basically was able to take those pictures.

Doc or someone would come through on their rounds and stand with me a while and shoot the breeze and ask about photography. [laughter]

JC: [laughter]

BB: That would be that.

JC: That brings up probably the most interesting aspect of your whole story, your whole relationship with the plant, and it is the evolution of your relationship with the workers in the plant on the shop floor wandering around and from the interviews I've done, especially with Ivey, just the transformation from you as being a point suspicion and somebody from outside to somebody they trusted. Can you trace that?

BB: I can't trace it--. There was no point when sort of the dam broke and all of a sudden I was welcomed, but I felt the resentment of many at first. And I just decided that I would be strong. It's a very difficult thing to be in a place where you feel like you are trying to do some good, where you are trying to tell some greater story, where you know that these people might feel that they are being compromised and not know how to get through to them. I mean, you want so desperately to sort of tell them that you are on their side. It's very hard to do that, I mean, it takes time for people to trust you. I mean, I know this now in the work I do. I just decided that--. There were a couple of things that I decided from the beginning, one--generally this is always the way I do my work--first, I would be completely straightforward in terms of my intent. I would tell people what I was about, where I was from, how I had received permission and that I would use the work freelance when people would ask, you know, what I was doing. Documentary photography, they don't know what that means. I basically told them I was freelance because to me freelance meant that I was not working for the company, you know, I'm

not working for some agency, I'm not working for the government, I'm just a photographer.

And secondly, I tried to tell them what the story was about for me because this is something that Kathy, I think, is trying to get at in the work that she's doing that what the workers have to say about what's happening is not often just sort of a reaction of sort of what it's like for them in this place. They have a global sense of what's going on in this country and this world for workers everywhere. They have a read and a take on it. I said to them that I felt like that the plant was an important and historic place, and that there should be some documentation of that, but also, this was a story about how the closing of a place like this effects their lives, you know, effects the lives of workers everywhere. I think that people got that dead on, and they knew that this was also not the story of just, you know, a maker of great reproduction antique furniture, but a story of what happens to them and to people like them when the rug is yanked out from under them.

JC: Let me follow you on something.

BB: Okay.

JC: You just said that you prided yourself on being really straightforward and honest with your subjects, yet that's not exactly the story you were telling management when you went in to photograph.

BB: Yeah, well--.

JC: There the emphasis is more on the historical significance of the plant and to the community, right?

BB: When I first went in there it wasn't clear what I would see exactly. I mean, I didn't know what I would do, but if I wanted to be completely honest, you know, if I had written the more honest letter to management it would have said that this is going to be a story about a closing, but that was not completely clear to me. It became pretty clear when I was in there. If that had been my only agenda I could have found it in a more powerful way if this was just about the closing. I think one thing I wanted the work to be

and why I spent as much time in the place when it was empty is that I wanted it to also to be about this place, you know, about the magnificence of this place that made furniture and about the workers.

Was I completely honest when I wrote that letter to the management in the beginning? No, I wasn't completely honest. I think that there was a side of me that held back what I think might not have allowed me to do the project.

JC: Right.

BB: Was I honest with Robin Hart? I think I was pretty damn honest with him with some chances.

JC: Sounds like it.

BB: I think he called me on something and you're right.

JC: It's a tension I feel in my own work when I'm going in to try and gain access to plants.

BB: You know, as a photographer would I take a picture of Randy Austin in a way that was sort of compromising and use it, no, I don't think I'll ever do that. But, you know, I think I was careful. It would be interesting to pull this letter and see how I worded it and what I said exactly, but my guess is that I wouldn't have said anything about the impact of the closing on the people. I might have said about the impact on the closing on the community.

JC: In broader terms, yeah, but I don't want to make too much of this but the original theme was how you gained the trust of--.

BB: Yeah, and to be honest I don't how much I belabored that really, I mean, I sort of pretty much told people what I was about and said I was going to do a show one day, and most people would surprise me because people said, "I want to see that," or "Would you let me know?" Or, "I want a copy of that book when it comes out." That's how I started collecting these addresses, you know, I thought well, if I'm going to make good on this--I didn't know how or when I would ever do this, but, you know, I said I was

going to do it so I was sure going to try--I started to say, "Give me your address," and people would scribble their addresses for me on slips of paper and in the end I probably collected close to two hundred. I think I have about a hundred and fifty addresses. That's about what we had--I'm not sure about that number--addresses and phone numbers so I could track people down. I would make little notes on them, you know, so I could remember.

In terms of sort of being honest with management, I went to management and requested a list of all the workers in the plant. It was clear that people wanted to come to the show when it was going to happen. I was really clear why I wanted it because there was going to be this exhibition and I wanted to be able to invite and keep up with people and would they give me a copy of this. Fletcher said, "Sure, no problem." I went down to personnel and asked--I can't think of the name of the woman there who had really been there a long time and she said okay--and then the list was not forthcoming. I realized there was some snafu, and I went back and then I went back to ask her and she said, "Well, Jim Murray told me I can't give you that." I went to Fletcher and he said, "I'll get it for you." I said, "No, let me fight my own battle." I went to Robin Hart again and I said I'd like this list and this is why. He said, "You can't have it. We are not going to give that to you." I said, "Fine."

JC: Good enough, yeah.

BB: Good enough. So be it and so I was a little more vigilant in collecting names and addresses and having a way to keep up with folks. This is probably before we had started the oral history--the idea that we were going to do the interviews--and it became really valuable in that respect, but also in a way of sort of keeping people posted. When we did the exhibit we had this massive mailing list.

I have sort of wandered. Maybe you can help get me back on course.

JC: Well, actually, the wandering is interesting because I find that in my own work and somewhat in this project that having that database has been useful because you

become this new point of connection to all these other people whose former point in connection was the plant. Once that plant is gone that hub is gone as well, that social hub.

BB: That's totally true especially for people who were friends and acquaintances but who weren't from the same community, I mean, there is a network of people in Hillsborough, Possum and Little Man and Jimmy Gross and all, some of whom have grown up together and may have known each other most of their lives and they stay in touch, but they might not see James Blalock very much.

JC: Right.

BB: I did find, actually, that I would serve that purpose when I would call some and we would talk and I would tell them what I knew of other people and in some cases how to get up with them. So, that's real true.

JC: So how did you find your relationship with these workers changing through your presence? You were there for how long, first of all?

BB: I started in about December, I think, of '92 and then was there through May. Most people were gone. A majority of the folks were gone by the end of February, early March. Actually probably by March most people were gone by mid March. People started to leave pretty regularly in February.

How did I find my relationship with them develop?

JC: Yeah.

BB: Yeah, we haven't talked at all about that and it's real different. Well, I would check in each day. I would see Cindy Cook in the office and Kay and sometimes Margaret and then I would go into the plant.

JC: You did full-time everyday for all those months?

BB: I was trying to, I mean, once I stopped teaching which was in December of that year--the plant was closed for two weeks at Christmas--I came back and really started to go almost everyday an awful lot and sometimes I would go and then have to go and do

some other work and I'd come back and work at night. I started to make friends in different departments. I would try and be there for their breaks, you know, I mean those were the times where I would hang out with Riley and share his biscuits with him and stuff like that. I also found like particular places where I would sort of--departments--where I would be taken in a little bit more or make friends.

I spent a lot of time with Harry and the other Bill Hicks who they called Rooster up in the finishing, that little corner of the spray booth in the finishing department. I would go up there and I'd hang out with them while they were working and sort of sit there and talk to them. When the line would go back we'd push open the window of the factory together and watch cars go by and talk about them just like they would do. I sort found like that was a little place that I would often leave my gear when I was up in finishing there with them and wander. I sort of looked after them in some way, and they'd look after me.

