

Interview

with

BARBARA HANKS

August 10, 1994

by Patrick Huber

Transcribed by Jackie Gorman

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

Transcription on deposit at
The Southern Historical Collection
Louis Round Wilson Library

Citation of this interview should be as follows:
"Southern Oral History Program,
in the Southern Historical Collection Manuscripts Department,
Wilson Library,
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill"

Copyright © 1996 The University of North Carolina

START OF TAPE 1. SIDE A

BARBARA HANKS
AUGUST 10, 1994

PATRICK HUBER: This is an interview with Barbara Hanks at her home, 6316 Lebanon Road. Mebane, North Carolina, on August 10, 1994. This interview is being conducted for the Southern Oral History Program and is part of its oral history of the White Furniture Company.

Why don't we start out the interview, Barbara, by having you tell us a little bit about where and when you were born and about your parents and any brothers and sister, if you had any.

BARBARA HANKS: Well, I was born right here in Alamance County. I've been living here all my life. I have four sisters. My dad worked at White's. My mom, she worked in Saxapahaw for many years at Tex-Fi.

PH: Where did your dad work at White's?

BH: In the cabinet room.

PH: In the cabinet room?

BH: Yeah, he worked there for like eighteen years.

PH: What year were you born in?

BH: In '60.

PH: 1960. How was it that you got the job at White's?

BH: Well, I was working in Burlington, and so I wanted to get closer to Mebane. I just went and applied for it, and they hired me.

PH: Where were you working at before White's?

BH: Gray Cyc's in Burlington

PH: Is that a furniture factory?

BH: No, White's was my first furniture factory. learned everything from White's.

PH: Do you remember who you spoke to when you went?

BH: Yeah, Jim Murray.

PH: Jim Murray?

BH: Uh, huh.

PH: And what did he tell you? Were you hired on the spot?

BH: Yeah, pretty much, you know, my work record was pretty good.

PH: And you had other family or relatives who worked there at White's?

BH: Right, I had a, let's see. My father, and then I had two uncles and an aunt, and my sister, cousins. [laughs] Yeah, so it was right many of us. Not all at one time, you know, different times But my dad left and went to Craftique, though.

PH: Do you remember what your first day was like at White's?

BH: Yeah, weird [Laughs] because I had never worked in furniture. I started out in rub and packing. I had to rub the furniture and sand it and make sure it was smooth, you know, shine it up, gloss it up or whatever.

Let's see. I can't remember how it was. We used-- It was kind of weird cause, you know, when you rubbed the furniture you used this, like steel wool, and I thought that was really weird because you wouldn't think you'd put nothing like that on a piece of furniture. I mean, it cleaned it up. It got all that oil and stuff off of it. I learned about the different types of polish-- I learned a lot really in the time I was there that I didn't know about furniture.

This is a piece of White's furniture. [Barbara is showing Patrick a piece of her furniture.] We done messed it up. The people was real nice. They help you out a lot. Really, the older ones there, you wouldn't think it, but they would help you a lot.

PH: How would they help you out?

BH: Like some of the short cuts that, you know, after a while you'll learn them, you know, how to do it better, and they would just point out things like, when I was on rubbing and packing you'd have to pull the drawers out and clean it all up and make sure it was all sanded and stuff.

PH: What other kind of short cuts would the old timers there show you?

BH: I don't know. Well, not really, I can't say they'd short cuts, they just--. I reckon you have to be there to really understand [Laughs] what I'm talking about. I ain't really thought about it.

I worked there a little over a year, and then I got the final inspecting job. That was really a shock to me because I didn't think I had been there long enough. But what they was really looking for was just a normal eye, you know, instead of looking into the wood just seeing, you know, what you could just see normally. After you've been working there a while you look more into the wood than the outer. Then you could see, you know, the little nicks and stuff that a lot of people really wouldn't notice, but when you work there you notice it cause you see it everyday and stuff. I really like that. I sure hated it when they shut down. I really liked working at White's.

PH: What year did you start there?

BH: I really don't know. Seven years ago so it's what? Let's see, '85?

PH: '85 you started there?

BH: I think so cause she was little. [Barbara is referring to her daughter who is in the room.] Some of the older ones--. Like my father probably could tell you more about it than I could.

In the showroom, I used to love to go to the showroom.

PH: Where's that at?

BH: In High Point. Cause when we had shows we'd have to go up there, you know, and set it up and stuff. I used to like it cause you'd see it set up just instead of the individual piece, you'd see it like in a little room all set up. It was pretty.

PH: And you would go up there sometime and help them set it up?

BH: Uh, huh. Dust it up and clean it up and make sure--. With people, you know, moving it and stuff they'd nick it and bang it and then I'd have to fix it. I learned how to burn in on wood. That was really an experience.

PH: What's that?

BH: Like if you nick the piece of wood they fix it where--it's called burn in. It's like a putty, like, and you get it hot, and you burn it back into the wood and it blends it back into the wood. Don't look like it's been hit or nothing. I thought that was real neat. I hadn't never-

PH: Do you remember who broke you in or showed you your job the first day?

BH: The first day [pause]. I remember more about the inspecting I did on the first day of rub and packing. To tell you the truth, I don't remember who first trained me on that. I know

Richard Hinkle was there. But Robert Hodges, he showed me a lot of stuff. He'd probably be a good one for you to talk to.

PH: Robert Hodges?

BH: Uh, huh. He just lives right over here in Mebane, too. But he was a repairman. He helped me a lot. He worked there right there beside me, and Harvey Solomon, too. He's a real--. [laughs]

PH: I've heard of him, yeah.