But each department sort of things unfolded for me differently, I mean, I cut through the cabinet room to get to the finishing department, and I sort of had this strategy of like, you know, I can't get to know everyone all at once. I knew sort of what it was going to take, and I would sort of go where I had sort of built relationships and then I would have the difficult days where maybe I would go and bother Ivey and Grant and take some pictures of them knowing--I didn't know what Ivey was thinking till I read your interview with him--but I knew there was a side of him that didn't really want much to do with me and that they were going to tolerate me to some extent, and I knew that that was sort of necessary for me to get closer to them--to sort of talk to them--that I was going to have to deal with the fact that they were going to let me know that I wasn't completely wanted at first. And my sense was that either sooner or later they would tell me to either bug off or on some level they would accept me, you know, they would give me a chance. I think that's what did happen. At some point, you know, they opened up.

There were like particular moments that marked, you know, my bonding in different departments. In finishing, one of the things that really amused me the most is, you know, one day I went in and they always have all these announcements in the plant all the time over the loud speaker and one day I heard, "Will Bill, the photographer, please come to the main office?" [laughter]

JC: [laughter]

BB: I thought, what is it now? I got there and Kay said, "Your lights are on in your car." I thought, "Damnit, that Harry and Bill, you know, looking out the window and saw my lights on and they knew my bomb when it drove off and they reported it." That's exactly what happened. It was like little things like that that you sort of build your friendships with a little joke.

There was this other incident that no one knows about. I was up there doing Harry's portrait. He was the one who did all these amazing line drawings on the wall, actually on the glass, the blackened glass of his spray area. In the finishing department there is a picture called Harry and His Drawings. There is a little rocket ship and these faces. It is very sort of primitive but interesting, you know, artistic, you know, these very primitive and artistic drawings that are really quite remarkable, a lot of life. I tried to do his portrait and in getting the lights just right we decided we needed to turn on the factory lights that lit the lines just a little bit--big heavy reflector around this huge light hanging there--and he said, "No, problem. Just turn it." I turned it a little and the thing fell off and was hanging by the wire, and like this, you know, could have shorted out the whole line and basically, you know, something happened or something and we had to stop the entire production line. I don't know whether it shorted out or whether he couldn't keep holding on to it. We couldn't let it go because we were afraid it would break the wire and it would fall and crash. So the supervisor of the department came and I was thinking, "Oh, rats." He said, "What happened?" And before I could say a word Harry said

something, "Oh, I just moved this thing a little to adjust the light and it fell." I thought, "God damn it, if he didn't cover for me."

JC: He ran interference, right.

BB: Because he knew, you know, that if the word got back that I had stopped the line that could have been my last day. That was a pretty amazing and powerful gesture to have made. So stuff like that from my point of view really made me feel close to people. From their point of view I don't know if there were sort of specific gestures or things like that.

Something I did a lot of that I think made a difference that when it was break time, you know, I went and ate in the cafeteria with everyone else and got the same pimento cheeses and sort of waited in line and hung out and got to know everyone and sat at a table. As I was in the place I sort of lived the life like everyone else did. I didn't go take breaks and get sandwiches and eat lunch when people were working, I waited till the break time. Sometimes I photographed at break time, as well, or I would meet people in private times and take their pictures. Often at that point I was bringing back proofs and pictures as best I could to give folks. So it was kind of that process of getting to know people individually but also collectively by being seen in a department, by hanging out in a department, by being straight with the supervisors but not spending all my time with the supervisors by being kind of sensitive to those dynamics and by talking to people about my life and theirs and hearing stories and telling jokes and betting on basketball and, you know, all of those things.

Something else that I think happened for me as well as I mentioned I would work late many nights and it was often on those nights that I would see some of the other workers who were working late, Carl Durham and Bill Hicks often would work late and Charlotte, Carl Durham's sister--I don't remember Charlotte's last name--but she worked late as well. And, you know, I would see these folks who were in there working extra hours to make extra money and they would see me in there working extra hours to do my

project and they would think, "this person is committed as well, I mean, he is working really hard like us. He's not afraid to work." I think that made a difference to people.

JC: I bet, because I could see somebody who worked on the line not necessarily accepting that taking pictures is work unless they actually see the toil behind it.

You set up how the bonds are created very well and just sort of the shared experience, just your very presence over a long period of time, but what sorts of barriers remained, I mean, there had to be a certain level of alienation from everybody else that you were still somebody from outside or did you overcome that?

BB: [hesitation] You know, I don't know.

JC: That's fine.

BB: Yeah, I'm sure there were some, but I think sometimes--. I was clearly someone from outside, but I think sometimes a friendship is borne out of your differences, you know, in spite of your differences around some common connection can be as powerful or more powerful.

JC: You mentioned that one of the main differences was that you had access to the office and, you know, you certainly had more fluidity, you could travel throughout the entire plant. You knew all the different departments whereas somebody who was just in the painting booth was in the painting booth.

BB: The other thing that happened around that--I call folks like that transients, I don't know what the word in the factory is but Richard was one, I mean, and Ronnie Sykes and Robert Riley, people from shipping, people in repair who would go to get parts and bring them back, people in shipping would deliver things, and then of course some supervisors and all would go. There were probably only a dozen people other than sort of high level managers that could do that.

JC: Right.

BB: And the other thing that I would find out is there was some talk about--. I mean, people would know things about me. I would tell someone in the rough mill

something and someone else would sort of joke with me about it later so it was clear that there were friendships that crossed these boundaries, not a lot. There were friends, I think, that existed around these, but I think that you tended to get to know people mostly in your department.

As the place started to close that happened pretty early on in the time that I was there, you know, I started a little bit in December and when I came back in January, I mean, the closing loomed large. We had gone through Christmas and New Year's and here we are, you know, beginning of a new year and a month and a half from this time everyone is going to facing a loss of job, I mean, almost everyone.

When the closing actually started to happen it happened in little bits and pieces. You know, places often don't close as you'd expect them, you know, the door slammed shut and two hundred and fifty workers loose their job and go home on that day. Nothing could be further from the truth. Every day at three o'clock, not every day, but on day's where people lost their jobs, they'd be called from their department at three o'clock--about a half an hour before the plant would close--and they'd spend their last fifteen or twenty minutes down there with the head of personnel and they'd sign their papers and they'd shake hands and they'd be asked to sort of--sometimes they'd be allowed to wander--but they sort of asked and some would be expected to leave. I think subliminally the idea is that it won't impact people as much or maybe it is clearly a conscious choice by management, probably conscious. I think it would be naive to think otherwise. They would be out of there and they will be gone and people won't sort of have the feeling that people are getting laid off in the same kind of way. There will sort of be these ghosts the next day. They don't see them leaving in the same kind of way and so they will be out of there and gone by three thirty or three twenty-five when the plant shuts down and everyone leaves.

JC: How were they called up? It wasn't over the loud speaker?

BB: No, people would come to the departments and the supervisor would know and tell them. They would say good-bye to people and in some cases there were many people--. Andy Foley talks about, you know, wandering around. There were different people who went all over the plant and--.

JC: Andy was certainly one of them.

BB: Yeah, and Andy was one that was just going to go. To some extent this was tolerated, this was allowed, you know, as a sort of final farewell and who was going to tell them that they couldn't do this anyway.

But anyway, I'm sort of weaving around all this is I was also in a position to tell folks up in the cabinet room or finishing or rub and pack who was laid off in the rough mill that day, the machine room. And I found myself more and more being asked what's happening down there. Have they gone? Who's there? I started to really know so many workers by name that I could tell them who left and what was going on and who was still there and what was said in these different departments so I became a kind of conduit of information about how the place was coming apart in the end.

JC: Did everybody know each other or was there still a sense of groups that didn't?

BB: No, everyone clearly didn't know each other, but if someone would say--. I'm trying to think of an example.

JC: It would take a couple of identifiers to pick them out, you know, the guy who wears this.

BB: More of what would happen is someone would ask me in rub and pack who was let go in the machine room and I'd say--. I'd mention a bunch of names and they would know one or two of those and then they might say which one is that or something like that and you sort of could identify them a little bit.

I think it was also a sense of sort of how this was moving up the line as well giving the information because in some ways it would be hard to know who was gone.

You know, information travels in all kinds of ways, but I was the most immediate source, I mean, they could still be at work and not knowing who was being laid off. Just after that meeting I might go back to another department, I often would.

JC: What was the pattern of layoffs? Where did they start?

BB: They started--. The layoffs followed production, I mean, started out in the kiln area in the yard where they brought in lumber, I mean, there was no need to keep people there after they brought in their last wood. I remember the day when the--. In fact, the photograph I took of the line at the rough mill, all the lumber coming down the line, and that was taken on the last day that lumber ran. In fact, the reason there is so much wood piled up and it looks messy is because they let all the final wood come down and that was it. It was a picture I probably couldn't have taken other times because it was so rough in there and so--. It was too dangerous to set up in some ways. And then so after that wood ran through people who worked the saws on the line some of them were let go because there was no need for them. Then as the wood was glued together more people in rough mill would sort of go like that. It was often four or five in a day, yeah. Then after all that wood was machined they'd let go most of the machine room, but they'd keep people for problems that came back, but also they were running samples at the same time. They were trying new pieces that they were going to produce out of Hickory so they'd be running some samples and they'd have sort of a skeletal crew, like Ivey stayed pretty late on to run the samples and folks like Robert Riley and Jimmy Gross stayed for other reasons to start breaking down the plant preparing for the auction. So they kept sort of a skeletal crew in each department and they just sort of followed the line. The last department to really be let go was finishing and rubbing and packing all sort of went very close to the end.

I want to tell a couple of other stories about sort of being an insider or outsider in the plant that sort of come to mind.

JC: Okay. Good.

BB: Two other things were memorable for me. A good friend of mine came through town, John Manuel. He's always been a friend and interested in my work and vice versa. I took him through the factory and that was one of the most uncomfortable days because it was the kind of day where I couldn't take him and introduce him to everyone. We stopped in a few cases. But all of sudden I found myself being an outsider, almost like a manager, taking someone through the plant and sort of showing these people off to this other person. I felt so much so distant and sort of separated and sort of-- I remember how when I was in the place long enough if I'd be up there with Harry or if I'd be down in the rough mill near Annette or Manuel or Larry or whoever that if people came through I would sort of eye them suspiciously. I would sort of wonder what they were about and watch this "newbie" walk through, you know, walk through the factory and all of a sudden I was bringing someone through and I felt like there was something a little indecent about this. It really bothered me after I did it. I never did it again except to take Alice through which was completely different, because when I took Alice through I was taking my wife through to meet people who I knew, and she was greeted so warmly and stories told about me. She would find that then she could come looking for me in the factory and they would just let her go. She would come in there and everyone would say, "Oh, he's down there doing this," and tell jokes or lies about me and make up stories and stuff. She found that she started having a relationship with a lot of folks and the fact that I would bring her there to meet people as friends, you know, had a completely meaning than sort of taking someone through to see the facilities, you know, i.e., the people and the facility. It was really different and that was very memorable to me both of those, you know, Alice coming many more times than once, but I remember many of those incidences of what it was like to introduce her and how different that was.

JC: This is a difficult question to ask, but something rings in my head that Ivey said at one point, "It's like, here we are all about to loose our jobs and here's this guy in here taking pictures of it. Almost, this guy is profiting at our loss, not necessarily

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financially profiting but taking advantage of our loss or exploiting our loss." Did you feel that?

BB: No.

JC: Never even had to struggle with that?

BB: Well, yes and no. That's what most journalist do at times, I mean, if someone is hit by a car and they are there, I mean, there's a tragedy and they're there to tell the story. I didn't go through it with people. I wasn't losing my job like they were losing theirs, but I was there with the people for the long haul and that makes all the difference in the world. And I think there was a point, if there is a collective consciousness in a place like that, where people generally said, "He is telling, you know, a story that needs to be told. He's sort of telling our story."

Again, sort of getting back to was I honest completely to them, the management? I wasn't just photographing lay off meetings and pension paper meetings, I was photographing people clowning around at work, you know-- Gosh, it has been a while and I'm sort of missing names, but, you know, people like Darren would hang out the window during break or jump up on the assembly line like they were surfing or blow each other off, you know, or blow jobs that used to give each other at the end of the day. There are big jokes about that where they would get out the air hoses and Don and Darren would blow each other and Don would say, "Do you want a blow job Darren?" And then he would hit him with the compressed air and all these sort of silly and crazy things, I mean, I photographed that as well. I think people forget, like this guy, he's having a good time like us and when times were difficult I was there with people, too, and taking pictures. I felt in a way that I was not wanting to take pictures people would stop me.

There was one experience-- Gosh, I'm having trouble with a lot of names today because it has been so wild.

JC: That's understandable.

BB: Can we take a break for a second?

JC: Sure.

[The recording machine is turned off for a while and then turned back on and the interview continued.]

BB: In the veneer room when I was confronted in a really direct way-- I photographed in the veneer room a lot and it was a place where I sort of maybe photographed too much. People never said anything. In some instances you asked if I felt like I was exploiting people in some instances I felt like I had to push limits a little bit to get to a point where people would accept me so I had to sort of be there, otherwise I would just sort of stand there watching which is almost worst. I mean, I was doing my job in a way and this was my job.

Anyway, the light was really beautiful down there. It was a really amazing place. It was real dark and I shot a lot-- It was beautiful but very little of it was difficult technically. I shot a lot of pictures and there was a point where Donald Poole who's a black worker and Nate--I don't remember Nate's last name-- they worked together a lot. I later would learn that there was a good bit of tension in this department--racial tension-- and that Donald and Nate felt like they had been sort of harassed a little bit by some of the white workers in the department and felt like a couple and some that I had spent time with as well were real racists and were constantly bad-mouthing them saying they were lazy and all the stereotypes that are often thrown around and it just pissed them off generally. They kind of kept to themselves, but I photographed them a good bit, and they kind of joked and I never had a sense as they were joking if they were joking with me or at me or what they really had to say about it till one day Nate said something like, you know, "You thinking you are pretty fucking good at that," or something. "Why don't you try doing this?" Or something like that. It was a pretty heated confrontation.

JC: This being his job?

BB: Yeah, and I said--. I can't remember exactly what was said after that, but it might have been even something like, "Oh, you think we're lazy," or "You think you could do this," or something. I said, "Look, I don't think I can do your job. I'm not saying I can. You don't know what I think about you. I don't think what you're saying I think, but I clearly don't feel that. I mean, I don't have any judgment about this and I don't know exactly where you are coming from. What are you saying to me?" I wasn't even sure exactly what it was. Basically, they almost surrounded me in this dark part of the veneer room and sort of like said, "Lift this, lift this." I didn't know if they were really seeing if I could physically lift it or if it was booby trapped, but it was clearly sort of a hostile moment. I said--. I basically called them on this and said, "Look, I can't do your job. I'm not saying I could. What is this about?"

Then there was some stuff about me hanging out with so and so and in this case it was Riley and there was someone else named Roger and some innuendo about them, you know, what they think about us and, you know, I can't remember the words, but that was the content basically.

That was a real curious thing and then basically Donald was telling me to kind of lay off a little bit or just don't fuck with him or something like that, you know, it's like not worth it or something and Nate said something like, you know, he's so damn white or something, "I bet you can't even tell a joke that would make me laugh," you know, because they were always telling jokes.

You know, I don't remember what I said or what the joke was, but I basically told Nate a joke and he just about wet his pants. [laughter]

JC: [laughter]

BB: It was the funniest kind of sort of ritual, it was like I can tell some rude joke just like he could that was just as funny because they were always telling these obscene jokes and sometimes at me. Nate was so tickled. They sort of bet a dollar, I mean, that was the thing, "I'll bet you five bucks that he can't even make me laugh, that white boy

can't make me laugh." So when I made Nate laugh it was kind of like, "Hey, you're okay, man." It was like give me five or something. It was almost like--.