BH: But, I mean, he's good, he's real good at his job, Harvey. Well, all of them were. They helped me a lot like, you know, touching up like the edges'd be wrong where you rub it and clean it up, it takes some of the finish off, and you have a touch-up pencil. You have to go back around it and get the white edges.

Like when I first started, I mean, I just couldn't--. I mean, it was like I was shaking or something. I just couldn't get it. They would show me how to just my little tip. To me, they'd look like they just smoothed it on there. They would show me how to get my tip right and get it on there. They were a real help.

PH: Were you nervous your first day?

BH: Oh, yeah, yeah. And not knowing that big old plant I didn't know which way to go. Here I was--. Cause I worked upstairs and so I just had to follow them to find out where break room and stuff was. So usually, I would just take the easiest way and just go down the back steps and just go out the side and be out there and just sit on a little bench. Then it didn't take long till I found my way around. Then it was just like home, I reckon. Well, I really spent more time there than I did at home most of the time. [Laughs]

PH: How big was the rub and pack department? How many people worked there?

BH: Oh, Lord--. Cause that's where we rubbed it, and then we put the hardware on it there in that department. Then we inspected it and plus packed it. So it was all, I'll say, a good twenty people in there.

PH: Where there women and men who worked there?

BH: Right.

PH: Black and white?

BH: Uh, huh. Mexicans. There was a Mexican guy named William. He was a repairman. He was good, too, and he could do the tops to gloss them. He was real good at that. Machine them. Cut them down. And that was something weird, too. You know when you go in a store and you see the tops how so pretty and shiny they are? The steps you have to go to get that--. I learned all about that, the machines, cutting it down and getting the orange peel out of the tops and stuff.

PH: What's the orange peel?

BH: Okay, orange peel--. It looks like little holes maybe in it. It looks brushed, like, see you want that out to make it smooth looking.

PH: And they call it the orange peel?

BH: Uh, huh, that's what they call it cause maybe if it come down to me and I look at it, I'd have to tag it out and send it back cause it's got orange--. You know how orange peeling looks?

PH: Yeah.

BH: And that's what it looked like. We used to call the polish--I really don't know the name of it--but it was white, milky looking, so we called it goat's milk. The reason why, a long time ago in the fields White's has goats. So I'm assuming they just-- Cause I was running around like, goat's milk? Why anyone would call it that, but that's what we used to call it. It did good, too. I'd like to have some of that at home.

PH: Would you do all of the steps like putting on hardware and rubbing it and packing it, or was it divided up with--?

BH: Divided up, right.

PH: What did you do primarily before you got your inspecting job?

BH: Well, I did a little bit of everything.

PH: Did you?

BH: Yeah, but mainly I rubbed it, like sand up under it, and make sure it's not rough around the legs and clean it up. Like when they machine the top they used oil, and it would run all down on your furniture, so we'd have to get all that off with a cleaner because that oil if it stayed on it it would turn white. It would get all in your designs where it's cut in, we'd have to make sure it was all out. Make sure the drawers were smooth, because sometimes in the cabinet room when they fixed the drawers there might be putty on the side. You had to make sure to get that off. And then it would move on down to the hardware, and they'd put that on.

PH: What sort of--? How fast did you have to work in the rub and pack? Was it on a line?

BH: Yeah.

PH: It was?

BH: It moved, yeah. Well, it depends on the size of the furniture, too, really, and what all the guys had to do to make the top. Like some of it, you didn't have to use machines on the top, and then some of it you did. So it just really depend. Some of it, boy, we'd roll. [laughs] Then some of it you had to really take your time and get all that oil--. That oil was a pain. Getting all them nooks and crannies and stuff.

PH: What sort of machine would you use on the top?

BH: Like a big, you know, hooked up with the aire It looked like two sanders on it, and it would move like that. [Barbara demonstrates]

PH: And it would polish the top?

BH: Yeah, it would, see, well, you had three, had three different guys up there running three machines and three different kinds of sand paper on it. Then it would go down and some of the tops it depend on how high the sheen's suppose to be on different suites, and if it needed a higher sheen then you'd go on down to another guy and he would buff it up after they cut it down. I mean, so there were steps you had to go, and then you could see the difference in them. It was really something.

And then like when I go in some of these little discount stores I got a habit, I just got a habit of looking, and all of a sudden I'll just start rubbing and feeling up under there and taking the drawers out. And I can tell the difference because it looks so cheap, which it is, I guess, compared to White's furniture. It's just made so much different.

I'm trying to think of some of the things that helped me around the house. Like with your drawers and stuff, how they drop and sag. They use a thumb tack. I never knew that. That's

all you got to do is put back there, and it will hold it up. [Laughs] A thumb tack, that's what they use.

PH: How did--? What did the workers think of the furniture?

BH: We all wanted it [Laughs]. We would all love to have some. Well, you know, how people are. Some of them would say, well, they ask too much for it. Of course, we were regular old workers, and we couldn't afford it no way. Oh, all of us would have loved to have it, which some of them did get some.

PH: How did you get this piece?

BH: Oh, this was messed up, and they was gonna a--they called it the bone yard--.

PH: The bone yard?

BH: Uh, huh, that's because--. And that was the like the furniture that you couldn't really repair it. It was just too much work. It would have cost you more to fix it than really--. It was out there, and when they decided to shut down and stuff the guy, William--they sold it to me for like thirty dollars--and he fixed it. Oh, it looked better than this, but we done used it and glasses and stuff, like, we should never do that, but--. So he fixed it for me, and that's how I got it.

PH: How did the people in rub and pack get along?

BH: We all got along real well. I mean, I really--. We was all like a big family, I mean, when you come in everybody know if you had a good afternoon or not, you know, cause we worked together so long that we could just--. We was all like a family. We'd tell each other our problems, and that's what's so weird cause over here at Dixie's it's not like that at all. I mean, I hardly know any of those people. Cause, I mean, at White's when you're working you

could at least talk, you know, cause you can work and talk. Not a whole lot, you know, you still have to keep your mind on what you was doing, but everybody got to know everybody. Like Christmas and stuff, rub-and-packing and some of the people out in finishing, we'd go to someone's house and have a party. Just us, you know. Or cookouts or whatever. We still get together some time. So it's real neat. And when you see some of them out, it's really nice just to get to see them again. I miss them all. I do.

PH: These were things that the workers would get together and have parties. They weren't sponsored by the company?

BH: No, we'd just do it ourselves. The company, at first, when I went there they would for Christmas they would have a party. You'd bring your kids and family and Santa Claus would be there. They had gifts for the kids and stuff. Then they cut all that out. I guess it got just too expensive, cause they had drawings and you'd win--cause I won a grip, you know, you'd put it on the table and it would grip stuff.

PH: Oh, uh huh.

BH: You know? I don't know what it's called.

PH: Yeah. Like a vise?

BH: Yeah. Put it on the table to grip. Real nice.

PH: Did--? When you started working there did the White family still own the company or had it been sold to Hickory?

BH: It was sold to Hickory.

PH: So you never worked there under--?

BH: Not under Mr.--. No, my father did. Let's see, I guess--. I can remember--I mean, I don't know if this will help you--my dad, when--. Cause we lived right over here in Mebane and it was snow and stuff and he would walk to work. He would walk to work. I thought, man, you really love to go to work. [laughs] But he would. Then they had an hour for lunch. Where when I went we didn't have put thirty minutes. So, I mean, he would come home everyday and eat lunch. I remember more him working there, I mean--cause he would come home and there was little tacks all in his shoes. So we would have to get them tacks out of his shoes. And glue, he would just bring all kinds of glue.

PH: To use around the house?

BH: Yeah, because we'd tell him--and tape--if he didn't have his glue and tape he couldn't fix nothing. [laughs]

PH: [laughs] You never went to work, though, with your dad when you were younger, did you?

BH: No. We would go, like out front, you know all them benches and stuff. We could go so much inside the door, and we would look in. Oh, we wanted to go and check it out, but, you know, they wouldn't let us go in. But we'd stand out there and wait for him when he would get off work.

The whistle, I mean, that's something in Mebane, cause at lunch everybody could set the time with that White's whistle, cause at twelve o'clock it went off and then at one it went off before we'd go back to work and then in the evenings. Cause mamma would say--I remember her be cooking-- "There goes the whistle," and we know daddy be home soon. Everybody misses that whistle, too.

PH: Would it go off at the beginning of the shift, too, in the mornings?

BH: In the mornings, uh, huh, and then I think at break--it really didn't go off like at lunch. At lunch, you know, it would really [makes whistle noise] holler it out. [laughs]

PH: [laughs] I guess you went to Christmas parties when you were younger that the company would have?

BH: No, then they didn't have--. Then they would--. I remember when I was in high school I was in home ec, and they had a White's dinner. My daddy worked there, and they had them a steak dinner at the Eastern High School. I don't know if it was for Christmas or why they had it for them, and so I got to help serve. I mean, I was doing it for my school.

PH: I see.

BH: But we was doing it for White's. That was really neat serving mamma and daddy. Well, it was a bunch of people. They had a lot of room. They had them a steak and a salad and potatoes, a little slice of cake. I would tell mamma and them to bring me their cake home.

PH: Would they have summer picnics or--?

BH: No, but I remember my father for Christmas that how many years you've been there they get a book. They used to could pick out--. You look through the book, and you get so many items how ever long you've been there. I remember he could pick--I forgot how long-- anyway, he could pick out three things. That year it was my turn cause he would take turns with me and my sisters and mamma. My mother's still got the clocks. It's like a little old-timey grandfather's clock. There's a smaller model, she's still got that, too. She got that, and I remember I got a unicycle and couldn't ride it. I forgot what the other thing, but he would let

us take turns picking what we wanted. He never got him nothing out of it, but they used to do that. I remember them doing that.

When I went there they-- I think-- When my dad worked--I remember I wanted to work there when he did. He just-- I don't think he really wanted me to.

PH: Why's that?

BH: Cause to him he thought it was just too dirty, you know, for his daughter to be working there. But then, after I did, and he seen how much I enjoyed working there, I mean, I was really making very good money for being-- You know, cause I don't have a real high education. He was really surprised I stayed there. He didn't think I would stay there, which one of my sisters didn't.

I mean, it was work, you know to work, I mean, and you didn't go in there looking pretty cause, I mean, all the furniture, you know, all the chemicals and stuff. I enjoyed working there.

PH: What did the--? Could you describe what the rub-and-pack sort of looked or smelled like or the noises?

BH: Yes, it smelled like lacquer all the time. The look, I mean, you know, it was an old building. You'd think it was going to fall in at any time. [laughs] And we was upstairs, and it was just a big open room. It had a line, and the line would move. Then it had a platform up there where the guys were standing, cause when it would come off the finishing you would have to pull it up onto our line. Then as it come down, you'd sand the drawers. That's where it started. Then it would come on down. You had to pull the tape and stuff off it. It would come on down, and then they'd have to pull it off and do the tops, and then push it on the line

for us to rub it and get it all cleaned up. Then it would go on and get the hardware on it, and then it would come on around. Anything wrong with it it would be fixed and everything. The noise. It wasn't really noisy. Just when the machines--. When they'd have to do the tops. It wasn't like real loud or nothing.