JC: You're rite of passage, sort of?

BB: Yeah, it was almost a parody sort of, I mean, it was so easy in a way, but I don't think it was at all about the joke. I think it was about me sort of standing up and saying, "I have no value judgment about you. Don't make one about me. I'm not saying I can do your job. I'm not saying I have it as hard as you, but I'm doing my job, too, and I would appreciate some respect and I'll treat you decently." I mean, that's what I was trying to say in the confrontation, not that I can make some joke that can really make you laugh.

JC: Were you having to talk tough?

BB: I had to talk a little bit, but, you know, I wasn't talking like I could stand them off or fight with them. There was a physical tone to all of this, too.

JC: That's what I'm getting.

BB: There was some shit about sort of guns and violence and stuff like that. I mean there was some shit about, you know, being tough or, you know, "I killed a man. I can whip your ass." Maybe not even directly to me like, "I can whip that sorry boy's ass in a second if I felt like it," to his friend, but just kind of saying to you. I know I couldn't whip either of their asses, I wouldn't try, but I know also I felt like I had the courage to stand up to them and not walk away, and that this was something that had to be dealt with. I felt like being straight with them that they would either respect me or tell me to fuck off.

It turned out that those guys ended being like best buddies after this, I mean, in sort of a way.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

WILLIAM L. BAMBERGER, JR.
JUNE 12, 1995

BB: I think the irony in this was that part of what was being said to me pretty clearly was, you know, "Quit bugging us. You photograph us too much." But I think what I also got out of this after the fact is, "You don't spend enough time with us."

JC: Oh, really?

BB: You know and I had realized after this that, you know, during a lot of the breaks, I mean, I would be sitting with Roger or Riley or Robert Wynn and, you know, all the white people in the department and not with them. While I was there the talk was never about them, but I imagine, you know, and Peanut a little bit, I didn't spend much time with him, but you know it is kind of clear, you know, that with maybe Peanut and Riley that there was an edge about them. Part of it was like, you know, "Hang out with us a little. Do you think we're like less than them?" I think that was part of the undercurrent of all this and so after this the ice had been broken. You know, I found that I'd hang out with them and maybe that bothered some of the white folk down there, I don't know. So be it, you know.

I think there are defining moments like that when you do something like this where things change and they change cosmetically and you feel like, you know--. I have seen Donald on the streets after this. He didn't come to the show. I invited him. He will stop and talk, and he'll be in the car with someone, and I might even climb with him or lean in the window. There was a closeness that comes out of something like this. Or during breaks where as I might never have sat next to him before I'd sit next to them and they would sort of enjoy having their picture taken now, you know, they felt like I was one of them as well. And sort of what you're getting at I clearly am not one of them, I'm never going to be black. I'm never going to work in that veneer department next to them, but anyway, I think it is sometimes the moment like that makes all the difference in the

world and often the moment is just, it is sort of just when all these other things sort of come to a point as kind of like a way of resolving or talking about things that have not been clear.

JC: This all started because I asked whether you felt any pangs of exploitation in this whole process. What I get as well as a lot of other things with this interview so far is sort of your commitment to the community and what the plant meant as part of the community. I wonder how you sort of negotiated the role as both resident within this place and as photographer and now interviewer because the first thing you push home on us or pushed upon us when we first met is, "I'm here, and I've got to talk to these people later after you guys are gone so don't do anything offensive or let's be careful here." Have you found that a difficult line to walk?

BB: Well, what's been difficult to me after the fact is there were so many people that I came to know in this place--we talked about this just briefly before the interview started--I sort of relish the time to be able to sort of return to photographing some folks after the fact and sort of tell the story, but what I find myself doing is being barely able to keep up the friendships. And while I've had many visits in the aftermath of the closing, 95% of those have been social. You know, I've gone to check in on people to see how they are, to see them at home, to talk about what happened, to lay the ground work for another interviewer to come in and do an interview.

But also what, you know, what happens in a community like this, I mean, I go to the grocery store and I see someone that I knew from the factory regularly. You know, I sort of run into people, I see them. People know me as a photographer. You know, after the exhibition, also, I'm sort of known in the community as the person who put on this exhibition about White Furniture and that carries a certain amount of connection to everybody.

And then there are the more amazing things, I mean, maybe little things at first like when Possum and Little Man would show up at my house at eight o'clock to go to the

flea market or something one Saturday or Sunday morning and I'd just be crawling out of bed and they'd give me grief about it. I'd get in the truck and we'd drive around for twenty minutes and then they'd drop me back off. Recently--. When people like Don McCall call up from Tennessee, you know, "You know who this is?" I'd get people checking in on me like that or Annette Patterson who I had interviewed and in many ways whom I got closer to after the closing by through the interview and through the time spent with her afterwards who showed up on my porch about two or three weeks ago in tears because her little sister had died and wanted to come tell me in person.

JC: The little sister had what?

BB: Had died and so there she was with her siblings, you know, some other siblings in the car and they were driving around not knowing where to go exactly and they drive up here and she gets out.

I remember Teresa and Willie coming by bringing a photo of Willie's bass that he caught on the lake and Teresa looking through the list of all the employees and filling it out for me, and stuff like that. The reason this project is so satisfying is not because I am telling the story of the impact of closing on workers, but because I have made so many genuine friends who are so unlike me. That has been really powerful. That there has been a story to tell that has political consequence, you know, of a nature that many of us can relate to from all parts of this country. That's grand. That's what allowed me to do the work cause it probably wouldn't have been funded if that were not the case to the level that it was. But in terms of its support in the community it's because White Furniture was a part of everyone's lives and because I had become a part of White Furniture in many ways I've become a part of this network of people. That's worth so much, but what's worth more is going to see James Wynn and sharing things from the garden and going out and seeing his chickens and trading jam with him and all the sort of things you do. Or going by and seeing Robert Riley who I haven't seen in ages both here and now that he's driving a truck, a Point-To-Point vehicle rather, for UNC, you know,

when I need on campus calling and getting Robert and riding with him and shooting the shit. You know, all of that stuff is really a kind of powerful connection that comes out of sort of being in this community and living here and the community now being larger than White Furniture because White Furniture is no longer the nucleus.

JC: Your own personal sense of community is obviously deep and tremendous to this project. Can you judge or can you provide anecdotal description of what the impact of this closing is on the community not all these characters that you've told us about and that you photographed or we've interviewed, but in a larger sense where are people working; what is the sense of the community's destiny? I mean, very abstract notions of what a community is about without that economic and social center.

BB: The irony I have to say asks, whose community?

JC: Right.