PH: Was it dusty?

BH: No, not--. The only dust is when you sand the drawers. The person that had to do that, that was, you know--. You'd sand your finger tips cause I used to have to do it. You'd think that sanding all day with your hands, I mean, the whole tips of fingers--. Most of em they would tape them up. Everybody that had to do would put tape around the tips of their fingers. With sanding all day, and getting up in all them corners and stuff. You had to kind of be pretty fast doing it cause it was coming off that line and you had to get them--. They'd get mad at me, too, cause if they didn't feel right I'd have to send them back, and they'd have to do it over.

PH: You mean when you were an inspector?

BH: Yeah, when I was inspecting. Some of them would get real aggravated. [laughs]
That's how it had to be.

PH: Was that hard having to do that?

BH: Inspecting, yeah. I mean, that was--. Rub-and-packing, yeah, you just done it and went on, and you didn't have to worry about it. Inspecting, I mean, you wanted it perfect, but every piece you couldn't get perfect. I mean, you just couldn't do it. When it would come back it would upset me, you know, when you send a pie out and the customer--.

PH: You had inspected it?

BH: Yeah, and it come back because--. I mean, a lot of times the person--the customers-- wouldn't understand, you know, like when they pack it up and take off it's going to get dinged up and everything. Some of them would be really mad, you know, like, they would send letters, and I'd have to read the letters what they said. Yeah, it was a little rough sometimes.

I had a go-by case--a sample case--and this is what all of it is suppose to look like, well, sometimes they all wouldn't look like that. [laughs] So I would say "No" and not let it go. Then the boss man would say, "Yeah, it ain't that bad." And so I was like, "Wait a minute, now, okay, I'm not supposed to, but you're telling me to, but if it comes back this is going to be on me." It was like--. And so then we would start. I would start putting them--. Like if I say--. If I said I wouldn't let it go and they decided to let it go, I would put a little mark or something on the statement that they told me to let it go. So when it come back I would say, "Hey ya'll told me." [laughs] Cause, I mean, everybody is a lot. But most of it didn't come back, but some customers would we'd all have to watch the video tape.

PH: What would the video tapes be of?

BH: It's really hard to believe that something like that could get out, but I guess as fast as was going and stuff--like putty inside the drawer, you know. Like little dings on the outside of the case. Stuff like that.

PH: They'd video tape that and send it?

BH: Yes, and send it back and say, "We don't want this." I always told them, I said, "Them people just ain't got nothing else to do, maybe." [laughs] They just had to find something wrong with it, I mean, it wasn't like be something real bad, bad, but then again, if

you're going to pay that kind of money I wouldn't want that neither. I can look at it both ways. But it just seems like when you're down there they just all look at me like, "Why did you let this go?" I'm like, "Wait a minute." But, you know, you're only human. Stuff get by you.

PH: Did you have somebody inspecting your inspecting then?

BH: No.

PH: You were the last?

BH: Right, and if it went it's cause of me. I had a stamp, too, you put on the back of it, and it had my initials and the date and White's Furniture.

PH: Like that one on the book that we looked at?

BH: Well, that I put inside the drawer, see, cause they have a little oval thing that says "Hickory-White's Furniture." I would put that under it or then I'd put it in the back. Wherever I wanted to. Usually, I would put it in the back, because they'd stick in the drawers and it would be hard to get out, I would think. Somebody don't want my name in their drawers. [laughs]

PH: Who would have told you--? Who did you answer to that would have told you to send some pieces out that you thought should have been sent back and fixed?

BH: Ah, well, I would go first to my supervisor. First, it was Carlton Adkins, he worked there, and then he left and then it was Avery Apple. So I would go to them, and if I didn't like what-- See, I didn't have to listen to them like if they told me to send it and I didn't like-- I'd go over their head, and I'd go to the plant manager, I reckon you'd call him.

PH: Who was that?

BH: Marshall Murdock at one time, and let's see, Richard Pickford at one time. If I didn't like what they said, if I disagreed with them, then I would go to the president either Richard Hinkle or Robert Hart. I worked more with Robert Hart than I did--.

Well, Richard Hinkle--right when I first started--so I've worked with him maybe a couple years, but Robert Hart, a little more. Then what he said it didn't matter what I said, it went.

[laughs]

PH: Would like Robert Hart come around? Would you call him and tell him?

BH: We'd call him, I'd call him and tell him to come up there that we have a problem. Then he would decide.

Sometimes I was right, and sometimes I was wrong. You felt safer when, you know, the top man said go ahead. Then sometimes I didn't agree with him, you know, but it wasn't much I could do then.

PH: What was it like to have to send a piece back down the line and get it fixed up?

BH: Oh, you had to hear a little mouth some, but it wasn't too--. Some of them sometimes they could come up there and just do it or I would do it. You know, it depends if it's a whole lot now I wouldn't do it cause I wouldn't have time. but if they missed a spot here and there on a drawer or whatever, I would just do it. Most of the time that's what the repair--. We would just do it now. Like if the tops were all messed up I'd just cut the line off, just stop it and get that straightened out instead of fixing it.

Sometimes we just couldn't get them tops--. Like different tops have to have different sheens on top. We'd have a little machine that would set there and gauge it to how shiny. If they didn't get it just right you'd have to send it back and get it shined up. Sometimes a

machine would scratch them, like zigzag scratches in the tops or wouldn't cut it all the way down at the edge. All the people, these was good. They'd just do it.

Now we had a repair lady. I guess she's the only repair girl there. Her name is Tammy. I think she's done moved back to West Virginia. She was real good. If I'm not mistaken I'm sure she was the only woman.

PH: In the whole plant?

BH: Yeah, that fixed, that repaired. Yeah, I'm pretty sure she was.

PH: How many other inspectors were there in rub-and-pack besides you?

BH: I was the only one.

PH: You were the one. Did somebody quit the job or did they move on to a different job that you took over?

BH: Yeah, the way I took over was, yeah, they put-- Robert used to inspect, Robert Hodges. And they put him fixing, because see he would inspect and repair, too, and there was really just too much. He couldn't. The way I got it, really, is cause I had been there a little over a year, and it was time for me to move up or whatever, and that's what come open. So I lucked out getting it, I really did. It was between me and this other girl and the way they looked was our work record. She was out more than I was, so they gave it to me. I said all right.

A lot of people was like, "How did you get that, and you hadn't been here so long?" I hadn't been there long, and I'm like, "I don't know." But then again, see, I would see things that some of them would-- I would look at it like anybody would look at it. I didn't know, I didn't know about the color of the wood or the what all. Not then, then I got to doing what

they was [Laughs]. So that's what they wanted, and, boy, I was just taping. I had tape all over that thing, cause some of it was supposed to be there and some of it wasn't, but I didn't know at the time. So I'd just tape everything. There was tape sticking all over them tables and stuff.

I didn't like doing their kitchen tables.

PH: Why was that?

BH: They was just a little bit harder, because it was more machining on it, and it just had to really look good, you know. And the machining-- Like the little tops and stuff they did them good, but when it got to be big, I don't know, it seemed like they wanted to leave streaks and stuff. We'd have to work on getting that right. Then they'd get the hang of it. But didn't nobody like to do tables cause then you had to pick them up, and they get heavy after a while. So here you are moving them and picking them up. It was a little rough.

PH: How did you think that the company treated you as a woman? Did you see any differences between the way they treated women and men there?

BH: No, I didn't. The company, I thought they was, you know, pretty fair. You gonna talk about it anyway, you know, any employee that's probably going to talk about the company some, you know, got to talk about something. I thought they was pretty decent.

The little clock up there. I got that from Hickory-White's for being there for five years. I mean, they appreciated you, I mean, if you were there they would do a little-- Well, they used to do more, I think, when it was White's than for Hickory-White's.

Like I said, I can remember with my daddy. But the summer picnics-- Now when I worked there they had one, and you'd take the kids, and get your little face painted and I think played

softball and stuff like that. They might have had them when my daddy worked there, but we just never went.

[pause] Oh, I know, talking to some of the older people in white's they could tell me--. They would tell me that they remember when horse and buggy and White's was there. They'd be working there and that's how they'd get to work. I was like, wow, cause I used to love to talk to them. I loved to listen to this, especially Harvey.

PH: Harvey Solomon?

BH: Yeah, you ain't got to talk to him yet?

PH: I don't believe so.

BH: Oh, man. Now I did. He'd let you know.

PH: What sort of stuff would you talk to him about, the older workers?

BH: Oh, like we was packing up leaving Robert found this old, I don't know what, a cover or whatever. He got it there at White's, but it didn't really have nothing to do--. It was an old store in Mebane, Freshwater Store, and it was a picture of that. Well, if you ain't lived in Mebane it probably wouldn't matter to you, but--.

PH: That's okay, go ahead.

BH: It's just--. I really wanted that picture, too. I can remember how that used to look. I was little though. But what I used to talk to them about is--well, they would bring up, "Well, back when it used to be White's," you know, the pay raised. They was talking, "When we started, we didn't get a dollar a week or whatever"--that's what it sound like. Said, "Ya'll come in," said, "Ya'll just make as much as we do." And that was true, and they didn't like that.

PH: You mean, when you started there--

BH: I was making as much as they were, and they'd been there, you know, twenty, twenty-five years. Which, you know, it was different times, but I guess they would say, "How can you do that?" That's true, but that's just how it worked.

But then when Hickory took over a lot of the older ones like my father, they didn't do them right cause they wanted younger people in there because they'd be faster. They wanted to get on production. Where the old White's they really didn't care about production as much, they just wanted good quality. A lot of people say that's what messed White's up is when they took over, and they wanted to get more production out than quality. That's why my daddy went to Craftique is they just putting so much on him, and the older hands just couldn't handle it.

PH: Did a lot of them--?

BH: A lot of them quit and went to Craftique or just went other places, yeah.

PH: When did you father leave White's?

BH: He worked there about a year or so after Hickory-White's took it. He said it wasn't the same.

PH: Did you hear a lot of--? What did some of the other workers who stayed, did you hear what they were saying about the way that it used to be and the way that it was?

BH: Oh, yeah.

PH: [laughs] What sort of things were they saying?

BH: Well, like they would just switch the whole routine. They were trying to just make it, I think, faster, like the hardware they got these--they used to put them on with screwdrivers

and stuff--they started getting these air things where it goes [makes a noise] and try to get it on and get it on crooked and stuff. They'd say, "Well, we didn't used to that." They used to say a whole bunch if I can remember. [pause]. I'd have to just think on it. [pause] I don't know.

PH: But you'd hear that a lot, huh?

BH: Yeah, I'd hear how it used to be and how it is now. They would say they took more pride in their work then instead of trying to--. Now, some days they would, they would have that furniture rolling down that line, boy. And you couldn't do a good job with it going that fast. They used to say that if it wasn't right they would just stop it right then and get it right. But they done that, too, you know, Hickory-White's. We put out a good piece of furniture. You are gonna have faults everywhere, and employees is gripe about something.

PH: Yeah.

BH: [laughs] I liked it there, especially at break time, sit out front and wave at everybody that goes by. Cause when you go through town you've got to look and check out everybody at White's. [laughs]

PH: When would you get breaks?