BB: Because there are many different groups struggling to sort of define this town right now and in fact, the one's who are struggling, who are working to impact Mebane are not the people of White Furniture. In many ways the workers in that plant are the one's who are sort of waiting and seeing what's happening to them, but the new breed of people--not unlike myself--who are more highly educated, who are more affluent, have come here and want to see progress of a different sort. Then the developers and some of the councilmen are people who want to see -- think that Cary is the greatest thing -- who in North Carolina who think that as Mebane grows and builds more and more houses and now a golf course it's going to half again the size, you know, it's going to be half again the size of the existing town when it is finished. As projects like that begin to be launched there is a sense that White Furniture is all but forgotten, however, you know, and people that are a part of that are to some extent there will probably be some that are the sons and brothers and siblings of people who worked in the factory who were more removed from that lifestyle, but still you don't have to go far to find people who grew up in Mebane who are still here, who are still connected to what the factory

was in some way. One of the reasons I think the show was such an enormous success in terms of here is because of the connection, I mean, it brought so many people out around this event to see the place. And it was not--again, I don't believe--you know, we sort of get back to this, I think it was more a show of celebrating, as much a show celebrating what was accomplished there as it was documenting the tragedy. I mean, that's a different discussion, but I felt--a lot of people saw that in the show. So in terms of how it's impacted the community, I think most people--many, many people--from old Mebane are still sorry that it's gone, still hope the town won't change too much, like the small town nature of it, like to knowing people, but now they are sort of slowly becoming the minority where maybe they walk uptown and they only see far more people that they don't know and the places they've shopped at and known and gone to are beginning to close or being transformed and replaced by other shops and stores. So I think that part of the population is aging and there is a new population growing here that would probably love to see White Furniture saved, but can't decide what it should be. Clearly it will never be manufacturing. There were some that wanted the building torn down and a new shopping mall there. There was a lot of debate and now it has been purchased. I don't know if you knew this, but the Fipps' family who has its roots here in Mebane plans to try and save it and turn it into a kind a multi use building--whatever that it is -- but have a portion of it that's devoted to, you know, celebrating what the factory was. Some open-air markets, I mean, some shops are not probably not remarkably unlike the Carr Mill Mall, but I think there's a fairly strong commitment to having a part of it that's not going to entertain such high end clients. A lot of talk about some artist studios and some open-air market like I said and shops and maybe residences, but also the idea of trying to keep alive some of the feeling of what the place was, i.e., celebrating it, but you and I know that's very different than keeping alive the factory that paid people to work there, to keeping those jobs.

JC: Yeah, that sort of post-industrial and nostalgia that somehow Carr Mill Mall captures for bedroom communities or for service economies. It's dramatically different.

BB: Yep, but, you know, my feeling is it is, but it's better than tearing it down.

JC: Yes, I completely agree.

BB: The other thought was to make the show a permanent installation and after the new-- Robert Fipp is talking-- Fipp and Meg Scott have talked to me about would I be willing to hang the show there on a permanent basis. They are trying to collect some of the furniture and devote a portion of the new factory to this. I think that would be a powerful tribute to the people who worked there, and it's a way of telling the story, the history of the history, so that it will be remembered by this community. So I'm all for that. I don't know logistically how we will work it out or what will be done, but I have selected the prints from my portfolio that I would have given the town, and I would rather give them to a space where they will be displayed and remembered in some way.

JC: I hope that happens. How are we doing on time?

BB: I'm fine. I don't know how you're doing on time.

JC: I'm fine.

Let's talk about the exhibit. It was an incredible success. I mean, everybody that I talked to there was very moved. A lot has been written about it, the reviews. We were just talking about Peter Filene's review. How does it feel personally?

BB: [pause] Let me answer something else before I get to that.

JC: Okay.

BB: If there is a down side? You've asked if there was ever a sense of sort of distance or that I was exploiting people. There is something that has occurred to me around all this and that is it's come out more after the fact. At the exhibit there was a powerful connection of people there around the show--I'll talk about that in a second--that was absolutely positive. But in trying to keep this project alive to the point where the book comes out and sort of managing the other stories the sort of the other life that a

project like this takes on, you know, in the art world, the academic world where it comes out and out and out in different venues over and over again, and where I might have to call up someone and say, "Do you mind if your photograph runs here or there?" I think for some people the factory is closed, they've gone through this, it's taking place, I mean, they are moving on. They don't want to be stuck in this place.

JC: Right.

BB: To some extent the work keeps them stuck in their place, and that's a level where I feel a certain kind of angst about, a kind of exploitation that goes on. You know, I've done all the work and that was a powerful experience and having the show here was very important and in certain ways unusual to pour that much time and money into a local presentation of your work. Clearly the national celebration--the better museums--do a lot more for an artist's career in getting the work out there. They allow you to do the next project that's much more important where something like this won't be forgotten in Mebane for a while, but it's never noticed on some other levels. And so like if I now look, you know, as a realist to try to get the work out another level I think there is a sense among some that this is old news. Now there are others like Don McCall who, you know, when I said recently if we get this book done--sort of knowing that we will get it done, but not sort of saying if as if, you know, it's still a long way off--he will say to me, "Bill, if you don't publish this book I'm going to come up there and kick your ass." "Well, Don, tell me why it's important." Or someone like Robert Riley who runs into Jackie Gorman and Jackie mentioned to him that the book is underway, thinking she might have let the cat out of the bag because Robert was concerned about it. I know his concern is that is anyone is going to make any money? Is Bill going to get any pay for this because he's asked me before, "Are you sure you're going to get it?" Thinking like the University is going to take it away or cut me out on some of it. So that's the good side of that.

But those were issues that have come up for me and sort of do a little bit now as this is old here in Mebane and in the lives of people, but in terms of dissemination outside of the region it has just begun.

JC: That's an unreconcilable tension in almost all forms of study now, I mean, anthropologists who want to preserve cultures that are in the midst of change, historians that are struggling to cling to past events. I don't think it is necessarily unique but powerful and difficult.

BB: It's powerful, and in most instances if I call up someone or if I go see them from the factory it's like their reactions are really positive, but for instance Harry, who I knew real well, when I called him one day it was almost a little bit like, so what, you know, this is over for me. Whereas Annette I've formed a relationship with her outside of the plant now, and it's more powerful than the one I had there. I think what I have realized as well is we talk about the workers, I mean, like what is your relationship like with the workers? Are you exploiting them? It's one person to one person over and over again. I think I've realized that I can't have relationships with all of these people now, I mean, sending them a letter to invite them to an event and remembering them in that way because I have all these addresses means something to people, and writing a little note. When we did the exhibit, you know, I had wrote a little personal note to almost everyone we invited to the show, you know, something I remembered, I mean, that means something to people, but it is just a gesture you make in that way, but you can't expect to keep up with all of them. So it is hard for me to even know or surmise how people feel about this now.

Back to the opening.

JC: Back to the opening.

BB: If was by far for me the most difficult time in terms of work. Not the most difficult, it was the hardest I've ever worked at anything in my life. I mean, we had a completely unrealistic schedule with funds that didn't exist at first that we raised, I mean,

to basically turn a space that you saw pretty early on that had been condemned for ten years into a gallery. I wanted it to be really--. I wanted the space to be really striking so that when you went into it the work could be seen in a way that would really let it, you know, sing. I didn't want to compromise that even if it meant pouring money into I didn't have. Even if it meant maybe pushing the bureaucracy at UNC in directions that were not--. I mean to try and get money spent for spray painting a ceiling out of a budget where no one had ever hired a painter to spray paint a ceiling before. [laughter] To find that wasn't in the budget and I had to move it from one line to another because it's not the kind of thing that comes up a lot. There were just so many things to sort of put together and yet, to me as an artist, I mean, stepping away from the relationship to workers and all. People from the factory would stop in to sort of see what I was doing.

Family and friends of White Furniture helped more than actual employees. People like Ronnie Cook--who was married to Cindy who had worked there--the electrician gave us probably fifteen hundred dollars of electrical work rewiring the whole place. People like that really chipped in.

People like Paul and Buck from the city--. You know, Paul whose father had worked at the factory, who helped me unload all the fabric and all. There was all of that and for me it was a really rewarding time. I mean, that was just some of the best spent energy, and in the end when I was just--. As an artist, I mean, separate from being a citizen in this community, it was really great to sort of see that place take shape and the idea that we were going to track light it with, you know, a hundred and eighty feet of running track, I mean, to actually pull all that off and to have a gallery that I think is as nice a space as I've shown my work in. I mean, it is not the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, it was better. I mean, it was bigger open wall space that felt like the factory that was painted to sort of feel industrial. Everything about it said that this is a welcoming place for everyone to see this work. I just loved the space, I mean, to me that was a real challenge and there was a lot of collaboration and you know, folks like Alice

Boyle and Barry Oblingese and friends like John Shoneman, you know, I could go on with this. But it was the most satisfying of times, and we worked probably from, you know, eight o'clock--which is early for me--till about two or three in the morning for about a month straight--which is late for me--trying to get this ready until the night before the show, the employees opening, when Alice and I were up till about three or four. Then at the employees opening it was just all adrenaline.

I remember going back after the opening--it was a morning opening--and Alice and I laying there and taking a nap and sort of looking at each other and saying, "It was all worth it." We were both completely and absolutely exhausted. She, who had contributed enormous energy from the beginning in this project in all phases including some of the shooting in the plant with me late at night and setting up light, felt like--. Often the one who isn't recognized who gives all this energy, the partner in something like this, she said to me, "I wouldn't trade this either."

It was a very powerful thing because we imagined sort of like so many of these things having this idea and trying to bring the workers, but a lot of people came. For me it was a fabulous turnout, and I just felt like the mood was really special there.

JC: It was.

BB: You know, that's something that I'll remember. James Blalock came up to me about a week later and said, "Bill, there are two days I'll always remember the rest of my life, my wedding day and that opening last week." You know, when someone says that to you that's really, really something.

JC: Wow!

BB: And people like Robin Smith saying, "You've made us really proud." And Harvey Solomon, you know, sort of the same sentiment and some of the things that were said there it was a very, very memorable thing for me. I mean, I've always liked the idea of an artist taking the work out of museums and to the people, but to me this was a case where that really happened and succeeded completely. You know, we would have just

opened that space for two openings, the employees opening and for the public opening, but when we got the support from the town there was the insistence that we keep it open longer. We never thought, well, that makes sense, you know, you go to all this work and then end up taking it down, but it was an after-the-fact, too, that this was so great. People that maybe hadn't come to the opening that would show up cause they had heard about it from other workers who would sneak in just to sort of have a look though maybe not buy into it to kind of say hi and walk through at these unusual times. The number of people from all over. Someone driving down from Baltimore, people from Canada, I mean, the work spread. It was our little miniature field of dreams.

When we had the Dogwood Festival, you know, we opened it up for that day and that's the big sort of event in Mebane and it was like sort of wall to wall--. I mean, there were a lot of people moving around the space almost the entire day non stop. We couldn't document it. We couldn't get most that stopped in to sign in. I would guess hundreds and hundreds of people came through. It was like one of those shows at the National Gallery and it just blew my mind to do something and say that all these people are coming to see this. I mean, I felt like we had reached in a way that was so profound. I wish we could have documented it.

JC: Yeah. It was hard to get people to sign in even on the opening day.

BB: Yeah, and people didn't want--. And so be it, you know, that was part of it. So the record might never show sort of what went on, but in this community it was just so powerful to do that for me. There were people like Phonse Bean. Bernie Bean who was talked about in several interviews and his father Phonse Bean who was a superintendent of the plant for some time passed away about two months ago and was in a nursing home. I told Margaret White that Phonse Bean had come to the show and she said, "No way. He hasn't left his nursing home for several years." Sure enough I did go back and find that he had signed in and someone had brought him out. He had heard of this and had someone

take him out of the home to come see the show. It breaks my heart, you know, it's a very powerful thing.

So the only regret I felt was having to take it down at the end. It's one thing I've done that I won't ever look back on, you know--. If I could do this every time I did a major project I would do it. The question is could I because the energy expended, I mean, you think twice the idea of community art and reaching out and doing it in this way is a powerful idea but the reality in making it happen it takes a lot of damn work. Boy, I would think twice about ever committing to do it again.

JC: [laughter]

BB: If a project comes along that's this special, you know, it's worth it.

JC: Was there anybody you looked around and said, "How come they are not here? How come they didn't come?"

BB: Yeah. I was sorry that Ivey Jones never came. He never came to see the show. I ran into him at the Byrd's Food Store when it was still open and his wife said, "We're going to see that, I really want to see that." [laughter]

JC: [laughter]

BB: "We'll see it," and I knew he wouldn't. Later when I saw her sometime she said, "I never could get his ass out of there to see it." Some people--. I think some people just--. Photos just don't do it for them, I mean, some came out of curiosity. Some came because they thought, I mean, clearly it was celebration to them and a tribute, and I think a lot of workers came because it was their event. Some came because I called and asked them to several times, at least for the opening. I mean, I did a good bit of recruiting, you know, when ever I would see somebody, tell them and reinvite them. I think some were sort of disinterested and sort of, "so what, we're a bunch of pictures on the wall." Others, I know there must be others who never saw the show. I'm trying to think of who they are. There were several folks who I wanted to be there who never came; Nellie, no Sandra was there, that's right, that's the day I saw there. Nellie didn't. I

spoke to her recently, and she was someone who I had hoped would be there. But, yes, there were some.

JC: As someone who was interviewers in the audience and just sort of monitoring everybody's emotional energy running through the crowd. I have no idea what you went through, but I'm sure it was worth it because it really was, I think, probably a defining moment for a lot of people.

Let's move away from this. I'm interested actually in sort of more artistic aspects of what you've done as well. What's difficult or interesting about taking pictures in a factory?

BB: What's interesting, I mean, the work was clearly divided and I visualized this from the beginning, I mean, there would be the life of the plant, i.e., the workers, the manufacturing, the assembling, the kidding around at break time in the lunch room. There would be all that life and the life would revolve around the people, the making of furniture, the talking, the whole community as it moves and evolves with the community people. Then there was this place and undeniably the place had a kind of power all it's own.

I remember going in the factory the first few times when it closed down. The mist, what I felt was a mist, but actually the fine sawdust as the huge vacuums, you know, the venting systems that would suck the sawdust out would be shut down and you'd hear the quietness. And then the seepage, the fine mist of sawdust seeping back into the plant. That just mesmerized me.

And the physical place like looking at the machinery. How do you photograph this huge row of band saws and give a sense of the light, the place, the size, the volume? So for me the more difficult challenge from the beginning was photographing the place because I've never been a photographer who's photographed things. Landscapes have not interested me. Portraits have always interested me. My pictures have always had a kind

of emotional center rather than an aesthetic center, you know, the subject sort of being the defining part and the relationship I have with that subject being what my art is about.

So here for the first time I was faced with having to photograph in this physical place. I made two dramatic changes. One was, I decided right from the beginning that I was going to shoot color film. I had never shot a roll of color film prior to this project.

JC: No kidding.

BB: And half the project turned being color. I wasn't sure where and how I would draw the line, but that became clear to me after a while.

The second thing that was difficult--I can talk a little bit more about that in laying the framework--the second thing that was clearly difficult for me right away is there's not much light in a factory. Your eyes see well, but film doesn't see with the same detail or clarity as the eye sees. Our eye adjusts to low-light situations, but film needs a certain amount of light to record movement. So I found myself shooting at very low slow shutter speeds and wide open apertures which are very limiting and difficult. And then there's the movement. So all of that was kind of difficult. Technically there was that difficulty, and for the first time I had to introduce--. Probably half the pictures in this portfolio are light with artificial light or with strobes.

I've talked with other people who have worked in factories and they say that's, you know, something immoral about it to them. It's like you photograph with the factory light, I don't believe so, I mean, I think you try to create a light that is as close to the reality of what you feel and see in that place as possible. If you use some artificial light to make it look like it feels with real light, so be it, I mean, because after all it's all one great fantasy, I mean, it's all terribly interpretive and subjective and I think that's the art of what we do, sort of how we see and use our medium and the technique we have to make some statement, some emotional, personal, political or whatever about this place. So using light for the first time, using strobe, well, actually electronic flash for the first time was new for me.

But also, here I am in a place where I'm taking pictures and trying to be subtle at times, and every time I take a picture the flash bursts and people know it. That's real different. There's not just the sound, I mean, people know you are there anyway, but you have a way with working with them and they sort of accept and forget about you and go back to work. When you're working with flash it changes everything.

JC: Very intrusive.

BB: I used it to fill subtle bits of light just to fill in, but it still was there.

So those two things were different. At some point it became clear to me that the photographs of the place would be about color because the color was so mesmerizing. A lot of the color photographs are as much about color--. They are about color and place. My criticism of color photography has often been too much about color that the color is too sexy and people, you know, the statement becomes fully an aesthetic one of the mixing of colors that it is less rooted in place and so to be able to do a project where I felt like the colors were driving this in part but the real emphasis was in trying to represent this place.

When I imagined the show from the very beginning, and I really didn't think of a book, but I imagined an exhibition which I promised, I was imaging a lot of really big color images so that when employees would walk into this exhibit for the first time they would feel like they were walking back into the plant, it would be that real on some level. I don't think I achieved that, but I think there was, you know, to a lesser extent that's sort of what I was trying to achieve even in the end.

And then the color portraits, I've always been a portrait photographer, worked with medium format cameras--camera on a tripod--and photographs like James Malone on his last day of work, you know, a sort of a fairly plain picture of this man with a grayish hair and his blue work shirt looking right at you and sort of a rosy red sort of Irish face and the saddened eyes, I mean, the sense that sort of in that photograph he's holding much of the feeling of what it is to be there for the very last time and not knowing where

he's going next. Not a typical color photograph but I liked sort of the industrial colors as well, I mean, the blueness of the work shirts and the color on Jimmy Gross's face as he's breaking down the factory and the pictures of Andrew Binet and the spray booth and all those colors told about the life of the place. So technically as an artist what was also interesting me and moving me was the mix of colors and these formal portraits and what they said about place.

At first I started shooting all the formal portraits in both black and white and color and then I just had to choose. But the pictures of the-- The 35mm--the black and white pictures which were all shot on 35mm--a more instantaneous camera, artistically that just seemed like it needed to be black and white. I didn't feel like there would be a problem with integrating the two conceptually. I felt like that would be the life of the plant and the other would be the structure of the plant. It would be okay to make that break so at some point I consciously made that division and just went for that.

JC: Do you have a group of photographs that you regard as your favorites?

BB: Yeah. Can I leave there? I want to say a little bit more about the difficulty of photographing in a plant. There is another very, very-- There is a human difficulty that I had not encountered before. People can't hear when things are running.

JC: Just the din.

BB: And so you ask permission in different kinds of ways, you know, I always ask permission to take pictures, but when someone is working at a machine it is kind of hard to ask. And there are sort of ways to ask sometimes non-verbal ways that are pretty clear, but there was always a sense also like these people are stuck at those machines and I'm wandering around them taking pictures. The inequity in that was real clear at times, and that was a difficult thing in some instances and yet there are other instances where I felt like when I was taking these pictures they felt like they were being celebrated, like they were being focused on, they were important, they were significant, they were a symbol of something, and people sort of liked that time as well. But that wasn't always

the case. I think it depends on what they were doing, how they felt about it. Often after the fact the pictures that people liked were not the ones that I liked that showed the valor, the strength of the worker but the ones that showed them next to their favorite machine.

JC: [laughter]

BB: This is the type of thing you would never know. So it was that difficulty and then there was the other difficulties that I was not allowed to interfere with production, and I wanted to do more portraits. There were a few instances--. There's a thin line between production and nonproduction.

JC: [laughter]

BB: When the line slows down in finishing and I want to do Harry's picture because things are moving slowly and I set up while he sprays a table. I set up a little more and he sprays another one. I stand here and I think about. He sprays another one and then we've got thirty seconds to shoot. That sort of fits in, but I knew if somebody caught me doing that and thought I was slowing production that would not go over well.

Robin Hart, the president, did catch me one time doing a portrait and stopped me. It was after I had the conversation and he said, "I told you never to do this." It was clear to me that I was going to have to be careful. So generally in principle I always respected that, but like I said there's a thin line between, you know, when someone can stop for a moment and have their portrait taken while they are working, you know, especially in a place where people would often stop and talk for a few moments anyway. Not like the old days where people were given more freedom. There was a real constant push, push, push.

I found that my best portrait time--and this is different than a lot of places having not photographed the work place extensively before or this kind of work environment--was during breaks. I would do a lot of the portraits during breaks, and I would do a lot of portraits after work. People often didn't want to stay more than five or ten minutes after work. You know, that impacted how I could photograph as well.

You asked me about favorite photographs. Yeah, I have sort of mentioned some already.

JC: Yes, you have.

BB: Of the portraits--. I think the portraits of Jimmy and James Malone are powerful for me. The portrait of Annette Patterson is not as good a portrait and yet, you know, there's something about her spirit, you know, that really gives me--. I don't think it is as good a portrait of her as could have done, but I really like it. It may be my fondness for Annette after the fact.

The black and white pictures I'm sort of more personally attached to, and I think it is because of my attachment to moment and people. Whereas a picture like the empty loading dock which is just that orange railing in the middle of sort of emptiness to me visually that's really a compelling and striking image. I love it. I'll probably blow it up really large or the size it was in the show and hang it in my house. Aesthetically it strikes me. It doesn't move me in the way that the picture of, you know, of the four men receiving their pension papers moves me or the picture of Little Man pretending to fix--. I mean Carlos was pretending to fix Little Man's hair, I mean, that's always been a favorite because it gets the kind of playful camaraderie in the way people really care for each other but don't quite show it but show it in a teasing way and yet through that teasing you sense the real affection there.

There are some pictures that weren't in the show that are favorites in different kinds of ways. The pictures of James Blalock on his final day of work as he walks down, as he grabs his jacket and walks through the sanding department to sign his pension papers there's a kind of haunting quality about that. You sort of have to know what's going on.

JC: Is that why you didn't choose it for the exhibit?

BB: No, because I think in the exhibit there were other pictures that were as strong or maybe stronger like Avery sweeping up on his last day of work after years and

years of working there after twenty-one years that tell that in a more powerful way and are visually more engaging. And yet I knew James in a way that I didn't know Avery at the time and so that resonates for me. And I also didn't choose because there were enough pictures about the closing. Remember we were trying to strike this balance. There are pictures like at quitting time. That's an image that I like very much which is basically an outline or silhouettes of shapes of the workers leaving the plant for the last time--not for the last time--at the end of the day rather. To me it is not about sort of--. It's not a picture of closing it's a picture of the everydayness of their jobs. I mean, again the shapes, the figures, the people leaving and punching out day after day after day all their lives. The fact that, you know, there was an end to this sort of makes it, you know, gives it another kind of life, a kind of symbolic life, but for me the sort of ordinary closing and sort of the line up of people waiting to leave and sort of that moment in the darkness there is really nice. You know, the lights would go down in the plant. There are pictures like that I liked.

I liked some of those moment pictures in some ways more than production pictures. I liked the picture of Darren and Donna sort of at the end of the day with the air compressors blowing themselves off. Not in a day where they were teasing about blowing themselves off. A sort of quietness in the sense of, you know, again the sort of everydayness, the ritual. I love the picture of the break where--I can't remember if there's Richard or Darren--you know, hanging out the window and other employees walking by and looking up at him, that moment that he captures. I mean, I love that sort of for the moment.

Let's see if there are any other ones. I could probably go on and on.

JC: I'm sure. Especially if we got the proof sheets.

BB: Yeah, if we got out the proof sheets I would be able to point to them and tell you which ones.

JC: We talked about your favorites, and we talked about the technical aspects of photography. I don't even know how to frame this question really because I don't know that much about photography schools and photography, the development of the art, but how does your work fit in broader themes and categories of the photographic medium?

BB: Well I think today, you know, photography has really been pushed in the last ten years. Like much of the art world I think there is more emphasis on work that is quite conceptual, I think too cerebral, and I think the kind of realism I'm doing is not sort of the cutting edge these days. And I think it all sort of gets grouped into the documentary tradition, and I think much of work that comes out of the tradition is some what lifeless. It's the same stuff that's sort of--. It's derivative, it's not the same stuff that Walter Evans was doing. What he was doing was pretty remarkable, but it's derivative of that. I don't know, I think it lacks a kind of life in reality. But I think in the last few years, I mean, I think there is beginning to be a bit of a reemergence again of a kind of social realism which is the work that I did. It's about real people and their lives.

There has always been this tradition and the photographers whose work I have admired from August Sanders who spent much of his life trying to photograph the people of one nation of his native Germany on through a time where that country was going through major changes. You know, during a time when the Third Reich actually destroyed many of his original negatives and imprisoned his son because his portrait of the people were far to diverse than what they had hoped to propagate. But sort of I love of the formality of that work and yet the depth of it--. Maybe I shouldn't go on and sort of name the many photographers I like. I've been wandering.

JC: That's okay. What is formality in a photograph?

BB: When I think of formality in a portrait, I mean, I think of--. A portrait is different in some ways than--. More candid kind of photograph like the pictures you see in newspapers day in and day out, the 35mm, where someone can take a moment and frame it instantly. Two lovers can be on a bench and you from a distance can take that

with a long lens, or someone could be working at a machine and you take it from a distance, but to me the more formal portrait is when two people collaborate. The photographer and the subject or subjects and it's clear what's going on. Their portrait is being taken and the camera is often on a tripod, and there's this tension there, this relationship between photographer and participant, subjects, or whatever. It's clear that the photographer is after a moment and the subject is trying to like show their best face and that's sort of part of the photographic tension. But it is also an incredibly intimate time because it's a time where just you are there with this camera, and you're recording something that's very permanent and everyone knows that. Formal portraits to me are portraits that I'm thinking in terms of process that has always sort of been done in this way, where the person being photographed is clearly a willing participant, maybe not completely willing, but is clearly participating in the endeavor.

JC: [laughter]

BB: In my work I hope very willing. I like that tradition. I like working in that way. It's very different than capturing this moment that reveals them, you know, this expressive moment, but some people might call that portrait of Andrew Poteat where he is holding up the bed post and it was an image that was reproduced for the show a lot--it was the first image in the show--a kind of portrait, an environmental portrait. I don't consider that a portrait. It's a different kind of photograph taking with a 35mm at a moment where he knew I was taking it but not as involved in the same way, not facing the camera.

JC: One final question and I'll let you go. How did you choose the photograph for the poster?

BB: Never, you know, have a group of people deliberated so much. It was very difficult to come up with an image that we felt like could represent this entire exhibition. Of course, we had two tries at it cause we had an announcement. I couldn't be more pleased as how the announcement came out. The poster, I think, could have been a little

more--. The poster still feels a little haunting and a little bit too much like a tombstone or a little too much about the final days, but we wanted it clearly to be something that sort of was about life as well as closing. We wanted it to be something that the workers would respond to and feel proud of. And so at some point the designer who I was working with and Kathy Nasstrom and several others all put our input into that image, you know, into selecting that image. Couldn't decide and we thought it would be great idea to invite a handful of workers to come and vote.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

WILLIAM L. BAMBERGER, JR.
JUNE 12, 1995

BB: So anyway, we invited all these people to come look, and of course what always happens is that no two people agree, but there were three or four images that came to the forefront. Then ultimately two seemed to get the strongest support. There was the poster image which of course all of us familiar with the project have seen with all the beds on the conveyor in the cabinet room. And then there was the other image which was of furniture coming down the line, beds, and the spindles and the mirrors coming down the line in the finishing room. It had even more of a quality of tune-ism. It's not a tone it's a--. It had sort of more of a quality of sort of life and death imagery with plastic draped over it and all these spindles sort of lined up and assembled here.

Anyway, there was a lot of debate as to whether we should use this image which I think in some ways was more aesthetically provocative versus--. In the cabinet room--. What I like about the image in the cabinet room is that I really felt the human presence there. I mean, here was this line up of all these beds on this assembly line, and I could see, you know, there were no workers in the picture, but I could see them in the picture. I could sort of see their place. I could feel it. There was something really romantic about the light there. There was also a sense that, you know, this would be gone. There's a beautiful light and it also very much said factory to me.

But anyway, it wasn't strictly my call. I was going back and forth as was everyone. But what was interesting was how different people--employees in particular--responded to the images. Margaret White, for instance, who was married to Stephen

White--once president of the company--liked the latter image, the one we never pictured, because it showed off the furniture a little bit more. I mean, she didn't sort of see some of the other imagery and the sort of shroud, you know, this plastic that was draped around the furniture that we thought was a kind of a shroud, and the whole thing felt like a shrine of sorts. That's one of the words I was thinking of. She thought it showed off the furniture more, and it was something that she wanted to see more of in the show, the finished furniture.

JC: Sure.

BB: You never really see the finished furniture in the show. We didn't because the finished furniture gets packed in boxes as it comes down the line. It never sort of sits there like it does in the showroom.

Vickie Jacobs objected to this image because she worked up there in the finishing department, and she didn't see this plastic as a shroud of some kind, you know, a symbolic sort of wrapping. She saw it as plastic that was there because the ceiling leaked and she knew that there was a bucket up under it and she thought everyone would think that it was really tacky that there would be this picture for the poster that showed that there was a leaky ceiling.

JC: [laughter]

BB: And that would be a real insult to the workers. And so it went back and forth with almost everyone picking a different image. And in the end it was ultimately my decision and it was clear that it was one of these two pictures. I selected the other because of the reasons I think I have mentioned. It felt more like--. It really said this is a factory, this a place where people work. It felt like it was something that everyone owned

in a way. Also, I took Vickie's comments more to heart in some ways than Margaret's. Granted, it would have been nice to have shown off the product which another picture did. We clearly wanted a picture that showed the product, not a one dimensional one just sort of showing finished furniture, but one that was richer and other kinds of metaphors.

But I was afraid that some of the workers would see this and really be insulted by the plastic and know what it was, and I just didn't feel that that was fair, and so it was struck.

JC: That's an interesting sort of negotiation between the aesthetic and your responsibility to your subjects.

BB: But I still have the list of what everyone picked and their choices. We also spent almost as much time picking the three images for the announcement. There were more images. I don't remember the varied responses, but there we were trying to get at other kinds of balances of men and women and we were thinking more in that respect of trying to represent the plant and the kinds of people were there. But that became a story that unfolded in design, a story with the first image saying, "These are the people that worked there. This is what was made." The picture of Joan in the spray booth, you know, finishing this piece of furniture. These are the people that were impacted, you know, part two of the story and part one was that picture of, you know, this little bit about, you know, some history a maker of fine antique reproduction furniture. I mean, a sense of the history of this place, and the second image was to tell that this was about a closing as well. So the closing was given one-third of that, I mean, these were the men and women who worked there who lost their jobs. Two hundred and some workers lost their jobs. That reminds me of like that little song about the Titanic, you know, so many

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people lost their jobs sort of like concocting this fable. And then the last picture clearly a picture of friendship which was really important to me to have in there, you know, celebrating not only did this place make furniture, but it was about friendships and that that would survive on some level.

That was as difficult. We wrestled with that forever and had people come and look, and in the end, with this image, I didn't need a final approval with the color poster image because there were no people in it, but I asked permission of everyone in the announcement except for one person who I couldn't reach--one of the people in the layoff picture--called and asked everyone else. I was surprised a little bit, but everyone said, sure go ahead especially Carlos and Little Man because I thought people would wonder what their picture was really about.

JC: Right. You know, several people what was going on there.

BB: Yeah, and I was sort of delighted that they both said sure.

JC: Good enough.

It's been great getting to know both you and your work. It's been a pleasure.

Thanks for the interview.

BB: Sure, thank you. I've enjoyed being on this side of the microphone as well.

END OF INTERVIEW