BH: Well, we used to get three then they cut it down to two. Nine in the morning and then at lunch. We used to get one at two o'clock, but they quit that.

PH: What sort of things would you do on break?

BH: Now, I was--. They called me the gopher, I reckon, cause I would run to Byrd's. Byrd's, when they seen me coming, they were grinning cause they had the deli over there. I

would go get food for everybody. You know, they would give me money, and I would run over there for break.

Now, at lunch I'd go home. My mama had me a hot meal every day. Boy, I miss that, too. She had me dinner. Byrd's hated to see White's shut down, too, cause a bunch of them that's where they would eat lunch.

PH: That's right across the tracks?

BH: Yeah, you hear that whistle go off, and you ought to see the people just running across that track going over there because you didn't have long.

You wasn't suppose to eat on the job, but everybody would sneak it, you know. Give em a chicken leg or something and hide it, and wasn't nobody looking take a bite. But I could always tell cause I'd see little grease paws on the furniture. I said "Somebody's got chicken up there." [laughs]

We all had a good-- Well, we had a good time working there, and then we had rough times. Of course, we'd have to have words every now and then.

PH: Have words?

BH: Yeah, you know, cause you have a bad day and then somebody's just saying, "You ain't doing it right, you got, to do it better." You know. But usually we didn't have many days like that cause everybody worked together and that was good. I mean, I could have been a real butt, and sent every little thing back, but instead we just all pitch in and work together. That made it a whole lot better.

Now, out in the finishing, I used to like to just walk-- Now, I've worked out there just a little bit in glazing or whatever. That was nasty.

PH: What is it? What is glazing?

BH: Well, I don't know if that's--. I can't really say, cause I didn't work up there that much. You just put this--they'd spray on and you had to wipe it off. That made the color like get into the wood, like brown or whatever. But I'm sure it ain't called glazing-. [inaudible]

PH: But you didn't like that?

BH: No, I wouldn't have worked there. That was nasty. They had a rough job. They did.

PH: Would you interact with a lot of other people from different departments or did you know people around the plant?

BH: Yeah, everybody would get to talking. Now, downstairs I didn't know many down there because--. Just in passing, you know, "Hey. How you doing?" But upstairs I knew about everybody in finishing and when the cabinet room moved upstairs, now it used to be downstairs and they moved upstairs and got to know them. You know, every time you get a little break you sneak out and run and talk to everybody.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

BARBARA HANKS
AUGUST 10, 1994

BH: Oh, I knew some of the older people by my dad. And then like for birthdays and stuff, different people would bring cakes and stuff and have cakes for their birthday. It was real nice.

PH: Did a lot of the workers stay and eat lunch there rather than go home?

BH: Yeah, a bunch of them couldn't go home. Yeah, and they would either

call in and it would be ready at Janice's cause it was right there in town. It was real convenient. You could go get at Byrd's or bring your own lunch or whatever. Some of the wives would bring it or husbands. I

mean, it was just a good location for the people who lived in Mebane, too.

PH: What did you think of the job that you had right before you started compared to working at Hickory-White's?

BH: Oh, it was totally different cause I was in yarn. I wanted to get back in furniture. I liked furniture, but I went back to yarn. Cause it's hard to find a job now. But when I left White's they gave us so many opportunities. I went back to school--but I hadn't finished yet--to get my GED. They were just trying to help you in any way they could. I've still got two more tests to take before I get it. So I hope I can get it. [laughs]

PH: What sort of rules would they have at Hickory-White's that you had to--? You mentioned you couldn't eat on the eat

BH: Right. You're not supposed to eat on the job, but we did. Of course, you couldn't smoke in the bathrooms.

PH: Or anywhere inside?

BH: No, except down in the break room or outside, you know. Really they wasn't that strict, I mean, you know, they just let you use your common sense, you know, when you were working you were supposed to be in your work area. But other than that, I mean, you know it wasn't really that strict.

Now, working, they wanted you to be there everyday. They had a point system. If you was out or whatever, you know, you could be out, I think, like three days and it would be

one point. But you set to work your points off. They was really lenient, I mean, compared to other plants. I mean, like leaving, a lot of plants, you couldn't leave, like, go out and get stuff.

Now, people has got hit, you know, it's bad, cause, you know, when the whistle blows, you know, we'd all just run out and there were cars and stuff-. People has got hit out there and that was really bad. A guy got killed coming to work.

PH: When you were there?

BH: Yeah. It was really bad. He was coming--. He'd been working there a long time, and he was coming to work, and he was coming across the road, and a truck hit him. That was real bad.

PH: Was he an old guy?

BH: Yeah, he'd been working there. They said that evidently he wasn't paying attention, you know, when you come in the mornings you're half asleep. He was coming across the tracks and really wasn't paying attention. It was real bad.

Then a girl in the evening--. Now in the evening time we was wild, you know, we're going home. [laughs] And she got hit. Went running out and not looking. So when that happened they kind of got concerned, you know.

First, we'd have to punch in and out when we left. Everybody understood that then cause I'm assuming we was still on their time if you got hit. So when we run over we'd have to punch out and in. That wasn't too bad. But it didn't last long cause, you know, they'd say "I'll punch later."

PH: Would you all punch out a little bit before work ended?

BH: No. Cause the clock, you know, it would put your time on there. So no, if we got to the clock we'd wait until it clicked and blow before we punch out. See, now, a lot of people don't even have the clocks to punch in and out. I know, we don't at Dixie. Cause there'll be something every morning, and there you are lined up and punching in.

PH: Were there some practical jokers?

BH: Oh. man, yeah! Like some of them, you know, that wool I was telling you about?

PH: Uh, huh.

BH: They would roll it up and make it like a long tail. You wouldn't know it. You'd walk by, and they'd just kind of like tag it on your back. [laughs] Then you'd walk and, man, that little tail swinging. And you'd notice people kind of laughing. They'd let you walk around half the day like that, and here you're going downstairs and everything with that wool hanging down there and looking like a little tail. Yeah. and we'd laugh. too. when you seen other people. But that got to be aggravating because every time you'd walk by them you'd think, here you go, you start patting because you have that tail hanging down. But that was funny.

PH: Who would have done things like that? Was there just a couple of people there?

BH: Well, Vickie.

PH: Vickie Jacobs?

BH: Yeah, she would do it a lot. She is a card. She is a mess. She's the main one, yeah. Yeah, and see that's something, too, with the Hillsborough plant closing they come up. That was really something. When they first come, you know, everybody's like, "Yeah, they gonna try to come and take over everything." It was nothing like that. We all become

real good friends and worked together. It was good. Me and her both--cause I had never done the furniture that they done, and she hadn't never done the furniture we done. So me and her would talk and worked together. That was real good instead of trying-- "Well, you ain't gonna outdo me, and I ain't gonna outdo you." She helped me a lot, and I think I helped her a lot.

PH: She came from Hillsborough?

BH: She come from Hillsborough, and Tammy did, too, the repair lady. Yep. We all became real good friends. Just a handful come from Hillsborough. Didn't too many come.

PH: And what year was that, do you remember?

BH: Let's see. I don't remember, but it wasn't too long after they come that this White's shut down, I mean, I'll say a couple of years. Well, I might have worked about three years or so.

PH: Did you all hear rumors that the plant was going to close before they announced it?

BH: Yeah, cause they said when Richard Hinkle left something was wrong, the older guys, cause they really liked him. He would come and work with you. He would get in there and just work right with you. A bunch of the older ones said--cause all of a sudden he just upped and left--and they said, "Ah, something's going on." So that's when the rumors-- And it was true.

PH: Was he the plants--?

BH: He was the president.

PH: President, and he was replaced by Robert Hart?

BH: Right.

PH: I see, and Robert Hart didn't come in--?

BH: He would come up there and stand, but he wouldn't get down and work with you like, you know, and where Hinkle, he did. He'd get in there and sand a drawer with you or whatever, you know. But Robert Hart-- He seemed like he knew what he was talking about, you know. See like the older guys, you know, how can they come in and not, you know, they don't know what they're talking about. They just come in, you know--which when you work with it everyday, you do seem to know more about it than when you come and look at it every now and then.

PH: So some people didn't like the fact that Robert Hart didn't come and work with them?

BH: Right. Yeah, that he would come up and say, "That's wrong, that's wrong," or whatever, but he wouldn't jump in there with you or whatever to try to fix it, where Richard Hinkle did. Sometimes you'd come around, and he'd just be working away. [laughs] I mean, that's just different people, work different.

PH: Uh, huh. Do you remember the day that they announced that they were going to close the factory? Do you remember where you were at?

BH: Well, they got us all together I think down in the shipping room. They was telling all about, you know, we're not-- Cause they have a better plant in Hickory. See, I was going to go to Hickory. We was going to move down there, and I was going to start work there but they weren't going to do me right so I said, "No." They was gonna cut my pay and stuff, and I was like, "Wait a minute, I'm moving." Nay, forget it.

And they was just telling us that, you know, Hickory had a newer plant, and that we wasn't making enough money to keep the plant open. But we'd all heard it. We knew what was going on. It was still a kind of a shock, though.

PH: Do you remember how you felt when you found out?

BH: Yeah, well, kind of disappointed, you know. After you've been working there for so long you hate thinking, well, you got to go out looking for another job, meet new people, learn a new thing, you know. Yeah, I hated it. I was near the last one to leave.

PH: Were you?

BH: Yeah. Me and a few others, you know, we hung in there as long as we could.
[laughs]

PH: How did they go about shutting down the plant?

BH: Like downstairs went before upstairs, like when they finished running it, that last piece. That last piece of furniture we run, too, I think they took a picture of our last piece of furniture that we run. When that last piece come by me--and then, you know, we was there cleaning up. Like I said, we had called it bone yard where we put furniture. We had to get all that up. Just stuff, just furniture around. Maybe a piece of furniture without a drawer or whatever. We had to try to find a drawer to fit it. So that's why we was there longer, cause upstairs, you know, getting some of that furniture out.

Yeah, but downstairs went first.

PH: What was it like around the plant or what was like in rub and pack after they announced that they were closing? Did you see any difference in there?

BH: Yeah, everybody was talking about it, especially the older ones were wondering what they were going to do, you know, since they are so much older. Like when you're younger, you know, you can get a job usually, and the older ones they didn't know what they was gonna do. A lot of them, about their insurance were upset. They just been there so many years, I mean, you could really tell it on them. Some of them was glad, and you had some, "Well, good. We can draw unemployment for a while and stuff." Most everybody, you know--cause after you've been there and we was all like a family. I really felt bad about the older ones. That's what you heard mostly, "What am I going to do? Where am I going to find a job?" But, I think, most of them have, the ones that I've talked to, and I'm glad about that. It was really rough on them, cause they said, "That's all I know is furniture." It ain't many furniture companies around, not around Mebane.

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

BH: Yeah. March the 26th was my last day. I knew it was my last day. Yeah, well, like I say, it wasn't but a handful there. I really didn't do much of nothing. My uncle, he was there a long time, and then afterwards he would come and tell me, he'd say, "You need to go up there and look." Cause the difference, cause they was taking everything out. It was so empty. I never went back after I left. I never went back in there.

PH: Did you tell people good-bye?

BH: Oh, yeah. Oh, you mean--?

PH: On your very last day that you were there?

BH: Like I said, it was a handful. But when everybody else was leaving cause different ones would leave at different times. And, oh, yeah, we would give each other

addresses and phone numbers and try to keep in touch. Yeah, it was bad. I mean, you know, you're sad because half of them you won't never see again, and some you might in passing. [pause] Like Tammy, me and her got to be real good friends, you know. She moved back to Virginia, and I hate that. I miss her. And Vickie, Vickie, I see her every now and then in passing. And Jane, I don't know if you talked to her, Jane Newcomb.

PH: Oh, we may have. I know we interviewed Vickie.

BH: She's a trip, ain't she. She's a mess. I hadn't seen her no more. I see Moriah [Whitfield] every now and then. Some of them I see like in the grocery store, and some of them I don't never see no more.

PH: Would you hang out with or go out and do things with people who work there?

BH: Yeah, well, like I said, you know, we'd get together--.

PH: You mentioned at Christmas.

BH: Yeah, well, sometimes we'd just get together and eat, cook-out. Yeah, some of them like Jane and let's see--like me and Jane, we went to the beach, we went to the beach for the weekend and that was real fun. Jane, she, oh, that woman could cook. She would bring food and stuff. She would just invite us over for supper and stuff. That was really neat. We used to go over there and eat. So, yeah, we all would do stuff after work.

PH: But you don't see people much anymore?

BH: Naw, like I said, I see Vickie in passing, like, passing in the car or something or in the grocery store. Most of them, I don't ever see them.

PH: How does your new job compare to Hickory-White's?

BH: Nothing, nothing compares. What I'm doing now is, you're on a machine right by yourself, and you go stay on that machine and you don't have time to socialize, I mean, you know, talk. Like at White's at least you could as you worked talk. Nothing. Like you say, you got your little ten minutes. That's when you talk to people. Then your twenty minutes for your lunch. That's when you get in a yarn mill. Naw, if White's was open I'd still be there. [laughs] I sure would. I told my daddy and them that's where I'd retire from if it was still open, and I really believe I would of.

PH: Did they offer a lot of the workers a chance to go up to Hickory or just certain people?

BH: I think just certain ones, you know.

PH: And do you know of anybody who went?

BH: I think-- No, no, I can't say. Well, I heard one of the supervisors downstairs was, but I don't know if he did or not. Yeah, I was going, but that didn't make no sense cause why go somewhere and they are going to cut your pay. And I'm a mamma and daddy's girl, anyway, I don't want to move away from them. [laughs]

PH: How was White's about, or Hickory-White, would they give women pregnancy leave, maternity leave?

BH: Yeah. I don't even know if any of them got pregnant while I was there. Yeah, Penny, Penny Smith worked there, and she got pregnant. Yeah, they did us fair. She worked up to the day she had her little girl, though. But it's kind of rough on, you know, rubbing and stuff, I mean; you get so tired, but she had it a little early. But everything is fine. Yeah, I believe that's the only one I know of.

PH: For a while there were rumors going around that Mercedes-Benz might build a plant out here in Mebane.

BH: Yeah.

PH: Did you hear anything about that or were people talking about it?

BH: Yeah, but, White's had done shut down. Well, I remember them talking about it but I believe White's was already shut down then because I said that would be good. I get a job there, hopefully. That didn't happen neither. Mebane would have been a booming little town if that had happened.

PH: So you miss your job there at White's?

BH: Yes, I do.

PH: What do you miss about it?

BH: First shift and the people, and I was real comfortable. Well, you know, like I said, you had your rough days and your bad days, but it wasn't real, you know, bad, you know, stressful or whatever, and when you're used to something it's so much easier to go. The people mainly is what I miss.

PH: Are there things you don't miss about the place?

BH: What I don't miss [laughs]? Well, the headaches, you know. Some would say, "I know any place you go is going to be kind of the same." I'd still be at White's though, I really believe that. Unless they got tired of me and said, "Gone." Cause I used to be an old hateful thing sometimes. [laughs]

PH: Oh, yeah?

BH: Oh, yeah, especially if I have a rough day. You know, different people'd come, and some we'd nickname. This one they called the preacher. Yes, sometime I'd get mad and get to cussing a little bit. "Girl, you got the devil in you, you got the devil in you." I'm like, "Yeah, I do."

Then you had some that knowed everything, and they ain't knowed nothing. [laughs]

PH: Did a lot of people in the plant have nicknames?

BH: A few, not a whole lot.

PH: Do you remember any other nicknames?

BH: Well, let me think. A lot of them we call you instead of your first name, your last name. Like Murdock, if your last name was Murdock. I can't think of another one. I'm sure there's a bunch, but my brain is--. When you ask me I can't think of it. [laughs]

PH: So you think the town of Mebane is different now that White's has closed?

BH: A little because, you know, the noise, the whistle, I mean, the whistle is the main thing, I think. I mean, to me cause I miss the whistle. Yeah, all the people coming out cause, you know, usually you could just come and here's everybody--. Cause that's a sight when you see all them people rush out of there. And now you go, and it's just nothing. Yeah, I think so.

PH: That's pretty much all my questions. Is there anything you want to say that you didn't get a chance to say that you could record here on tape forever?

BH: Well, no, I mean, it was a good place to work, and I hated it shut down. We made good quality work. No, that's about it. I don't know nothing.

PH: I appreciate you doing the interview with us.

K-10
K-98

HANKS, BARBARA

36

BH: Okay, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW