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Interview

with

JAMES M. GILLAND

May 26, 1994

by Patrick Huber

Transcribed by Jackie Gorman

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

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JAMES GILLAND
MAY 26, 1994

PATRICK HUBER: The following is an interview by Patrick Huber with James Gilland at his home, 6710 East Washington Street Extension, Mebane, North Carolina, on May 26, 1994. This interview is being conducted for the Southern Oral History Program and is part of their White Furniture Company of Mebane interview project.

Why don't we start out the interview, Mr. Gilland, by you telling us a little bit about where and when you were born and about what your folks did for a living?

JAMES GILLAND: I was born in Newport, Tennessee, the county of Cocke County, about seventy miles west of Asheville, North Carolina. There were five kids in the family. My father passed away when I was about five years old, and we all had to work to help my mother out because the work there was--right after The Depression--scarce. It was hard to find anything to do. So we worked for Stokley's Can Factory some. As children we picked beans in the field. They had this big bottom land with just rows and rows of beans. That helped out a whole lot. My older sister, she housekept for another couple that was a preacher there in the town. She took care of the kids during the daytime. Other than that, since my mother was a widow, why, she drew welfare. They call it Social Services now because it [welfare] downgrades the people some. But they called it welfare then, and she drew a check. With five kids she got a cash check of \$26.00 a month. That was to pay bills with. Then they had a store in town where they issued you the welfare supplies--groceries--other than giving you food stamps to buy them with. So you would go once a week, and you would get the groceries then you would take the other part and buy stuff, pay bills, and buy stuff you didn't get at the welfare grocery store.

Anyway, we grew up working together. We moved out on the farm when I was about eleven years old. Quit school. I was the only man in the house, and I had to work. I was large for my age as far as height and all. I went to work for a fellow on a farm then from sunup to sundown for a dollar a day [in a dairy]. Then we rented some land then from another fellow after that. That went on for about two years. We rented some land then, and he gave us about an acre of ground where we could have our own garden. He paid me for working. I milked twelve cows in the morning and twelve at night before I put in my day's work. So we worked with that for a few years, and then we moved back to town; we were out in the country, and we moved back to town. So I got me a job then help cutting timber when I got up about sixteen years old. I cut timber for probably about a year. The fellow that I was cutting timber for--he owned the saw-mill--he wanted me to work at the saw-mill. I worked there for about a year. When I turned eighteen then, why, I was drafted in the Army. I went in the service then.

PH: When was that? What year?

JG: That was in '45. I went in and took my basic training and all. The war was over then in Germany. I went in, in May, and it was ended in May in Germany, but it still continued in the Pacific. The recruiting officer come around and he says, "Everybody that has as much as twelve months service or has four dependents will be eligible for discharge very shortly because the war was over in Germany and all we are going to need is occupation troops." I sort of liked it. I had never been away from home over fifty miles in my life. He come around and talked to us and told us the Army would give us two hundred dollars mustering out pay and a sixty-day furlough. So I signed up and took it. We had a choice, then, where we--you could pick it. So in the European Theater would be England, France, Germany, or Warsaw, and I picked Germany. I got my furlough and everything, and we went back to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and then they shipped us overseas.

They transferred us around quite a bit. We would stay in one place for a couple of months and then move us to another one for a couple of months. They finally wound up in the Third Division. So they busted it up and sent it back to the states. Then they transferred us into what they called the Bloody One, the First Division. Then they shipped us out in different areas--different ones--and I happened to be one that went to the First Division, and they shipped us to Nuremberg, me and a few others, and that's where I met my wife. She was working as a secretary in the House of Justice there in a courthouse.

My Company--M Company, heavy weapons--and a rifle company--L Company--was the two companies stationed in Nuremberg. We put the security guard on all the jurymen that they had for the war trials. They would bring all of them in--Allied generals and colonels and whatnot in--and they'd put them in German housing. They would have us pull guard. We would have a guard walking on the sidewalk in front of the house and one walk in the back of it. We would always walk far enough where we could see each other going and coming to make sure that something didn't happen to the other one on the other side. Some of them pulled a palace guard where the trials were. After that was over--the trials were over--then we started training. They took us out on the big German training camp which used to be the name of Graffenweir, and we stayed out there about six months, and then they moved us. We would come back and stay a little while at a different place--still in Nuremberg. Then they shipped us back again. Then when we came back from there they moved us to Bamberg.

During that time me and my wife had met shortly after I got in to the company in Nuremberg. We were real close. There was no separating for us. I told my wife--I had met her with another girl when they were waiting on her boyfriend. I walked from the streetcar, and I asked her, I said, "Can I see you tomorrow?" Just like that and she said, "If you want to." So we started going together then. I went home that same week and wrote my mother and told her that I had found the girl I wanted to marry. My mother wrote back--it wasn't a week later that I got a letter back--she said, "James, marriage is a

serious business. It's for life. It's something that you ought to think about real seriously before you do it." I took the letter and gave it to my wife, I mean, my girlfriend at that time, Erika, and she read the letter and she says, "James, I can't see you no more. "And I said, "Why?" She said, "Because if you're gonna get married"--she read the letter and she said--"I don't want to come between you and the woman you're gonna marry." I said, "Dingy, you're the one I'm gonna marry." Just like that! [Laughs] When I said that it really tickled her to death because we had love at first sight. We just really grew together.

We couldn't even get married then because they were our enemy. We couldn't even hold hands walking down the street. It was a disgrace to the American uniform. Later on then they passed the law then that you could get married but only three months before discharge date. We had a stack of papers about like a Sears and Roebuck catalogue and we had to have all kinds of records of hers from her home town, from the police department, and from the government there and she was from East Germany.

PH: Whereabouts in East Germany?

JG: Chemnitz was the town. Had to have papers from the government that her parents as not connected with the Nazi Party anyway whatsoever. And all this and everything. We had a stack of papers--and then mine as well--and birth certificates, any police records that we'd ever had for violations of any sort. We finally turned it in. The blood tests was only good for thirty days so we had to keep taking another blood test and forwarding it to catch up with it because it would get bogged down on somebody's desk. After about six months, why, it finally reached General Eisenhower--President Eisenhower was the European Commander at that time--it finally reached his office, and they approved it and sent it back to us.

Then we were able to get married, but being a German citizen she had no right to any allotment or housing or commissary, groceries, or anything like that. I had to buy the stuff myself and at the PX (Post Exchange) and anything. In other words, she was my full responsibility. But if I had married an Ally--Russian, French or English or Austrian or

anything like that--I would have drawn housing allotment, I could have married and stayed over there for two or three years, just like an American wife. But I couldn't do it with her, so we came back home. We went back to Tennessee to my hometown.

PH: What year was that?

JG: That was in '48.

PH: '48?

JG: Uh huh. We stayed there, and my first daughter was born in '49. She was about two years old, year and a half old, when we moved to Mebane. There's a boy that lives here in Mebane that I was in the service with, and we also came back on the same boat together.

PH: What was his name?

JG: Charlie Berry. He was working at White Furniture Company at that time. We just come up visiting. My work had got slack where I was at. I was only working three days a week.

PH: What had you been doing in Tennessee?

JG: I was an upholsterer. I started out in the frame shop. I was supervisor in the frame shop where we made the frames at. I had about thirty men working under me.

PH: What was the company?

JG: It was upholstering. [Pause] Overholt and Fowler Upholstery. It's two fellows. One of them is Overholt and the other was Fowler--last name.

I tried upholstering then I started upholstering. I hit it off pretty good and liked upholstery real well. We just came up here on a weekend visit. He said, [Charlie Berry] "Why don't you come up here?" He said, "I'm working sixty-five, seventy hours a week." He said, "I'm sure they could use some hand."

I went down, and we went back home, and I think about two weeks later, why, we packed up and moved. But when we come to Mebane then, why, we couldn't find a house so in part of his house he didn't have furniture in it, he just started out and part of it was

still empty. So we just moved in with him for the time being. What we couldn't get in the house we stored in his garage.

I went down to see about a job and the assistant superintendent at the Mebane plant was Mr. Claude Buck. He said, "James, I'm only allowed--Mr. Bean, the head supervisor, he's in Chicago at a furniture show, and he won't be back for a couple of days." He said, "I can't hire you. The only way I've got authority to hire is if I have to fire somebody or somebody quits I can hire a replacement." About three or four days later, why, Charlie come in and he said, "Mr. Bean is back now at the plant." He said, "You ought to go down tomorrow to see him." So I went down there to see him. He interviewed me and he said, "You've got a job," right off the bat. He said, "You're the type of fellow I've been looking for a long time, somebody that can do cabinet work and upholstery because the upholstery we don't have full-time work to pay a full-time upholsterer." So he hired me, but he said, "You'll have to go to Hillsborough to work." I said, "As long as I've got a job, I don't care." [Laughs] He said, "We'll, I've got a supervisor that works down there that lives in Mebane, and I'll call him and fix it up and you'll have a ride." It cost me two bucks a week for a ride to Hillsborough and back.

So I went to work down there, and we had so much work, even by myself, I'd have to have help once in a while. I upholstered and packed the chairs. Sometimes I'd have to holler for help in order to do it. I was working nine hours a day and four hours on Saturday, forty-nine hours a week. That went on for about six years. Then, of course, the upholsterer they had in Mebane he had a heart attack and passed away. Then I was transferred to the Mebane plant in July of '57.

PH: When did they open up the Hillsborough plant?

JG: The Hillsborough plant, I think they bought it out. I believe it was--I won't swear to it--I think it was Orange Manufacturing before and White's bought it. I think it was in '40. I'm pretty sure it was '40. And they switched it over. It was an upholstering plant and it made small platform rockers and stuff. They switched it over and started

making the same type furniture that they were making at the Mebane plant. I went there in '51 and worked until July '57 and was transferred to the Mebane plant.

From then on then, why, I was by myself cutting, sewing, upholstering. Doing all my work myself. We had two or three fellows that did packing. They was working under the packing supervisor at that time. Then later the business picked up so much that we had to have more help in upholstering. At the time when White's sold out we had four upholsterers including myself which I worked on the sewing machine or cut if the cutter was out. I had a lady cut and one'd sew and then I'd help sew; three up upholsterers and two chair packers. I was supervisor of that department once it grew. I carried that on through until Hickory sold out. When Hickory bought it they told us that there was going to be a whole lot of changes made, and which they did. They would come in--when it went up for sale--they'd put their bids on it. They'd come in about once every other week or so and just walk through the plant and see how the work force was working. They took over in June, and then in September they laid off fifty workers at one time. They said the plant was over stocked with labor force.

Of course, White's had been losing money on it because--that was one reason--Mr. Bean, when he run it, he run it with an iron hand. I mean, it was run and, the work and all. Then his son took over, Bernie, and he was really too good a guy to push somebody. He let the supervisors of each department get away with murder. They could just go and tell him they needed another hand, and he would just hire one without checking into it to see if they absolutely needed it. So they had people walking all over the plant and Hickory saw that when they'd come through and were spot checking through the plant before they bought it.

So it run like that until Hickory took over, and then they cut the labor force down. It finally dwindled. At one time the Mebane plant had--my oldest daughter run the wood project in school on trees and what you make from it; furniture and stuff like that. At that time the Mebane plant, I think, had about three hundred and thirty-five work force. That

didn't include office help or staff. The Hillsborough plant, I think, had about a hundred and twenty. When Hickory bought it out they cut it down. The Mebane plant, at the time of closure, I think, had two hundred and two or two hundred and four members--workers--or something like that. But we were running--they told us that White's had never run over fourteen million dollars a year, produced over fourteen million dollars a year in sales. I'd say in twelve months after Hickory had it we were pushing to twenty million, and I think possibly it might have went a little over that before times went hard.

The president of the outfit, the man that owned it, had four plants. He had Chair Craft in Hickory which made office furniture. He had Kaylyn in High Point which made upholstery furniture, Hickory Manufacturing which made a little of everything, and White's which made a little of everything, different kinds. The president of the whole outfit was one of the Walker brothers from Hillsborough--the same Walker who had the funeral home. He was president of it. His name was Hiram Walker. He retired and when he retired Richard Hinkel, which was the president of the Mebane company at that time, was elected by the chairman of the board as president of the whole firm to take his place. And when he did that he says, "No way will I run backwards and forwards the distance from Hickory to Mebane to look after it." So he went to High Point and set up the corporate office. He started pulling help then. He pulled our financial man, Mike Robinson, up there, and then he pulled our general sales manager, Hal McAdams, pulled him to the corporate office. Then they took, I think, all except maybe one or two of the sales persons in the sales department. Most of them went up there.

So when he did that, why, they had already cleaned out all of the supervisors when White's had it because they wanted to run it theirself, and they didn't want nobody telling them what to do, which I don't blame them. If I bought it I'd want it--if I told you to do something I wouldn't want you standing in the back telling me, "Well, I've been here thirty years and that ain't the way that we been doing it." So some way or another they were weeded out.

PH: They were let go, fired?

JG: Well, a lot of them were reduced to different jobs, and they just quit other than work at a different job. Now Robert Riley was one that was reduced down from his job as supervisor to the stock room and to driving a truck, pick up and delivery. That didn't seem to mind to him. He said, "Actually, I like this job better. I ain't got as much responsibility because when I was up there I had responsibility of all the workers," which makes a big difference if the responsibility bothers you.

By getting rid of all of them that really knew how to make furniture, I mean, the old hands that really knew how to make furniture, there were very few of them which was just the workers that still stayed there. A lot of the workers quit and went to different jobs somewhere else. General Electric started up back here and a lot of them quit and went back there. Some of them went to A.O. Smith on the backside behind the cemetery back in there and different places like that. C.K.J. or whatever it is back there between here and Burlington and some of them went down there. They lost a lot of their old hands that was used to making good furniture. Then they started hiring whoever they could get to replace them. And a lot of them--just the same way today--you get people and they don't care if they can eight hour pay, why, that's all that matters. So furniture got till it wasn't White's anymore. They got a new president and put him in there instead of a president--they called him president--but he was more of a plant manager. They didn't have a plant manager anymore.

PH: Who was that?

JG: Robert Hart. I don't know whether he's still here or not, but he was on the board of South Bank--that new bank they just built right outside of town. They didn't have a plant manager under him so he had all the responsibility from the supervisors. They'd have to meet with him then and he would get to them. I don't think--not run him down or anything like that--but I don't think he was, himself, qualified for the type of furniture that White's was used to making and had the name for making. He had worked

at places, Singer and different places, where they made cheaper furniture, but not the high class and high price furniture that we were producing. And for that reason, I think a whole lot of the furniture, the making of the furniture, was downgraded because it didn't have the old supervision there anymore to say that's not right, that's wrong. It was more or less to say the faster we can get it out and sell it the quicker we'll get the money in for it, so they say. There's too much of that going on everywhere.

But as long as Richard Hinkel was there he would come in a short sleeve shirt and a khaki pair of pants--him president of the outfit--and he would go and work in the rubbing room, packing room, just like a regular worker and show them how he wanted it done. He would be right there not only showing, but he'd be there doing it. But the other fellow that took over--that they put in his place though-- he sat in his office most of the time, and sometimes I doubt if he walked through the plant once a week. When Mr. Bean had it--I was talking about he ruled it with an iron hand--he would make a round, start when he come in, in the mornings as soon as the seven o'clock whistle blew, he would make a round through the whole plant to see that everybody was on the job and that they were doing the job that they was getting paid for. That makes a difference!

PH: Uh huh.

JG: The responsibility, and there was a lot of them that didn't take the responsibility for the pay--what the job called for, for the pay they were getting. And I think that is one of the biggest things--. But when Hickory bought it, I think they bought it for a song anyway. They didn't buy it, they stole it.

PH: They didn't buy it to what?

JG: I said, they didn't buy it, they stole it. [Laughs] I think it was \$5.1 million or something like that, but that included the Hillsborough plant, twelve acres of land right here just on the other side of me--the sidewalk and lumber company up there--and the plant in Mebane. All of it for \$5 million. We had the warehouses full of furniture, and

they told us when they took over that they had approximately \$6 million in back orders and the warehouse was full of furniture, all they had to do was ship it out.

PH: And sell it, huh?

JG: Yeah. I mean, it was sold, I mean, all they had to do was ship it out. But that's why I say they stole it. They stole it because I think that the price they bought it at, they more or less had intentions just buy it because it was cheap and use it later for a tax write-off like which they did, I'm sure. The Hillsborough plant sold and the ten acres or twelve acres land up here sold in a different year, and then they finally closed the Mebane plant because it wasn't running the type of furniture and it wasn't selling like it should have.

They changed the name of it a couple of years before it closed or so, to Hickory-White in order to keep the name so when they did close it out they would still have the name of the Hickory plant because at that time both plants were making sort of comparable high priced furniture. Hickory made a lot of contemporary stuff as well, but they also had some of the real high price lines like White'd carry.

PH: Between the time that White sold it and the time that Hickory changed it to Hickory-White it was called White's, up till the time they changed it? Is that right?

JG: Then they changed it to Hickory-White so when they did sell out, why, they could carry the name of the Hickory plant. So the furniture they're making at Hickory now is sold as Hickory-White, but White don't even exist no more. See, what they wanted--. They figured that the White name would help them stay on top. The dealers--. They also got rid of all the salesmen that White had. Replaced everyone of them. Got new salesmen. The dealers that carried White Furniture, especially if you get away from the plant like at the West Coast and on out away from the plant, they may be shipping them furniture right now, and they are selling to the public, and they still think it's White's. I mean, there's no way the customer--. If you go in and see it there and said Hickory-White owned it and then Hickory-White was the name of this plant and the other one too,

why, you wouldn't know were it made in Mebane or where it's made. All you know is to go by the Hickory-White name.

PH: You mentioned a lot of the old timers quit their jobs whenever Hickory took over. Do you know why, why some of them left?

JG: I think the biggest part of them left because at that time the furniture pay, I would consider, furniture pay and textile was probably two of the lowest rated pays that we have in North Carolina. Unless you were on some kind of machine like a tenor machine or shaper or router or something of that sort, were the operator of maybe a band saw or something where you had a regular job that paid a higher skilled laborer, something that required a skilled job, skilled knowledge for the job, then they got paid a better pay. But the ones that run the planer, the joiner, and what they called the tail men because on the planer you have to have one to put the board in and another to take it out. The workers are moving that's working in there, like the cabinet makers so many of them were driving pegs, filling the wooden pegs in so they could put the cases together and clamp it together. Anybody, they could pull somebody off the street and show them how to make a one, and they could do that job. The pay, it was not a skilled pay, and it was a low pay. At the time I went to work for them in 1951, the government wage was seventy-five cents an hour. They were starting them off at eighty cents. They were giving them a nickle above minimum wage.

PH: Is that what you made as an upholsterer?

JG: No, I went as an upholsterer and an experienced cabinet maker. I took that under G.I. training when I got out.

PH: Cabinet making?

JG: Cabinet making and upholstering and I was worked on the G.I. training. So I came qualified under both of them when I got a job. So they started me out at a dollar and ten cents an hour. But you didn't get raises. Sometimes you may go a whole year and not even get a raise, see, and if you got a raise-- I have seen times--I don't think I ever

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got one that small--I have seen them give one cent raise. But the biggest part of the time you were lucky if it was three or four or five cents.

PH: There wasn't any piecework involved, was there?

JG: No, and it wasn't a percentage, it wasn't like five percent, it was four or five cents. After six years at the Mebane, I mean, Hillsborough plant, I think I had risen from-- I believe in them six years, but I wouldn't swear to it--but I believe from a dollar and ten cents, I believe about a dollar and twenty-three cents, something like that in six years.

PH: So about a thirteen cent raise?

JG: Yeah.

PH: Over six years?

JG: In six years. Then after I got up here then I was more qualified, I mean, I qualified upholsterer. If by any chance got caught up I went to the cabinet room and worked on something that you had to be qualified for. It was part-time. Then I did my own cutting and sewing.

I remember one time I went down and I really got tired of working for nothing. That's just the way it was. Some of the places started moving in then like General Electric and different places. So I went to Mr. Bean and I said--I went down there and Mr. Bean was out that day--I says, I told Claude Buck, assistant superintendent, I said, "I want to see Mr. Bean." He said, "Well, he's not here." I said, "Well, I want to see him when he comes in because I want a raise or else." I mean, I had really got fed up there. I liked my job, and I liked the people that I worked for. And the White family has been just a good close family. The kids and all would run in and out here and at home. They were just like the neighbor kids. Steve had three kids. He had two boys and a girl. They were in and out all the time. I mean, we knew them that a way. My oldest daughter grew up with them and all.

I really didn't want to change jobs because I think that is one of the worst things that anybody can do today as a young person. I've told a lot of them that, and I will

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continue to tell is to take a job because it pays a little more money and for you to be disgusted with it and hate the job and you just keep it because it's fifty cents more an hour or something like that. Because somewhere down the line as you get older that's going to finally get on you and you're going to quit anyway. The thing of it is the best thing to do is start looking when you're young and find one that really interested, interested in, and one that you like that you think you can work with. That's just like getting married or something. Somebody that you think you can live with the rest of your life, and I think a job is the same way. If you've got a job you can't stand, you don't like or anything like that, go ahead and work at it, but at the same be looking for one that you think you'd be satisfied at. Because I don't think if you're dissatisfied on a job I don't think you can give a man a honest day's work to begin with. If you're happy on a job then you're a whole lot more apt to do your best to that job to try to do it right and whatnot.

PH: What was Mr. Bean's response to your demand?

JG: He came back and they told him in the office over there so he come over to see me. I was in the old building back behind the plant, separate. The only time that I was with them I've always been separate from the plant. I've seen a lot of the boys coming and going. A lot of them I knew by names because I had worked with them some time or other, but the biggest part of them is just when I would see them come and go. We even punched out on different clocks. We punched out on the clock on the backside and the machine room and the cabinet room and everything punched out on the clock in the front of the building. But he [Mr. Bean] came over anyway. He said, "I hear you were down at the office yesterday." I said, "Yeah." He said, "Mr. Buck told me that you said you want a raise or else." He said, "James, you're a good worker as I've got here." He said, "I figured up your pay." So what he did, he went down and he figured up cutting was so much an hour and sewing was so much an hour. Part-time work back in the cabinet room, wherever I worked at when I wasn't over there, was so much an hour. Upholstering was so much an hour, and if I packed chairs, why, so much an hour. He had me figure up

about five different jobs. Then he totaled all of that up. Of course, the lower pay job pulled the upholstering pay down because upholstering was the best pay. So it pulled them all down. He said, "Well, I've got it all figured up here." So much for this and so much that and so much that. He says, "Really, by you doing so many jobs that way, it cuts your high-level pay down to lower pay, to medium grade. Actually, the way I got it figured, you're fifteen cents over paid now an hour." But he said, "I'm going to give you a nickel raise because I think you're worth it." [laughs]

PH: [laughs] Were you happy with the nickel?

JG: Yep, I took it and I went on. Well, a nickel at that time, that was pretty good. That wasn't too long after I moved to the Mebane plant. That was probably in the late '50s or maybe around '60 or somewhere like that.

But Hickory, as far as pay was concerned, when they got rid of the other supervisors, one way or the other, whether they quit or cut them to regular workers instead of supervisors or whatever they did with different ones of them, why, Richard [Hinkel] told me, he said, "This is your department. I'm satisfied with your department the way it's run, and you're gonna still be in charge of it. There's nobody going to tell you what to do except for me." He said, "You work under me. Won't be nobody telling you what to do."

Then he moved me to the Clothing Store Building which is across the street, that big building that sits in the concrete all the way around it over there. It used to be a clothing store building, clothing store there. He kept me in there and I got-- He told me to go over there when he was talking about moving me. He said, "I've got the electrician coming, and I got a carpenter coming. I want you to go over there and show both of them where you want your cloth racks built for your cloths." We carried inventory, good gracious, probably at times maybe ten or fifteen thousand dollars worth of material, and all we upholstered was dining room chairs which took an average of a half or three-quarters of a yard per chair. He said, "We got an electrician coming. Go over and show him

where you're going to set your sewing machine." I had two sewing machines. He said, "If you need any lights changed, see the shop manager, and he'll get somebody to go over and change the lights for you so you'll have it in the right place." So I come back to my office one day--I was going in and out of the office sometimes two or three times a day carrying orders and checking orders and things like that--so I come back by him one day and he was in the packing department working. "Yo, James." I said, "Yeah." He said, "You've been over the clothing store building?" I said, "Yeah, I went over and showed them where to put stuff." I said, "You know, Richard, we're not gonna," I mean, he wanted you to call him that, I mean, that was his name. He didn't want Mr. Hinkel or anything like that. He said, "My name is Richard." I know one of the boys that worked for me, him and Mr. Howard, before he retired, come through and this boy said--he was about thirty years old--"Good morning, Mr. Howard." He looked around at him, he said, "Mr. Walker's dead." He said, "My name is Howard." His first name was Howard. Richard was the same way. So I said, "Richard, we won't have the room over there to put chairs." I had the building there--where it was at-- I had the whole upstairs, fifty feet wide and one hundred and fifty feet long. I had the second floor where it was the same thing where I had all of my packing equipment and my cloth racks. I got one area cut off where when we would get the chairs packed we'd push them out and stack them up in sets ready for shipment then the shipping clerk would come and pick them up. So I used that floor and the floor underneath us. I had it all for chairs. I said, "There ain't no way in the world we could get all of our chairs over there." Richard just raised up from where he was sort of stooped over helping with rubbing table leaves and stuff there and walked over closer to me, just laid his arm around my neck and up on my shoulder, he said, "James, just do as I tell you and we'll get along fine." I said, "Yes, sir." I said, "You're the boss." I said, "I wasn't trying to tell you what to do." I said, "We've got a whole lots of chairs over there whether you realize it or not." He said, "We'll put over there the ones that we sell the most of." And he said, "Any overstock," he said, "We can still keep it over here in the old building."

He said, "I just want you to have a more decent place to work than what you have, and that thing is cold as the dickens in the wintertime and hot in the summer." We had it fenced off, probably an area about as big as the house here. We had an electric heater in there to heat it in the wintertime, but you had to go in and out the doors to get the chairs, and up and down the conveyor belt. The conveyor belt went four stories high, up and down, then you'd just load the chairs on and take them off whatever floor you come to that you want to take them off on.

PH: This is the new building, the clothing?

JG: No, that was an old building.

PH: Oh, the old building.

JG: No, the old clothing store building, that's just one story high. Which was a much better place to work, and I appreciated that. But he was real good to me. I had no complaints of him whatsoever. I got over there and he told me, he said, "You work however you want to. As long as you've got work, you work, you don't have to come and ask me. If you've orders to fill, if you need to work a Saturday morning for cleaning up or something like that, that's perfectly all right. You don't have to get permission to do it." He said, "Of course, I don't you to come in just to hang around if you ain't got nothing to do." I said, "You don't have to worry about that. I ain't going to do that."

I built new racks on one wall, all the way down one wall, probably about as long as this room here to put extra seats and stuff we had made and things that we'd get them off the floor. He come over there a day or two later and looked at it, was in there and seen it. He went back over there and told this fellow, Mike Robinson, he said, "Go over there and get James and his crew and take them out for lunch. Instead of taking forty-five minutes, why, take you a full hour. Take them out and buy them lunch." So he took us down to Hewitt, Hewitt's Fish House, and we sat down and laughed and talking and had lunch. And he did, he did that, that way, about three or four different times that way if we done-- hit a high mark in sales and shipping and turned out the chairs to make a high mark in

shipping that way, why, he would take my department and the shipping department both out for free lunches. You couldn't of asked to have been treated any better. Once they moved him out, why, it just was all a new ball game then. It was just changed all completely.

PH: Who did you say they replaced him with?

JG: Robert Hart.

PH: Robert Hart?

JG: Yeah.

PH: Did he ...

JG: Well, they replaced Richard with-- They left it with Mike Robinson. He was a financial man and also Richard vice president. So when Richard moved first, why, he left Mike in charge, and as soon as he got situated in High Point then, why, he moved him and Hal McAdams to High Point with him. Then when he did that then, why, they had to hire somebody to take the place.

PH: And that's when they got Robert Hart?

JG: Yeah.

PH: Did the new supervisors who came in under Hickory, did they let you call them by their first names?

JG: Oh, yeah.

PH: They did?

JG: Anybody came in like that never required you to call them Mister or anything like that because most of them was country people, I mean, a lot of people say city slicker, but, I mean, people from the city where you would call somebody by their last name or Mister so and so, or something like that. Most everybody was called by their first name. Now, some of the people had respect now. I would say, maybe more of the black people than the white would--out of respect for the white people, I think, they would call a lot of the white people Mister. I know even Robert Riley called me Mr. James. We had a truck

driver there Rudolph Johnson and he would call me Mr. James all the time. They would call you Mister by your first names instead of like Mr. Gilland or that a way. A lot of the colored people--.

PH: When did black workers first start working in the plant?

JG: I don't know that because they were a lot of black ones when I came in '51.

PH: Really?

JG: Now in some of the southern states--.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

JAMES GILLAND
MAY 26, 1994

JG: . . . black people that had public jobs because we didn't have them around there where I lived at. White's had, I would say at one time, probably around maybe the middle '60s somewhere along there or maybe early part of the '70s, I would say White's was probably a good fifty percent black.

PH: Did black and white workers get along okay?

JG: Oh, yeah, no problem. I had black people work there, and while I was at Hillsborough too, I had black people I worked with down there, and I would consider them as just as good a friend, working friend and a friend away from job, as white friends I had.

PH: Did they begin working at the Hillsborough plant and the Mebane plant--? Was there roughly the same amount of black workers at each plant?

JG: I would say so. I know they had to go through the schools and transfer whites and blacks back and forth to try to make a mixture, but the jobs up here, the public work, why, that wasn't no problem. There were enough blacks--black people--already on the jobs. That was no problem as far as the law was concerned when the segregation come about cause there were plenty of them already working at public work or anything.

PH: What about--? Were there any women working at the Hillsborough plant when you got there in '51?

JG: Not except office help.

PH: Except office help, huh?

JG: I don't think there was a woman in the Hillsborough plant. In fact, I don't think there was one in the Mebane plant when I was transferred in '57. They later [pause]-- I had a women that when we started out, when the work got more than I could do, they hired a woman to sew for me. She cut and helped sew, and I sewed, too. But

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that was probably along in the late '60s or maybe early '70s. Then they started hiring them throughout the plant then in different areas. When they first started out, why, the biggest part of the ones that they hired the women was--they worked the finishing room where they rubbed the furniture and wiped it. They spread a glazed stain on it, and then they had to have somebody with soft cloths and brushes--big paint brushes--and they brushed it out and evened it up and dried all the wet finishes off so that it could go through the kiln and dry. That's where--outside the office that was probably the first women that they hired. Then they started hiring them then in the cabinet room. Then they skipped around then--. I don't know why they didn't trust them on the job or whatever in the machine room because about everything was machinery operated, but later on, why, they had women when Hickory had it, and by the time they sold out they had women working all over the place. It didn't make any difference what kind of job it was.

PH: Do you remember how people responded when they started hiring women in the plant, how the men responded?

JG: I don't remember of any kickback, I mean, from the menfolks on it at all. Now, some of them might have thought it was a little strange just like when a year or two ago when that girl joined that football team. Do you remember, why, everybody looked at her funny like "What are you doing in a whole bunch of men?" They was probably some of the men that had a feeling like that, but, I mean, I don't think it was against a woman unrespectable, it's just a "What would you do--one woman working with maybe a dozen men in a department?" One woman and twenty-five or thirty men in a department or something like that. I think it was more that kind of attitude. I don't think it was anything against her personally.

PH: But they started hiring both black and white women?

JG: Yeah. The finishing department where they sprayed the furniture--the glaze on--and then they had all these wipers, and I would say that they were probably maybe

sixty or seventy percent black that did that kind of work. They were glad to have a job, and a lot of the white women tried to find something better, I guess, because I think at that time so many of the black people, they'd go through grammar school, and then as soon as they got sixteen years old they could quit. Some of them never did even finish grammar. The ones at White's then, the biggest part of them would go on and get high school education anyway even if they didn't go to college. They'd probably go to a community college or something like that and take secretary work or something and then they would get them a job--office job-- or something that way. A lot of them worked in the hosiery mills, but even that was for a high school education, that was sort of downgrading, too.

PH: Was that considered better than working in furniture?

JG: Well, most of that was on piecework, and it depended on how fast a worker you was. Some of them made pretty good money in this little hosiery mill right there below White's that did dying and packing. They would buy the socks already made, and then they'd dye them and pack them and ship them out. When they'd get them--they'd have machines would make the sock but it wouldn't sew in the toe and heels. They'd have different machines there that would make the toe and the heel in it. So they'd do that and they'd dye them and pack them then--grade them out and pack them--and ship them out to different customers. Some of them-- My oldest daughter, she worked at that little old mill down there, and I forgot how many hundred pair of socks that she had to make there to make a day's production.

PH: The one near White's? That mill?

JG: Uh huh. But it was way up there. She said, "I worked there all the summertime"--summertime jobs while she was in school--and she said, "I never made production." But, man, she worked. There was one woman there, she said, that worked so fast with her hands that you couldn't see her hands move hardly. She said she made good money. She made piecework.

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But, most places like that though back then, why, a dollar was a dollar, and if you was on piecework and you made anywhere near the piecework or especially if you went over it, if they was two or three in the department that would go over piecework, why, they'd readjust the piecework and make it higher--raise it higher--because they didn't mind paying you piecework, but they didn't want to pay you the extra over it. When they did that the ones under them, that really put the pinch on them because they had to work like the dickens in order to make a dollar then because the hard workers, they more or less pushed the wages up, I mean, the price of production up.

PH: Were there ever any unions that came in at White's when you were there?

JG: White's had a union [pause], I believe Mr. Bean told me in 1948, I believe, and it was voted in and stayed in, I think, for about a year or something like that. They never could collect union dues from it so they pulled out and left after about a year or something like that. Then in 1955, while I was at the Hillsborough plant, it came back and tried to get those in there and they voted it out two to one. In 1965, ten years later, they came back, and it was voted in about two to one. So the union, I think if I ain't mistaken, Ford Motor Company give them about fifty thousand dollars or something like that. What they were trying to do was to get the minimum wage pushed up, I mean, pay rate in the South pushed up so that they could afford to buy their cars. The wages was too low. If you'd have to buy a car, you'd have to buy on four or five years in order to pay for it.

So it was voted in, in '65, and it went for nearly a year. They had it set for meetings and since White's was a family-owned thing you don't tell a man what to do if he's got his money in his pocket, it's his. That was White's. White's had control of stock. The uncontrolled stock belonged to the Milliner's which was also White's; she just married a Milliner. But anyway, they controlled it. It wasn't on the stock market and nothing for sale. It was a family owned thing.

So they had meetings--union meetings--up in the building up there next to the hardware store. They had a meeting for the company then, and they'd go in there and just sit on the table and the union would throw a contract out, and White's would just pitch it back and say, "Here's our contract. If you want to stay here you work by ours. It belongs to us. It doesn't belong to the people. It's not stock on the stock market for sale or anything, it's ours. If you want to collect off the men union dues, and you want to work with us, why, for the help of the people, that's okay with us, but you abide by our rules. We don't abide by your rules." It went back and forwards that way for six months, meeting after meeting. I think it lasted about a year that time.

PH: Do you remember whether that was the same union that came in all three times?

JG: No, I'm not sure whether it was or not. Men finally voted it out, but the union went to Mr. Bean since he was the head man. They said, "We have so and so, and so and so--a whole list of names--that signed union cards to join the union. We want you to deduct such amount--union fees--from their salary and pay it to the union." He [Mr. Bean] said, "This is a family-owned place of business. You're working for the people, the employees, you also abide by our rules. If you want any union dues, see the man and collect them yourself. If the man comes in here and tells me and signs a waiver for me to deduct from his salary, I'll do so, but unless he does, if you get any you take it from him." So it stayed in, it seemed like, about eighteen months or something like that from the time it was voted in, but they never did get no contract, and they never did get no union dues so their money runned out.

PH: They were outside people that came in to organize?

JG: Yeah, and a lot of them was. Some of them out in the plant that signed up for it--. See, they were promised--the first ones that signed up--was promised by the union that they would make them union stewards throughout the plant, it's like supervisors. So that's the reason some of them did. Some of them tried to get a little nasty there about the

thing. They said, "We'll have a strike, and we'll close the gates, and we'll get us an iron pipe or a baseball bat and stay out there so nobody can't get in." And all this and that and the other. But it never did get to that, though. They had said, "If you come in and do go into work," said, "we'll beat your car up," or something like that. So they just cleaned off the place inside the cyclone fence in the back of the lot there and told us, said, "If they do get that strong we'll have a security guard on the gate down there. Just drive your car right on inside the plant. It's enclosed with a six foot fence." They said, "You can park in there, and your car will not be damaged, and there will be a guard on the gate. Nobody will be going or coming other than just the regular workers that want to work." So they never did even have a strike.

They had a meeting up at the building up there, I think it was on Wednesday night, and the head man come down here from--with this lawyer--from New York when they found out. They called it a wildcat strike. They was gonna strike then, and do anything they had to do to shut the plant down. They was talking around that they was going to shut it down and they were going to make Steve White do this and Steve Milliner do that and everything. I told one of the boy's that worked for me and I says, "You don't tell them people how to do nothing." I said, "It belongs to them." I said, "As far as that goes," I said, "they've got money. They could close the plant down now and live, they've got money." So they had the meeting, and they were going to strike and all. We all said we got to work in order to put bread on the table, on their tables. When they got up there and they got the meeting started--in process--the head man from New York with the union he came down with a lawyer with him, and they walked up the front and told him and said, "If you pull this strike it will be against the rules and regulations. The company, being family owned, we have no control over them, what to do. If they are willing to work with us we can work with the men, but other than that we can't." They said, "If you pull a strike, why, it will be on your own self. The company could fire everyone of you and hire new labor in the place of you without any problem."

PH: That's what the lawyer told them?

JG: Yeah, and that was the end of the strike. They come back in. They wanted us to sign up, and one of the first to sign the papers worked for me. I didn't know that at the time. I said, "Well, do you think that Steve White has to--we have to work in order to put bread on Steve White's table?" He said, "No, siree." I said, "Well, what did the man tell you up there last night?" He said, "He told us that Steve White was worth seventeen million dollars." [Laughs] I said, "Man, with that kind of money," I said, "I don't think you'd have to put bread on his table, I think he can afford to buy it himself." That was the end of the union. They turned around then--the men themselves did--and turned around and had a vote and voted it out.

PH: Voted it out? Do you remember what the name of the union was?

JG: No, I don't remember what it was. I didn't join it.

PH: Was it something like United Furniture Workers?

JG: It could have been, but I wouldn't say for sure.

PH: But you didn't join, huh?

JG: No. I'm almost sure they tried at Craftique, and it didn't get off the floor. And this little Melville Furniture--they're out of business now, but built here on the other side of me--they were in a rented building in town and they come in there, and the fellow that owned the place he just called a meeting and told the employees, he said--Charlie Berry was the one I was talking about, this friend of mine, he had left White's at that time and worked for the Melville Furniture--and he said they come in there and told them and said, "We just rent the building. We're here to give you a job and to make money. If you vote for the union, you vote a union in, the union will be amongst yourself because we don't own the building or anything. We'll just pick our machinery up and go somewhere else." So it never got off the floor there either. So they come down here then about a year or two later and built this new building down here, moved down here.

The Furniture Worker's Union, I reckon that's what it was, but it just didn't make no headway anywhere it went.

PH: So if you worked at the company you, by law, you didn't have to belong to the union if they voted it in. Is that right?

JG: No.

PH: You didn't have to pay dues or--?

JG: Huh uh.

PH: But as long as so many workers voted for the union then they could have it there?

JG: Well, see, that's what some of them said. I didn't ever hear them say that to that point, but by it being private owned that way and everything, the ones that really joined the union was just the ones that was willing to join it and hope to get better working conditions and more pay. But there was no promise of that from the company, so that was one of their squawks, the ones that had joined it, if we get the union in why don't you vote for it? If we get it in and get more money and everything it could benefit you as good as it will us because if they got the wages raised up twenty percent or thirty percent more or whatever it was from what it was, why, it went for every employee, not for just the union. And the union people then they had to turn around and pay dues, I mean, would have if they got off the floor. So they would have been worse off than the ones that didn't sign because the ones that didn't sign wouldn't have to pay dues.

PH: Yeah. What was your thinking about why you didn't join the union?

JG: I just didn't want to join because I had seen too much the coming and going of Western Electric down here and different ones like that. I tell you what I had, I had people to tell me that worked at Western Electric down there where they went on a strike with the union that five years later they said they had never caught up with all their bills. They had to take low rate loans and spread the payments out--.

PH: The union?

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JG: No, the workers. Some of them had to borrow money and spread the payments out over several years in order to help catch up some of the other payments they had.

PH: Because they had gone out on strike?

JG: Yeah. The union promised to keep them up, well, they did, I think, furnish them money to buy groceries and paid their main bills like power bills, water bills, and if you rented a house they would pay your house rent and things that way, but there's so many of them, though, that had other bills and things like that, new automobiles and things that way that they had to borrow money--loans--in order to pay it off and pay the banks back. Of course, they couldn't do it. I had some of them told me that it took them years after they went back to work to ever get straightened back out.

PH: At White's did people who were in the union and people who weren't in the union did that like cause conflicts?

JG: It did at that time, but after they seen that the union couldn't do them no good when they turned around and voted out then, why, all of that was forgotten. I think it was just more or less because if you's for the union, why, they grouped together, and if you wasn't, why, your separate from us because you don't want to join it. After it was all over and done with, why, there wasn't no difference in the workers and that sort of thing.

PH: What did the workers, you and some other people who you have heard talk, what did people think of Steve White?

JG: I think most of them thought pretty highly of Steve. Of course, when you get a man with money, I don't care who it is, why, you gonna have some that--. That's how they got money by making it and keeping it--investing it or whatever in order to keep building money. If you had a business and you wasn't making no money it wouldn't be no use staying in business. But I think if any of them had anything against him I think that was because of that. He might have had some who would say, "Well, the reason we

ain't making no more money because they want to keep it for theirself" or something like that.

Up until probably about time that union was voted in, somewhere along there, it might have been a little before, they used to give us a Christmas bonus. Some of the boys depended on it, it was paid on a percentage and depended on how much overtime and how much the salary that you made hourly--paid to start with--yearly pay. Some of them would draw anywhere from five hundred to fifteen hundred dollars bonus at Christmas.

PH: Christmas bonus?

JG: Uh, huh.

PH: Huh.

JG: A lot of them would--. I know, I think the first two pieces of furniture I bought up at my house--. See, me and my wife built the house ourself. Nobody drove a nail in it or anything. I laid--. We dug the foundation and laid the blocks, myself. Started out at Hillsborough; working forty-nine hours a week. I'd come home in the evening and work until dark. I put me up lights, and I'd work until ten or eleven o'clock at night. Sometimes I would get up in the morning and work an hour or two maybe before I'd catch my ride at seven o'clock going back to Hillsborough. We worked like that for about three years until we got the house and got the roof on it. Of course, it took us about twelve or fourteen years to finish it up, but we halfway fixed the upstairs, I mean, it's livable. We have a kitchen, living room and one and a half bedroom and a bath all upstairs.

We worked at that like that. And once we started laying block, why, we'd order this truckload of blocks, save the money and pay for it. I'd lay them blocks. If I got the blocks laid before we was able to save money to buy another load, I'd get out and dig stumps or something. We cleared the land here; it was all big trees. We just worked like that together. About two years, why, we had the roof on it, had it closed in. All that time I was working forty-nine hours a weeks at the Hillsborough plant. When I moved to the

Mebane plant I worked fifty-five hours a week; ten hours a day and five hours on Saturday. I didn't know what anything was but work.

My wife was working in the daytime. She mixed my cement and carried blocks for me. I'd lay them; we worked together that way. We just done an unbelievable--. I never even built a doghouse in my life. It's just all by the help of the good Lord that I was--from one thing to another--just gifted and done the work as we went along. No carpenter; I've never laid a brick or block or anything in my life. I went over and watched a fellow--my neighbor--lay block and build a pump house, and I come back and built mine. Went out on Mebane Oak Road to Charlie Berry's out there and laid the foundation for him for two rooms. Come back then and we dug out and poured the foot for this room and started laying blocks on this. Everything I undertook just about--. I don't know anything that I ever tried that I didn't--wasn't never a success at it. Carpenter work; we never had a nail drove in the house outside of what me and my wife drove.

The plumber and I went--in 1955--we went to get a friend of mine to carry me down to Lowe's in Durham; they didn't have one up this way then. That was the closest. I went in and told the salesman, I said, "I want to get some plumbing equipment to go in my house." He said, "How much do you want?" I said, "I want to get enough to plumb my house I got." I said, "I built me a two-story house." So we out in the back and he showed me where it's at. He come out running out there with this little book and everything to write the stuff down. I said, "Ain't no use to come with that." He said, "Why?" I said, "Because I don't know what I want."

PH: [laughs]

JG: He said, "You come after plumbing to plumb a two-story house and you don't know what you want?" I said, "Well, I know what I want, but I don't know the name of the stuff. That book ain't gonna do you no good right now." He said, "Well, how you're going to get it?" I said, "You just show me where the stuffs at," and I said, "You can go on back in the office and wait on somebody else, and when I get--I'll lay out everything

that I need--and when I get it laid out, why, I'll come and get you, and you can come and write it up then because you know all the pieces. But I know what pieces I need, but I don't know what the names of all of it is." He just shook his head and walked off; he went on back in.

I got all my steel pipes for my sewage drain and everything for the whole thing all the way through the house and through the upstairs vent and everything. Laid it out on the ground piece by piece; joints and everything where my commodes would sit; where my sinks would plug in--bathroom sinks and my bathtub; where the kitchen would go in and everything. I just had it all measured out just on the house, I mean, it was just a big open behind the building over there where they had this equipment at. So they had plenty room. Got all my copper pipe and everything for my wires and figured where all my joints was and where I needed elbows would it be half an inch or three quarters; the spigots I'd need to hook it up and the cutoffs and everything. I got the whole thing all laid out and he come out there and he says, "I've sold a whole lot of plumbing, but it was nothing like this." [laughs]

PH: [laughs]

JG: He went through and wrote it all up, and we loaded it on a truck, and I come home, and I had to go uptown to a plumber and get one coupling for a half inch pipe in order to put my plumbing in.

PH: That's funny.

JG: I did all that myself. I went to Hillsborough, I said, "I want to find out about a septic tank." He says, "You want to build one; you want to buy one?" He said, "If you want to build it, I can give you a plan here where the specifications are to go by. You build it out of cinder block." I said, "No." I said, "This friend of mine said that he would drop me off a septic tank at wholesale price next time he ordered. He puts in septic tanks." That's Buck Bradley down the road down here. He'd go around digging ditches that way for septic tanks. I think, King Brick and Pipe Company out on Broughton, I

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think they could haul about four on a truck or something like that, crossways, and it had a lift on there where they could pick them up and let them down. So he told me to just go ahead and get my hole dug where I was gonna put it. He said, "The next time I order a load I'll just have your's put on the back, and they can stop at your place and drop it and then come on down from there." So he told me then what I'd have to have for drain pipe--the fellow down there in Hillsborough did and all. He said, "Of course, when you get it in you'll have to have a gravel bottom. When you get it in cover it up with a piece of tar paper over all the joints so that dirt can't wash in your drain pipe joints. When you get it in get your joints all covered up with pipe before you put any dirt on it." He said, "Give me a call and I'll come up and inspect it." So he come up to check it out and everything and said it was okay. So I covered the whole thing up.

I've never had anything done. I had a fellow come and wire the big part of the house, and after that then I just permission and wired the upstairs myself. These two rooms I built on here, I wired them myself. Then I got a farm over on Lebanon Road. It's got a little house that I fixed up for one of my daughters about five or six years ago, and I wired it. I was under the town of Mebane here then, they took over; were under Mebane jurisdiction so if I build anything now I've got to have a permit from Mebane, not from Hillsborough because they got the city limit plus a mile or plus two miles I think it is that they control.

So when I was fixing that little one over there I went down there and got a permit to remodel it. It was just a little outbuilding to remodel to make a house out of it. I said, "I want to wire it." I said, "Is there any reason I can't wire it myself?" They said, "No. Buy your wire and I'll tell you what you got to have. Go buy your wire and put it in. The only thing about it, why, we'll have it checked out, and I can't tell you what's wrong with it. You'll have to get a licensed electrician to check it out if there's anything wrong." I went and bought my stuff and went out there and wired it and everything. I called the

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fellow here in town, Paul Young. He come over and said, "Okay, I'll tell Duke to come turn your power on."

What we did we wasn't making much money even though I was working overtime. I was making more than a whole lot of others was because of the overtime pay, but everything went in the house when we built it was paid for on the spot. If we bought lumber--Mebane Lumber Company--it was paid off before the thirty days, before the end of the month. There was never any interest paid on anything in the house. Me and my wife built the whole thing.

PH: And you bought some of the White furniture with the Christmas bonus?

JG: Yeah, the first two things I bought was I bought me a television. At that time it wasn't as high then. I think we got one for a hundred and fifty dollars or something like that. That was way back. Then the next one, I bought me an electric stove. That was two of the main things. One was for enjoyment and the other one was to be able to eat.

PH: [laughs]

JG: [laughs]

PH: Did a lot of workers own pieces of White furniture?

JG: I think a lot of them, but some of them didn't seem to care too much about it. They might a piece if they had it on special, I mean, like if they discontinued a suite they'd have an odd and end piece that way, and a lot of them would just buy it and sell it to somebody else just to make a dollar on it or something.

PH: Uh huh.

JG: But, I never did buy nothing like that. What I bought, why, I bought for myself. So my whole dining room, why, I bought it like that. It was discontinued stuff while I worked at the Hillsborough plant. One time I bought the table and chairs and another time I bought the buffet and another time I bought the china--. After I got transferred up here then, why, we had a corner cabinet that came back. It was counted as

a cull--some customer sent it back, and we replaced it--so I bought it then. That was the corner cabinet so I give all that to my daughter when they moved out.

PH: Did workers get a discount buying furniture cause they worked there?

JG: No, if you bought the new furniture, why, you bought it at the same price the dealer bought it, but you had to pay sales tax where the dealer didn't; that was the only thing. But they was a lot of people around--. They had furniture stores that carried White furniture, I mean, they would buy it if you was--the public didn't work there and it was public--. You could buy it through the furniture store, and a lot of the furniture stores would charge maybe twenty-five percent if you paid cash for it. So what they would do if you wanted a suite and could pay them cash for it, they would order it from White's and then they'd go pick it up and deliver it straight to your house. They wouldn't have no paperwork or anything on it for twenty-five or something like that.

PH: I see. Somebody was telling me about the "hard luck fund". Do you know anything about that?

JG: Yeah. The "hard luck fund" was set up. They had machines--drink machines--in the factory, and they were owned and operated by outsiders so they decided that if the employees were going to spend the money they might as well put it to some use. So the company turned around then and they bought the--the drink machine, candy machine, and stuff like that--and they put it in, and they started putting the money in the "hard luck fund". They took the payments out of the "hard luck fund" to pay for the machines. Eventually, all of the machines actually belonged to the employees more or less because it was paid for out of the "hard luck fund."

The "hard luck fund" was a good thing because if you was out sick or anything like that, why, they'd write you--. The insurance at that time was, of course, lower rate interest. Wasn't nothing what it is now. If you was out like a week, why, you'd probably draw twenty bucks or something like that way back then when it first started. So the "hard luck fund"--. So then they had a committee set up on that--three or four maybe on

it, something like that--why, they were booked to match the insurance company, what they paid you. So you wound up with forty bucks. Back then forty bucks was about a week's pay.

I know when we started here I had my well bored [pause] in the late part of '50, '51, in October, I believe, of '51, October or November. I think my paycheck--I remember--I had two hundred dollars from the Army insurance--I still carry it today--and it paid me dividends. And that was '51 the first dividend they paid me, and it was two hundred dollars. So I paid a hundred dollars on the lot to my neighbor--I bought it from a neighbor--paid a hundred dollars on my lot, and took my other hundred dollars and my week's pay which was forty-six dollars at that time and paid for having the well bored.

PH: I see.

JG: So we even paid cash for that and things like that. My neighbor, he agreed, he wanted to sell the lot, and he agreed that he would wait for three months until we could buy the lumber and pay off the Mebane Lumber Company which we did. I think, bought about three hundred and fifty dollars worth. We just built a little three room shack right in front of my shop over there; just like a three room trailer.

PH: Uh huh.

JG: We lived in that for two years after we got the roof on this one. We fixed one room upstairs. We'd come over here and stay like on the weekend and things that way and just go over there and sleep. Then when we got moved, we tore it down, and then built my garage out of the lumber that was in it. Oh, we come in here and we went to work on the thing. We started cutting it down and figuring out how we could save a dollar here, a dime there, and whatever. We cut down pine trees and set them up on cinder blocks and made that our sills. We bought 2 X 6's and made a floor joists; went from one to the other. I put my plate on it and fixed it up. It was just a rough floor in it. We didn't have no finished floors; just regular 5 1/2 inch board floors nailed in it; just a

place to temporary stay and that was all we wanted to do till we could get the big part of the house.

I was covering a little chair for a woman in Greensboro one time, and she was working in Burlington--was a friend of ours--and she said she found out that me and Erika had built our house ourselves. So she told Ms. Rachel Shields, the one she worked with, which was a friend of ours, and she said, "When I pick my chair up I want to go pick it up myself," said, "I want to see James and Erika's house." So she come down and Erika wasn't here then. We went through the house; she wanted to see it. She said, "Ya'll sure have done a wonderful job on building the house. It's a beautiful house." I said, "It's not a house. We didn't build a house," I said, "We built a home." She just said, "Well, you know, that's the trouble with the world today," she said, "there's too many houses and not enough homes." That's true. I mean, we built it to live in, and that's what we did.

[Pause] You can't expect anymore than that, I mean, a lot of people, I don't know, that got a nice house or something and somebody come in and smoke a cigarette or something like that they grab the ashtray and run and empty it. We had a friend of ours down there in Tennessee where we lived, why, her husband would--he smoked cigars--he would aggravate her to death. He wore overalls a lot of times because he worked--he was a mechanic on refrigerators and freezers and stuff like that. He just kept his britches leg turned up--his pants leg--and he'd just sit there and reach down and dump his ashes off his cigar in the cuff of his britches leg. I've seen him do that a many a time. It used to just aggravate her because she was that way. The company left--if she had company--she'd grab the dust mop and go through and dust the living room and everything. She just had to have everything "spic and span." And we'd go down there every Labor Day and see my folks there, and we'd have to go by there and see her and her husband. We just love each other to death; they do us and we do them, too. You wouldn't even know her now to what she was when we lived there. She keeps her house clean. When dishes get

dirty and things she'd put them in a sink and wash them. She don't come around like she used to and all that. I guess she find out that there was more to life than "spic and span."

PH: Yeah. Did White's have pretty good--? You mentioned insurance. Did White's have pretty good insurance or medical benefits?

JG: We had pretty good insurance at the end after Hickory bought it. They upgraded a whole lot. They had to raise the premium, but who would mind paying an extra dollar a week if you got a whole lot better benefits? We got, before I retired, they had upgraded either two or three different times. It was up to--. They'd pay--. One of the fellows--. We had a meeting one time on the insurance, and one fellow spoke up and he says, "I've been out sick for six weeks. I had an operation. My bills come every month just like they always do. My grocery bill is no littler--smaller--cause I'm home with no work, I still have to eat and so does my family." He said, "There's none of my bills that's dwindled just because I'm out of work." He says, "The insurance--what I collect here and out of the 'hard luck fund' is not enough." So what they did, why, they changed the insurance company, I think, or got a new policy anyway. And they raised, I think, about a dollar more a week or something like that. They raised it to seventy-five dollars a week if you was out under doctor's orders sick. Then they upgraded it again, I think, one time. Very, very little. I don't know where's it's even fifty cents or not. They upped it to a hundred dollars if you was out sick which was pretty good considering your regular salary, what you made. The average was probably making two hundred dollars a week so if they was out sick, why, they got a hundred dollars from the insurance company and then the "hard luck fund" would give them some. They wouldn't match the hundred dollars cause that would have tore it all to pieces, I mean, used it up quicker. But they had the "hard luck fund" set up, you was talking about it. They had it when Hickory bought it, bought out. I think the "hard luck fund" was probably standing--a work amount for a coverage for--so if a machine had to be worked on or anything like--was [inaudible] a few thousand dollars, maybe three or four or something like that in there

where they could just write a check on it if they needed to pay bills with like that. But they had a certificate, it seem like, for about sixty thousand dollars where it had saved--.

PH: From this "hard luck fund"?

JG: Yeah, in the "hard luck fund". When Hickory bought it though, why, they upcreased it and on top of that then, why, they started using the "hard luck fund" for more. Sometimes they would have outings like Christmas suppers or something like that, why, they would pay for it out of the "hard luck fund". They'd say, "That's for the employees," so they'd pay for it out of the "hard luck fund". If you retired at sixty-two they'd give you, I think, it was two hundred dollars or something like that out of the "hard luck fund." If you retired at sixty-five they'd give you three hundred dollars out of the "hard luck fund." They finally busted. That's what they wanted to do, they wanted to get rid of it cause they didn't want to keep it up anymore.

PH: So Hickory-White started using it for different purposes?

JG: Yeah.

PH: White's wouldn't use that to throw a Christmas party at all?

JG: No. That was used strictly for the helping of an employee, I mean, as far as I know. I don't know that any of it was ever used for that, but Hickory did use to help pay for outings or others like that.

When White's had it they would have on Christmas--. We'd sometimes--a time or two--we went down to the Red Barn in Hillsborough, and sometimes we'd just rent the high school auditorium over there and have tables set up in it and have our Christmas supper over there.

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START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

JAMES GILLAND
MAY 26, 1994

JG: But they'd rent the school, not the auditorium, but the gym. They'd set the tables up in it. We'd have suppers, and they'd have door prizes; they called them door prizes. They'd call out the name. They'd use card numbers; you'd punch in card numbers, and they'd put them in a box and shake it up and have somebody draw them out then. They started out with a certain--. They had several prizes that they'd give away, different things. I know one time I got a fishing outfit. Another time I got a handsaw. Just several different times like that, and I think I got twenty dollars, I think, a couple of times. Steve would get up there then, he'd have--Steve White--he'd have a hand full of twenty dollar bills and maybe have like one hundred and a couple of fifties. Certain names they would draw out. If he was lucky they start out with a hundred first, and then with a fifty, and let it go on down then to the twenties and then tens, then fives, then have the other prizes too. It was pretty good at Christmas like that, and they paid for Christmas dinners theirselves--it didn't cost anything.

I think they--even though I said before that the wages for the furniture and textile for this area was real low, why, they'd paid--I would say they paid about as much or more than the average furniture worker was paid. I mean, was paid here cause Craftique and White's was the only furniture at that time in Mebane. We'd have our dinner, and everybody would dress up, and we'd go in dressed up in a suit and enjoy it, and the same way when we had it down at the barn, it was the same way, the Red Barn in Hillsborough.

But they had a few times at the plant after Hickory bought out, but they'd usually have like a summer outing or something in the fall of the year. I know one time we went down to Burlington Park, and they had hot dogs and hamburgers and things like that. You could get out there and play ball or anything you wanted to do in between times.

There's never no real elaborate meals like White's had. They'd have full course meals when we'd go. They had waitresses. The school would furnish the waitresses, I mean, they were paid for it, but it was high school kids that would serve as waitresses and all, and I think everybody enjoyed it. They looked forward to it, and we usually had a good crowd for it. Some didn't go, some probably was tied up some way or another, couldn't make it. I thought it was good just to clean up and put on your Sunday clothes. That's what it amounted to and go out just like you were gonna take your wife out for dinner or something like that.

PH: When--? Why did the White family have to sell the company? You said that they were loosing money, but--.

JG: I think that--. I think it more or less was--a whole lot of it was--some of it was--over-staffed with employees. And another one was that the employees that was being paid for a day's work, a lot of them wasn't doing a day's work. I think there's probably some of them that I would be willing to say they didn't give four hours work out of eight hours at the plant because they were going from here to there to the bathroom or water fountain or looking out the window and then first one thing and another like that. In other words, it's where you had more people on the job than you really needed, and that a way some of them didn't have to busy all the time.

PH: Was it also tough times for the furniture industry?

JG: Yes, things got sort of tough. They told us that they'd have, usually have a meeting at Christmas and give us our bonus and just have a speech or let us off at Christmas time or whatever. They finally got down to give us a week's pay. They called it a week's vacation with pay.

PH: Instead of the bonus?

JG: Yeah, for Christmas. They'd tell us then that we're pretty close to the top and the only reason we up there is because of the good management, good labor, and people that were willing to work and try to do the stuff as near right as we could, and the only

way we stay there is to continue the same thing. What they said is "it's a whole lot easier to go downhill than it was to climb up. If we start making sorry stuff, we'll start sliding backwards fast." And I think that's what happened. There wasn't too much of the sorry stuff that they was making, I think it was over-staffed, and we didn't have the production put out that they should have had for the workers that they had. In other words, they were taking money out of the till and paying somebody that wasn't putting in a day's work. I think that eventually dwindled the profits which would have been the profits.

PH: Were there rumors before the actual sale took place that the White family was going to sell it?

JG: Well, the--. Yeah, for awhile because it went probably for six months or something like that maybe. I don't remember exactly when it was put up for sale, that the bids were turned in on it to see who would get it. They knew--. Everybody knew it was up for up for sale, according to that, but they didn't know who was going to get it. When the bids were open, why,--it was a secret bid--when they were opened whoever had the highest bid would be the new owner. I don't know for sure, but I was told that there was actually only three bids put in on it. Steve--. None of the Whites' told me that. I just heard that from some of the workers afterwards. They had been loosing money, though, and running in the red, some of them said maybe for the last couple of years or so.

PH: You said earlier that when Hickory came in that they fired fifty people in September. Did you notice other changes in the way that the plant was run? After Hickory took over?

JG: Well, they didn't exactly fire them. They just figured they didn't need them anymore. I mean, they wasn't fired for lack of doing your job or something like that. It's they just had went through the plant and seen the work force, and if they had four people working there and they figured three of them could do the job or should be doing the job, why, they just made note of that and go on through. The next one they may have thirty people working in there and it might be four or five of them that they figured they could

do without. I mean, they were in the furniture business, and they knew what they could do and what they couldn't do.

Then on top of that, then, why, they, when they cut the force down, why, they turned around then and some of White's machinery was pretty old machinery, but it was still doing it, they was still making money with it till it sat that way. But Hickory pulled the old machinery out and started putting in either new or rebuilt machinery--second-hand--good machinery. They upgraded the machine room tremendously to what it was when White's had it. So that give them the opportunity to produce more furniture than White's had, cause they had joiners where they could run the lumber boards. They put it up on the belt where they used to have a man standing there and running the boards over to the joiners like where he's going to glue up boards to make tops and things out of it. They'd have a man standing there and run it over the joiner and he'd have to stack it back on the truck; take it off of one, join it, and put it back on another truck. So they had set up a chain thing in there where it would run through the joiner by chain and join it itself. When it went up through on the other side the thing would flip it and come back bottom side upwards and join it to the other side.

Just things like that. They put conveyor belts where White's would load it back out of the planer. They'd have a tail man there and he would stack it on a truck. The feeder would take it off one truck, put it in the shop truck. So they lined the machinery up and put a conveyor belt between them and a man'd stand there and feed it in the planer. One would cut it on the cutoff saw and he had a belt. He just throw it on the belt and pull it right on over to the man that joined it--or a planer--and he would--. The belt would pull it right on in the planer and run it through out on the other end. Then it would go from there then through the joiner, and sometimes it'd go through two or three operations and wouldn't even be a man touch it. Where they used to have a man at the front and back of all the machinery like that.

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When they cut down like that, why, they cut the help tremendously, I mean, employment. That's where they'd make money. I think they said in the first year they were in the black, even in the first year operating it cause they did lay off fifty workers. Well, you take fifty a year salary like that, why, that's a right good size hunk of money. Besides, with the new machinery--they start putting in a piece at the time replacing some of it and relining the other up and getting it so that they'd save time and wouldn't have to have somebody pushing it around all over the place on hand trucks. So they modernized it, so to speak, and therefore, they were able to produce a gross amount. The more they produced in the same amount of time the more money they make--more profit.

PH: Did the quality in the product decline any, do you think?

JG: I don't think at that time, but later on though when they did move Richard out to High Point, why, I think it started declining shortly after that till it finally got down to the basic of just what they had to use in order to produce. In other words, say, like a buffet shelf that goes behind closed doors they would--White's--they used chip core which was good in a way. It was better than solid wood because solid wood would warp and crack, and the joints would eventually over the years begin to separate a little. What they did they'd use chip core and they would band it with maybe two or three inch strips all the way around--glue it to the chip core. Then they would veneer the top and bottom of that. But when Hickory-- Later on they kept doing away with the high process and stuff--techniques that really produced good furniture--on the shelves like that because they were behind closed doors and you couldn't see them unless you opened a door, they just used a plain chip core veneered on both sides; didn't even bother to band it or anything. Some of it where the shelves were up where you could see it they'd use a chip core like that instead of putting the wood band around it. They had a banding machine that would just glue a plastic band around it just like you'd take a board and put a molding around it. They'd use that, but eventually that stuff'd start coming off. If there's any dampness whatsoever, why, it turned lose and all you had was a chip core there, veneered

on both sides, but it was just chip core. But the tops and things like that, why, everything that they made, the case ends and things that White's made, they banded it with wood all the way around it so that you had no chip core showing anywhere. Table leaves and table tops and buffet tops and things like that they would put--depending on if it had a scallop edge like this is here--they would put a wider band so they would have room to do the craving and shaping and still stay in the wood line so it wouldn't never hit the other. That part Hickory still done, because that would be hard to cover up if it was chip core, but they cut down the width of it. Where White's maybe might put a 4 inch strip through there, they'd put barely enough to cover this shape right here. [Mr. Gilland is now showing a piece of furniture to Mr. Huber.] This corner here now that they cut, I think, into--. Finally it just wasn't White's furniture anymore.

PH: When did you retire?

JG: I retired in May of '92.

PH: May of '92. Were there rumors going around at the time among the workers that they were going--?

JG: Not at that time, but it was the funniest thing--I thought of that things afterwards. See, I was probably one of the oldest one's still left. Actually, I was the only one in any supervision that still had their own job, I mean, as far as work force. All the rest of them had been replaced. When I retired we had made reservations to fly on Wednesday the 27th, and I retired on May 22nd on Friday. So I retired on Friday, and we left on Wednesday going to Europe. When I retired they told me--. My birthday was in January so I worked and made what I could make or about what I could make. I worked as late as I could and still make my reservations. But I was about at the limit where I could make anyway, I think, was ten thousand four hundred or six hundred, something like that. When I left down there they said, "Oh, you'll be back." I said, "No, I won't be back, I hate it." Some of them told me, said, "You're the oldest one here now," said, "your watch hold this place together," said, "they'd have to close down and sell out after

you leave." The end of the year they'd already talking about selling it then. I left in May, and by the end of the year--before the end of the year was out--they was talking about selling. So they started closing out during the first of the year and dwindling down until long about April or May, why, all that was left was just a skeleton crew to get out what was still in there and clean up and help pull machinery--.

PH: May of ninety--?

JG: Three.

PH: '93.

JG: Was you the one that took the pictures in the plant?

PH: Pardon me?

JG: Were you the one that take the pictures in the plant?

PH: No.

JG: I don't know who took those.

PH: A guy by the name of Bill Bamberger who lives up in Mebane over on, I think, 4th Street. Somewhere near there.

JG: I didn't know who took those.

PH: You never saw him?

JG: Naw.

PH: Oh, that's right. You were--.

JG: No, see, he come in after I left.

PH: After you retired.

JG: That's why I said and I think I told you up there when I was talking to you and your boss and Tom's wife, Alma, that most of the pictures that was hanging on the wall was the ones that were still there when the factory closed because a lot of them was clean-up crew. It [pictures] showed them where they was cleaning up. It showed the machinery and everything all gone and everything. Just empty rooms and things like

that. Evidently he didn't--until they started moving everything out or they got everything moved out and then he went in and took pictures of what was still there, I guess.

That book, I did not--. They had three or four standing in line to look through it, photo book, and I don't know whether my picture is in that or not. Where that was one he'd taken or where it was one that they had collected pictures with before?

PH: Yeah, I think they were more photos that he had taken.

JG: But they had been people come through before taking pictures in different parts of the plant.

PH: Oh, really?

JG: Even two or three years before that, but I don't know where any of them--. I don't know whether they just took them for a newspaper printing or where it's actually something that maybe was connected with this part of the closing [inaudible], I don't know.

PH: Did they have reporters come through sometimes and talk to people?

JG: [Hesitation] I think they did because I remember when I was still working I've seen papers of different workers in there--pictures in the paper where they'd been interviewed--of how you like your job and how long you been here and different things like that.

As I say, I think the most of what they got there is what he'd taken after the plant started closing.

PH: What did you think of the photos of the opening up there?

JG: I thought the ones was real good of what I saw. As I say, the book, I did not look at because I still hadn't seen that. There were some standing in line waiting who wanted to see it, and I got standing back there talking to you and your boss. Alma and I just decided--. We just about closed the place anyway [Laughs]. Everybody else was already gone except about three or four standing back there looking at the book. It might have been two or three still wondering around in there. I know it had been enough gone

that the caterer had already took the eating and everything out and cleaned that all out before we left.

I enjoyed my work. I enjoyed working there. If I hadn't enjoyed it I'd probably quit and went to G.E. right here behind me. In fact, back in '55, '56, somewhere along there, I was offered a job at Burlington. A friend of mine by the name of Ralph Ray was the line foreman in Western down there. He had about a dozen people working under him, and he tried to get me to go down there. But I would have had to went at the same time--which they didn't pay that much either, start off pay. I think I was making a dollar and a quarter an hour. He says, "I'll guarantee you the dollar and a quarter an hour, but" he said, "you'll have better benefits," and he said, "Of course, the wages will keep on climbing." I said, "No, we like it at White's." I said, "We're good friends with the family and all." I said, "Here at home, I don't have to go anywhere to work, I work here and everything." Some of them jumped about and still in a whole lot worse a shape today than I am by staying there.

Me and my wife we--. By her being German, she was raised up during war times and, of course, Hitler started the war in '39, and that went on through the middle of '45. So she was just a real youngster then and was only eighteen years old when I met her. She was raised up when people tried to save what they made, and just use what they had to use. We tried that here. We've never bought anything that's went in the house, I don't care if it was a refrigerator or electric stove or whatever, without paying for it. As I said, anything in the house, cars or anything else, we've never paid a penny of interest on anything that we've ever bought in the building of the house or anything we've ever bought since then. We figured that if it was worth having, it's worth waiting for, so we waited till we got the money and paid for it.

I've got an old white car sitting out there. It's a '65 Falcon that I bought. A fellow had it on the lot up here in Mebane and it belonged to--. A lady bought it at Burlington County Ford, and she let it go back. It had 500 miles on it. She never did make a

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payment on it. She traded the car in--an old car in on it--that was her first payment, I mean, her down payment. So he had it on his lot up here trying to sell it; Wachovia Bank in Burlington had the car. I went up there looking at it and sort of tried to "Jew" him down a little bit on it. He said, "Well, the bank has a loan on it of \$1,650.00." That's what the woman still owed on it. The car at that time--shows you the difference of the price of a car and the price now--it had all leather interior on it and what they called a deluxe turn wheel. It had large hub caps and white wall tires, and it sold for \$2,449.00. It's got the 170 engine in it, six cylinder what they called a small six.

Today-- My wife went down there to the bank and he said, "Ain't no use talking to me. I just told them because they have to do finance work for me that I'd set it on my lot and if I can find somebody that wanted to buy it I would send them down there." So she went down there and she told the fellow, she said, "I'm interested in the car." They said, "Well, good, good, good. We're getting ready to sell it for \$1,650.00." She said, "I ain't got no \$1,650.00 We've got \$1,500.00 saved up in the bank. We'll give you \$1,500.00 for it." He said, "No, can't take--." He said, "Look, wait a minute." He went in the back, talked to the manager, and come back out and said, "Manager said we can't take that, said we got to have our \$1650.00 on it." She said, "Well, I've got my husband's payroll check here. It's thirty-five dollars left from it--his paycheck--and that's all the money we got. The other is in the bank, and I can draw it out Monday, and put the \$1,535.00." He went back in there and come back and the bank manager said, "No, I can't take it. We'll finance the rest of it and you can pay it off." She said, "No, we built the house, and we didn't go in debt for it. We've got nothing in the house that we went in debt for. We don't intend going in debt for this either. This is my top offer, \$1,535.00." He said, "We just can't take it." She started, she said, "I know where I got the car at." She said, "I can take it back." Well, Peters had it on his used car lot up here. Said, "I'll take the car back where I got it at." So she got to the door, before she got out the door he

said, "Wait a minute." So he took off back in the back again and he come back out and he said, "We'll take it" [Laughs].

PH: [laughs]

JG: He took the \$1,535.00 She drew out everything we had and paid for that. We started saving all over again.

PH: Was that one of your first cars?

JG: No, not this one out here. It's an old white one. It's got 267,000 miles on it now. I use it just to run around and haul my tools back and forth. Of course, I won't mind start out and go to Tennessee in it, I mean, there's nothing wrong with it, it runs. It's been banged up a few times. I've got a few dents in it. The bumpers have got rusty on it, but the motor runs good. It cranks up a whole lot better than this one I got out here. Of course, that's a '65 too, but it's got a bigger motor in it. That's a 200 in that one. Even that, we wasn't about to even finance the couple of hundred dollars that we didn't have. We figured if anybody eat anything off their table they were going to have to work for it; we weren't going to put it on there. We had to work to put it on ours, and they could work to put it on theirs. So everything we bought we paid for it when we got it. And I still do. If I want anything--my wife passed away in January of '93--I don't buy anything now unless I can pay for it. That's the best way to do. The only credit card that I've got anywhere in my pocket is Sears and Roebuck. I do a whole lot of trading with Sears and Roebuck, but as soon as the bill comes at the end of the month, why, I write them a check for that; never paid any interest on that either. That's the only credit card I've gotten anywhere.

PH: Is there anything that you'd like to say that you haven't gotten to say with the questions and all?

JG: No, I don't think so. I think we had a pretty good talk.

PH: Well, I appreciate you doing this, Mr. Gilland. It worked out real well.

JG: I enjoyed it. You can come back and see them if you want--if they think they'd be interesting. Why, you're welcome to see them. [Mr. Gilland is referring to brochures and advertisements about White Furniture Company that he acquired as they were being thrown out during the cleaning out of the company.]

PH: Oh, yeah. We'll definitely be interested in coming out and looking at those more closely.

END OF INTERVIEW

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Interview

with

JAMES M. GILLAND

June 2, 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
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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

JAMES GILLAND
JUNE 2, 1994

This interview consists of an informal discussion between James Gilland, Patrick Huber, and Kathy Nasstrom while the latter two persons were examining a box of materials concerning the White Furniture Company which Mr. Gilland has in his possession. This interview is taking place in Mr. Gilland's home in Mebane, North Carolina.

JAMES GILLAND: This one here--.

KATHY NASSTROM: I can get a bird's eye view this way. [laughs]

JG: [There is a lot of rummaging noise in the background] Some of the papers in there where it has the White's write-ups in it, several of them have the same thing and I told him [Patrick Huber] when we were looking at them you're welcome to any of it that you can use as far as that goes, as far as the history of the factory.

KN: Uh, huh. Yeah, that's great. Pat was warning the administrative assistant in our office that we would be bringing back some xeroxing for her to do.

JG: You know, look how good a print that's still on that paper. Some of them things go back to 1909.

KN: This one, yeah, is 1912.

JG: Yeah, well, there was some of them we saw that was 1909.

PATRICK HUBER: So you would have saved these in '85 or '86?

JG: It was a little before White's--. White's threw them away themselves.

PH: Oh, they did?

JG: Yeah, they cleaned up and threw them away before they ever sold out.

PH: We were talking last time about-- You said that White's sold the plant for-- what you heard--was five million, but they had six million dollars in furniture sitting in the warehouses?

JG: They said they had back orders for about six million, but they probably had about enough furniture in the warehouse. The warehouse was all full. That might not have had a certain kinds for some of the orders; it would have had to be made, but the warehouse, everything was full. I never did understand why they didn't ship out what they had orders on before they were sold out.

PH: Huh. Did they-- Were they forced to accept the bid that they gave them?

JG: I-- Well-- What they done-- It actually went up for sale just like an auction or anything would, and if you don't split--you could call an auctioneer in here and auction off what's in the house. You don't set no limit on anything in there, why, you sell it for whatever you get out of it.

PH: Uh, huh.

JG: And, the factory was the same way. It was put up for bid, for sale, at a certain length of time to the highest bidder, and Hickory had the highest bid on it. They said five million, but I think I seen somewhere in the paper five point one million or something like that.

KN: I know that the things like the equipment, fans, that kind of thing, they auctioned off. The furniture that was already made, was that auctioned? Do you know?

JG: They didn't auction. It just went with the plant.

KN: It went as part of it?

JG: Yeah. Uh, huh. It was just a bid on the whole furniture plant and everything that was tied to it. I told him [Patrick], they didn't buy it, they stoled it. [laughs]

KN: [laughs]

PH: [laughs]

KN: Or something, but some we're still trying to figure out. [laughter]

JG: See, Hillsborough plant was working about a hundred and twenty employees. They had the plant over on the backside of Hillsborough, old 86 there.

It went with it. It closed out about a year and a half or something, maybe two years before this closed down. Hickory sold it out. White's run it. I told him [Patrick] I think that they were over staffed with labor and a whole lot of that. Poor management. By overstocking like that then they had more money going out than they had coming in which is very easy to do in any kind of business. You can do that with your household finances as well. All you have to do is to go out and buy more than you got money coming in to pay for it. No matter what, you're going to have to sell some it or let it go back or do something to be able to make the payments on the rest of it.

KN: From your perspective do you have any idea how that came to happen?

JG: Well, the-- We had a-- Mr. Phonse Bean--when I went to work with White's--he was running it, and it was run well as far as management was concerned. Later when he retired he turned it over to his boy, and he, Bernie, was too nice of a fellow to push somebody. I mean, he was a nice fellow and all that, but I don't think he was what you say a real strict businessman. I think the labor and a lot of it was the quality, too, just got out of hand. It just started. The sales dwindled on some of it, and the rest of it, I'd say the money was just going out faster than it was coming in; the expenses, the labor, and the wages.

KN: About when do you feel that started happening?

JG: Oh, shortly after he took over, but it took a long time for it to get down to, I'd say the last, maybe the last three or four years before they sold out was probably getting to be the worst.

KN: Who was that man again you mentioned being in charge when you first came?

JG: Phonse Bean.

KN: When did his son--? When did he turn it over to his son?

JG: Oh, I don't remember what year it was. It's several years back.

KN: You'd already been working there a while though?

JG: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. He [Bernie] was [hesitation] in Vietnam. Maybe it was the Korean War he was in. When he got out he went back to finish college then come in the plant and worked. Until his daddy retired, why, he worked as production manager. His daddy moved over. He'd still come in and sit around and oversee it, but Bernie just never did pick up what his daddy had. He just wasn't the business--. The business part didn't transfer from his daddy to him.

KN: [laughs]

PH: Did they own some stock in the company as well? the Beans'?

JG: Oh, yeah. Mr. Bean, Mr. Phonse Bean, his daddy was the owner of a chair factory in Lexington, but I wouldn't say for sure that it was the Lexington Chair Factory that exists now. He died and left it to--. His daddy died and left it to him. I think about '39 or '40, somewhere along there, why, they--Steve Miller and Steve White--two first cousins, they was trying to find a manager to manage and supervise the labor on it. They got a hold of him, but he said, "I can't run my place of business and yours too. The only way I will take it is if I sell mine and buy stock in this one." So that's what I heard that they agreed--each one of them--to give him so much stock on either side, sell it to him. He said, "If I've got money in it then I'll look after it better." He was right. That's what I heard the way they got started and how he got in it. [Train whistle blowing] He was the director of manufacturing. He was over both plants as far as labor supervision and all was concerned.

[Looking in the box] There's a whole lot of these different ones in here. You can have that one there and [hesitation] there's one there "ninety-four car loads." That's probably the Panama Canal thing.

KN: The Union Republican, Winston-Salem. Have you seen this one, Pat?

PH: Yeah.

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[There is the sound of the shuffling of paper as they look through the box.]

JG: Here's one, 1911. It's got a train load on it. I don't know whether it's the same one, just a different paper or not?

KN: Looks like a little bit-- Well, both April so--

JG: If it's a different paper, it's possible it's the same ad.

KN: Uh, huh. But you are right, the words are exactly the same. [laughs]

JG: [laughs] I saw the ninety-four car loads and that one there had ninety-four car loads, and I just figured maybe that it might be a different paper with the same write-up.

KN: Uh, huh. [hesitation] Well, I'll tell you one of the things we've been trying to figure out and what made me think of it is reading-- Here's something from The News and Observer. I can't find a date on it though. Let's see.

PH: That furniture insert?

KN: Yeah, maybe, right. But here it says, "The marvelous growth of a giant North Carolina industry that was sired by the Whites' at Mebane." We've been trying to figure out if when the White brothers started this in 18-- oh, Pat?

PH: '81.

KN: 1881. We have yet to find any record, like when we do research, of any furniture factory that opened before 1881, but we've seen other factories called the "first," like one that opened in 1887 was called the "first." We've read different, like, encyclopedias and that kind of thing, so we're still trying to figure this out because, by date, we haven't found anything earlier yet.

JG: White's actually is supposed, I mean, as far as the saying and all is, is supposed to be the oldest furniture factory in the South.

KN: In the South, not just North Carolina, but in the South?

JG: Uh, huh.

KN: Okay. So far we are starting to think that too.

JG: The Whites itself came down here from Pennsylvania. A lot of them settled at Haw Fields. They got moved into Mebane which was just a little wide place in the road at that time--dirt road at that. They built and then later on Kingsdown built. I think theirs was 1911 or something like that, several years later when they built. The place was called Melville at that time and then they changed it Mebane as it grewed.

KN: Melville?

JG: Uh, huh.

KN: Do you know why the change was made?

JG: No, not exactly. I have an idea it's just like a telephone, we got to have "home-owned" on a telephone company. About [hesitation] well, I think it was the first of the year they changed the name from Mebane Home Telephone Company to Meb-Tel Communications. [Kathy and Patrick laugh] I asked one of the boys that worked for them, I said, "Why in the world did they hang a name on it like that? Why couldn't they have left it alone?" Because it was still a home-owned telephone, I mean, it's Mebane and they hooked up with a [hesitation] somehow with agreements and hooked up with Bell on the other side so we can call Schweps, Saxapahaw, or Gibsonville. I think we can go as far as Gibsonville, Elon, and places like that, but we couldn't go farther this a way cause Hillsborough picks up. We could go down near Efland, but it didn't go into Efland. But we later got extended all the way through to Chapel Hill. We can make calls now to Chapel Hill through this way. I think they added about two dollars and a half more a month or something like that, but if you happen to use it for anything, why, it don't take you long to save that in even a short distance--phone calls.

This boy told me--the one that was working for them--when I asked him that he said with all the big business in Mebane they thought that was a puny name to hang on a telephone.

KN: Right. [laughs]

JG: Mebane Home Telephone because it makes it sound sort of like it's just a-- well, which it is--a private organization, but it make it sound like it didn't have no outreach to it.

PH: Uh, huh.

JG: Which it does. I imagine we were probably the-- I imagine the first around here in this part of the country to have all private lines. When we moved here from Tennessee we had--supposed to had--five, I think, was supposed to have been the limit on party lines and we had eleven and twelve on party lines. There were so many people that had telephones. So they come back and run new lines in and made the whole system all private lines. Now you don't have no party lines whatsoever. That's been several years ago since they changed that.

KN: Uh, huh.

PH: Uh, huh.

JG: But, a lot of the others still have the party lines. That's what he said, he said the business just got in with them and told them that they thought they ought to come up with something different instead of a "home" telephone.

KN: Communications, that does sound fancier. I'll agree with that.

JG: Meb-Tel Communication.

You can just look through all them. I've got a bunch of furniture books back here behind that was all the furniture was made after I went to work for White's. I don't think you'd--probably not want any of those cause it's just regular furniture books.

KN: With these various clippings, especially where they are marked, it looks like-- tell me if I've got this right--that they're just places where the company was written up especially well about the quality and the quantity?

JG: Uh, huh.

KN: Here I see-- I didn't know this The Mebane Enterprise goes back at least to 1919.

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JG: That's a pretty old paper, too.

[Here again is the sound of shuffling paper as Patrick, Kathy and probably James are searching through the box.]

KN: Here's a [inaudible] of The New York Sun in 1932 featured something from Mebane.

PH: The New York Sun?

KN: Uh, huh. Actually, it looks somewhat like an ad, but--

[The shuffling of the papers in the box continues.]

JG: I really hadn't paid any attention to all of that, I mean, as far as looking through it. I just mentioned it to him [Patrick] when he was up here a couple of weeks ago. We sorta took a gander at it, and I told him that you was welcome to look at them and see if there was anything in them that you could use as far as with the history or anything.

KN: Yeah, it looks like it covers some periods that we can't learn anything about it by talking to people.

JG: Yeah, now this paper here was April 17, 1911. I think that's got the same write-up as that big one had a while ago. It starts down here and then finishes up on there about the ninety-four car loads.

KN: Yeah, it's--. You're right, it's exactly the same.

PH: The very same one?

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: This was a different paper there. I just grabbed it out of the box when they threw it away with everything that was relevant. I had it out there in the shop. I hadn't even looked at it, any of it.

KN: Were you the only one interested in saving it?

JG: I guess so.

KN: As far as you could tell. [laughs]

PH: I can't believe that the White family didn't keep some of this stuff before they pitched it.

JG: Now here is some folks who's here-- This was made by White's in 1903. That's one of the booklets.

KN: Oh, this is good. One of those other booklets, I think, didn't have a date on it so it was hard to tell.

JG: That one has one there, 1903.

[Shuffling of papers]

KN: That's interesting.

JG: I guess-- A lot of this stuff probably come out of one of the offices sometime or other because these other ads are different companies. This one here dates back to 1933, but I don't see no White's advertisement. They probably would just pick anything up that way with the other companies at the time to see what kind of quality furniture that they made.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: Now, here's a suite right here. See that high-legged buffet there?

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: I bought one of them things for fifty dollars at a yard sale here about six months ago when I give my daughter my dining room suite. I washed it off and refinished it. It's just about the same thing as that one right there. I've got it in my dining room.

KN: Was it a White's piece?

JG: I'm not sure cause it was sold by a furniture store. It had the furniture store name on it, but I don't know-- I don't remember seeing the name of the manufacturing plant.

KN: Yeah, with some of these it's hard to tell what they were.

PH: What years?

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KN: Also, like what they were going after here. I guess actually this, but you can see it's only part of it so it's kind of hard to tell.

JG: That's what I said, a lot of them are probably advertisements of other furniture factories. They might have been a holding them just to see what kind of lines. You can't pick up somebody's design and use it, but you can pick it up and make little changes in it and use it.

KN: Right, right.

JG: As long as it's not exact. That's the way a whole lot of these other companies--. White's would run a suite and be running it real good, it would be a good seller, and some of the others would pick it up and redesign it. Maybe take a little molding off or add a little molding on to it or something like that to make it a little different so it wouldn't be exactly the same thing. They would put it on the market and try to sell it, but it didn't always work because as old as White's were and they'd always been a maker of good quality furniture and their sales would stay up, but the others couldn't sell it. Tell you the truth about it, I worked there forty-one years and I don't see how they sold it at the price that it sold for.

PH: Huh.

JG: We had dining room suites, I'd say a table and eight chairs and buffet and a china and a server, would probably sell for four thousand dollars wholesale.

KN: In what year?

JG: Oh, go back, maybe, six or eight years. We were still running when we closed down like that, but, I mean, even back then. And you think when that hit the market if it went out--up North or West Coast--they would mark it up at least one and a half times more than that. We had chairs that came back from a Chicago market where we were selling for a hundred and twenty dollars wholesale, and they had price tags on for three hundred fifty or sixty dollars. Triple what we sold them wholesale for.

But, as I said, it was the name though. The people that had the money they wanted quality and White's had the name behind them because one of the things that got them on the map was, I mean, nationwide, well, worldwide as far as that goes about it, was when they furnished all this here cargo stuff for the Panama Canal. That was their real advertisement with the government giving them contracts. That's what--one of the biggest advertisements they could have got.

KN: Right. What's interesting to me about that is people continue to talk about it even to this day at the exhibit opening. That's one of the things that Margaret White mentioned.

JG: Yeah. Well, we had a-- Our chairs, we didn't make our chairs. We made all the furniture, but our chairs for years when I first went to work for them, for years, Hickory Chair Company made our chairs for us. Of course, we would-- They would take the drawers and everything and they would make samples and then the company would okay it. It would be strictly White's. They couldn't make the same chair and sell it to nobody else.

Lane Chest Company out of Altavista, Virginia, bought Hickory Chair out. They said, "Oh, you just have to find somebody else to make your chairs." Said, "We make and sell our own furniture." Said, "We don't make contract furniture." Said, "If it's going to be any money in it, why, we make it ourselves." See what they do, make a chair, and maybe charge five bucks a chair or something like that and clear a profit on it. Lane wanted that five dollars for theirself. So they just make it and sell it theirself. So we had to go hunt somebody else. Then we got Commercial Carving to make our chairs in Thomasville. They made all of our chairs from then on.

The vice-president, Sam Downs, he came down, oh, probably three or four months before I retired. We had a suite of furniture. He would always make the chairs and finish a half or dozen or something like that then he'd bring them on down for me to okay it to go with a suite. I took care of all the chairs. The last time he was down he said--that was

after Hickory bought out and it started dwindling then, I mean, the orders did and time was getting slack and they started laying off, too--and he said, "You're not making White Furniture anymore." I said, "I know that." He said, "Everybody else is getting to know it, too." He said, "My daughter went in a furniture store up there in Thomasville and she wanted to get a White bedroom suite. She said she walked around and looked at everything; turned and started back out the door and she said the saleslady said, 'Can I help you?' 'I was looking for a bedroom suite. I see you don't have what I was looking for.' She said, 'What are you looking for?' She said, 'White Furniture Company suite.' She said, 'Oh, we got one back here.' Took her back there and looked at it. She said, 'Oh, seen that. That ain't White.' She said, 'Yes, it is, too.' Said, 'It was made at White's.' She said, 'It may be made at White's, but it's not White Furniture.' "The public knew the difference in the furniture after they looked at it. I mean, if you knew anything at all about furniture you knew that it wasn't White's.

But, as I said before, what they did when they hung that Hickory-White name on it they did that so after they closed down here they could still carry that name. A lot of the people that is unknowing would still think that White's had a hand in making it, because it was Hickory-White. Maybe thought they just went in together. But it wasn't.

KN: Would you describe--? When you are just talking that change and how people could tell it wasn't White's was it--? Sounds like you're talking about mainly the quality of it.

JG: It was the quality. There was corners cut, and cheaper materials used and stuff like that, that White's didn't go for when they run it.

KN: Yeah, I've heard that from several people now. Were there also changes in actual design, the way it looked not just the materials that it was made from but the design?

JG: They would change--. Tried several different kinds. Hickory was makers of fine furniture, too. I mean some of their furniture would compare with White's, I mean,

the designs of it. But they made a whole lot of contemporary furniture, too, which is a whole lot cheaper furniture. There's no fancy work on it, to amount to anything on it. It's just more straight lines. We tried some of it, and I told Richard Hinkle down there--he was president at that time, that's before they moved him into cooperate office--we run the suites, and I think they run about, I don't know, probably about fifty or sixty suites of it, and they put a couple of them on the market, and they didn't sell. So they got somebody to take it off their hand at cost. Somebody just bought the whole thing at cost so they could get their money back out of it. I says--we were still trying to sell some of it--and I told him, I said, "I could have told you that suite wouldn't have sold before you ever run it." But I said, "You's the one running the factory." [Laughs] He spoke up and said, "I wish the hell you'd of said something about it then," said, "as long as you've been here you ought to know what sells." I said, "I do know. I knew that wouldn't sell."

So they just had to give it away to try to get their cost out of it. They tried several suites like that, and some of them we'd maybe run one cut and some of them two cuttings, some of them maybe two or three, and then they'd just finally dwindle out that way. Then get down to the straggly ends of it and then they'd just mark the stuff down to half price or something to try to sell it to get rid of it.

KN: When you said, "I wished you'd said that to me before," the thought that went through my mind was, do you think it would've made a difference if you had said it then?

JG: No, he wouldn't have listened to me. I told him that.

KN: [laughs] Easy thing to say afterwards.

JG: I got along real good with him. He took over as president when they bought it out. They--as I told him [Patrick] before when I'd interviewed--their main thing was to try to get rid of everybody in the factory that really had any say so because they wanted to run it the way--. Hickory wanted to run it the way they wanted to. They didn't want to run it with somebody else telling them this is the way White's did it and so on. And sooner

or later they replaced all of the supervisors. And I had the chair department, and I was the only one left that still had my same job when I left. We got--me and Richard, we saw eye to eye, I mean, he told me that I was doing a good job, and he appreciated it, and I didn't have to worry about my job, that it was solid, and wasn't nothing in the thinking or idea of replacing me.

I had-- I started to say a run-in, but it really wasn't a run-in. He [Richard Hinkle] wanted to move us over into what was the clothing store building. We had been in one of the old buildings in the back. They wanted to move us over in that corner building there beside the drug store. I told him--I went over there and looked at it and showed him where to put the electric wires and build my cloth racks and everything so we could move. I was coming back from the office one day and he was working in the packing department. He called me over and asked me if I had been over there. I said, "Yeah." I said, "We ain't got enough room over there for our chairs, Richard." He just walked up and laid his arm around my neck and stood there and talked. He looked me face to face. He said, "James, just do what I tell you to, and we'll get along fine." I said, "Yes, sir, you're the boss." He said, "We'll put what we can over there, and we'll find a place for the rest of them." He said, "We can leave them in the warehouse, and you can haul them over there when you need them." He said, "All I was trying to do was to get you a decent place to work."

We never had any problems, I mean, I could walk in his office and sit down and talk to him anytime. When he had it and until they made him president over the whole thing, why, it was run good, I mean, we had good sales, made good furniture, and in fact the sales were up. We shipped probably half again as much furniture as White's ever shipped with less help, because they raised the pay a little bit and made the people more interested in work. And got rid of the ones that didn't work, that walked around. And kept the ones that was willing to work. They turned out pretty good furniture, but in the last two or three years, why, it really got sloppy. The quality dropped tremendously on it, and the sales started dropping as well.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: I mean, you can only sell junk so long.

PH: [laughs] When did they transfer Richard Hinkle to corporate president?

JG: I don't remember exactly. He was probably with us, I don't know, about five years, I guess, something like that. About the last three or four he was up there, and they hired a plant manager, but he didn't last long. I think one of them lasted about a week. I don't know whether he quit or whether they got rid of him, but anyway, he just come and went. The president that they got to replace him, to take the job, why, he just seemed like a pretty good fellow, but he didn't know what quality furniture was.

PH: That was Robert Hart?

JG: Uh, huh. I mean, we got along good, I mean, as far as that goes, but that ain't the point. If you've got a job you're suppose to know what that job is, and you're suppose to work at it to try to meet the goal. And I think he let supervisors run the place, just about. They'd just have a supervisors meeting every morning about a half hour. They'd make their reports to him, what their production was.

It wasn't quality furniture anymore. I've had pieces that I bought where it would have missing drawers and first one thing like that in it. Maybe have three drawers down either side or four drawers down either side, the top one more than likely would be a narrower shallow one and the others would suppose to be all the same. You could take a drawer out of this side and it wouldn't fit in the other one. See, they had a joiner set up. You know what a joiner is? They'd have a joiner set up just before the case fitters where they hung the doors and everything. They had a man there and he would take the drawers and try them in the hole. If it was a little too tight he'd run it over the joiner and cut the drawer down and make it fit the hole. Well, that same drawer then, cut down to fit that hole, may not fit the hole on the other side.

But when we used to make them, when White's made them years ago, we could ship a suite of furniture out and take it right back five years later and, say, they needed a

new leg or needed a new set of drawers--they got beat up somehow or another--we could make them a new set of drawers from patterns and ship it to them and they'd fit.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: Because the people on the machine-- They went to supervisors. They'd have a man running that machine, but when he went to set it up to run a drawer front or whatever he's running the supervisor would be there and assist him in setting it up to make sure that it was right to the 64th of an inch to cut it, to fit that pattern. They had a pattern of everything that had been run like that, drawer fronts or whatever it was.

Evidentially, when Hickory took over if it was off an eighth of an inch, why, that didn't make any difference we'd just cut the drawer a little bit and make it fit. If the hole's an eighth of an inch too big, we'd drive a thumb tack under each side of it and would dry the dishes in it.

PH: Have you seen that happening?

JG: Oh, sure. [hesitation] I ain't only seen it happen, I've done it. [laughter from all]

KN: I was trying to think who had described the same thing to me cause it was a while back and then I remembered it was James Wynn said something very similar to what you said.

JG: He lives right across the road up here from White Lumber Company.

KN: Yeah. I'm trying to think. He was in the cabinet room which is different from where you were, is that right?

JG: Yeah. I worked in the cabinet room some. If I got caught up, why-- I went to White's with upholstering and cabinet maker certificate. Trained on the GI bill when I got out of the service. So I went there as qualified for both of them. So if I got caught up in upholstering way back then, why-- We shipped more bedrooms.

A lot of our chairs we'd get with covers on them. If it was a good solid material on it we'd probably have-- maybe seventy-five or eighty percent of them made up at the

chair company in standard covers. It later got to where people--everybody--wanted a different kind of cover. So we started having to stock our own cloth, and, I mean, a tremendous amount of cloth. I bet there's at times I've probably had over a hundred thousand dollars worth of cloth. Different kinds, probably, and I think about the most we ever had was about fifty-five different kinds--patterns. On top of that then maybe five percent--between five and ten percent--of the customers would send their own material. They'd pick out something different from what we had even though with fifty or fifty-five different kinds.

KN: [laughs]

JG: The company just made it that we would cover it at no extra cost, but they'd still have to pay the full price of the chair. They would give no deduction for the material. They'd say, "If you want your own cover on it, we'll cover it, but the chair will still cost you the same price whether you bought it with White's material on it or where you send your own material." But we still run probably between five and ten percent of the orders would send their own. Sometimes we'd get exactly--. We have cloth on the rack just like what they sent. They might not have a book to go by--the customer wouldn't--so they'd go pick out what they want sometimes and sent it in with the exact stock cover that we'd be running.

KN: [laughs] Was--? At the end, you know, in the nineties, was White's or Hickory-White's still doing upholstery work?

JG: Yeah.

KN: Up until the very end?

JG: Uh, huh.

KN: Okay.

JG: All we made was the dining room chairs.

KN: The chairs.

JG: We had some with upholstered backs in them and some of them-- The biggest part of them was just upholstered seats. Yeah, it was still running when they closed down.

KN: Okay. I guess I had known that.

JG: In fact, we had one suite down there that we made samples on it before I retired. After I retired then, why, they figured it was more than the one boy--we had one upholsterer left--and more than he could do so they pulled that suite back to Hickory--give it to Hickory to make cause they had several upholsterers up there. But they were still doing upholstering.

We had a cloth rack about as long as this room is here. It had four shelves in it. Had it full from one end to the other.

KN: Huh.

JG: Rows double-decked on top of each other. Sometimes we would have, maybe, a thousand yards of one kind of cloth comes in at time.

PH: How many upholsterers did you have that worked under you?

JG: One time we had four.

PH: Four?

JG: Then business started dwindling off, why, they moved one of them to the sanding room, and he quit. And they wanted to move one of the others in off times when I didn't have enough work to do him to switch him around. So one time I walked into the machine room and he said, "I ain't going. Ain't nobody but me." Said, "James, I'll just take the day off if you don't have anything for me to do." So I called the office and they said, "That ain't the way we work. We need him over here." He said, "Well, you won't get me cause I'll just quit." He said, "I'm an upholsterer and I'm not going to work over there in that dust and everything in the machine room." So he just quit.

You can only push somebody so far. The fellow, he was sort of talking junk to him, too. I mean, he didn't like it so--. It was about eleven-thirty when he called back and

said to send him over there at one o'clock. I walked out to the car with him when he went out. I told him, I said, "Henry, you know this is not none of my doing?" He said, "I know it ain't yours." He said, "It's coming from higher up than you are."

PH: Were you responsible for hiring the people who worked under you?

JG: I wasn't responsible for hiring them. I had a man over me that done the hiring, but he brought them to me and I interviewed them to see where I thought I could use them or not. I had the understanding--anybody he hired--I had the understanding with him that I was the boss, and what I told him to do I expected him to do it. I expected him to be there every day unless he was out under doctor's orders cause that's the way we had to work. Our job didn't wait. If you wanted to lay out drunk on Monday that job didn't wait to you come back in Tuesday. Somebody had to do it. We went through that with anybody when we hired them cause we didn't have no extra hands, and we had to have somebody on the job all the time.

Here's a scrapbook here already made up--cut out some things--that you might want to look through that.

KN: Yeah. I was trying to figure that out. That looks like a ledger book, but it's not really keeping ledgers. Do you know what that is?

JG: That started out--I think there is one on down in here--they have where the--I think I got it--where it had the cutting, sewing, and upholstering. They used to make, back during, up until World War II, they made living room and bedroom furniture. Then--

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

JAMES GILLAND
JUNE 2, 1994

JG: over at the old building. Did you go down to the factory any?

KN: We tried, around the outside. We tried to get inside but we couldn't.

JG: Did you go around the back, through the back gate and around?

KN: Did look into the center, yeah, where the big--what are those towers called?

PH: Dust collecting?

KN: Yeah, where the dust collecting towers are there or somewhere else.

JG: Did you see that long red building there about four stories high?

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: Well, that's one of the original buildings. The other three burnt. I think there were four original, and they all burnt besides that one, and that one has been moved either three or four times. It's a hundred and fifty feet long, fifty feet wide, and four stories high.

KN: But all still on that little plot of land, really, don't you think?

JG: Yeah, they moved it back and built the brick in front of it. Then it was in the way. They moved it on back again to build something else. Then I guess probably in the early '60s when they built the new shipping department they jacked it up and moved it back then and built a new shipping department in front of it.

KN: [laughs] Just couldn't decide where that was suppose to go. [hesitates while looking at the scrapbook] This scrapbook is great. Now with this scrapbook--. Let me see, it starts with dates like 1905, oh, no, no, here's something, 1879, but that can't quite be right. Who do you suppose made this scrapbook?

JG: Some of that may be from somewheres else. It could be furniture advertisements for--it wouldn't have to necessarily be White's. That 1879 there could be

some other furniture factories from the North or something and they just picked up and made a scrapbook. [pause]

That buffet I got in here could easily be White's.

KN: Yeah.

JG: There's another one of them. That one has the turned legs on it, where mine had straight legs, but it looks like it's the same thing--a door on either side with a drawer over top of it and two big drawers in the middle.

KN: So for White's there was not any seal or stamp or anyplace where they put White Furniture Company?

JG: They had a--. For a long time there they had a--started to say a decal, but it wasn't--it was cloth with glue on the back of it. It was an iron on, and they'd stamp it with a hot iron and it would melt it to the inside. Then they changed from that then to a regular wood-burning sign, and they would stamp it with a wood-burner. I think they went back--. I don't remember if it was just before they sold out or after it sold out they had a stamp on the inside--cloth stamp--similar to what they used to have years ago.

KN: Uh, huh. So right till the very end they were doing that?

JG: Uh, huh.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: There's a good picture there. You might want that one cause that's the whole thing.

KN: Yeah. This is one of--. This one--. These three show up a lot don't you think?

JG: Uh, huh.

KN: Yeah, pretty standard one, so the 1881, 1904 pictures of the plant and then we'll have to try to figure the year of this, but it's the one with the railroad-- railcars going by.

JG: I think--I believe that's 1909. They had a big one hanging in the office like that.

KN: Yeah, and it's the one where they've shipping to the Panama Canal, so it would be easy to figure out when that was.

JG: I think it was 1909.

KN: Uh, huh. Hopefully, they really took that picture then rather than recreating the scene later and taking it.

JG: That's a real photo cause you can even read the letters on the boxcars. [pause] It's got some writing down on the side there. It's so little I can't make out what it is.

KN: I'll see.

JG: Partially read the letters on it, but not all the way.

KN: So here's--. We've got another. The White Line for Dining Room and Bedroom Furniture 1928. 1890, 1906, and 1928. Okay, let's see. These words along the bottom here, Mr. Gilland?

JG: Uh, huh.

KN: Yeah, it says--. Looks like Gatchel or Chactel Manning, Phila. Philadelphia meaning; I wonder if that's the photographer?

JG: Probably. It could be.

KN: I do like that picture a lot.

JG: That's a nice one there, I mean, it could even be framed or anything like that.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: It's still in real good shape.

KN: It's interesting, these clippings seem to be concentrated in the nineteen teens and a little bit from the twenties and then the thirties. There's not a--. It doesn't look like there's much else.

JG: This old book here is printed up by the Raleigh Observer.

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PH: I guess these would have all survived the fire, huh? They probably would have been in the building when the building was--, that was burned?

JG: What?

PH: All these papers would have survived somehow?

JG: I don't know. It's just possible that the one that survived could have been maybe the office building or something like that, had the office in it. These here were probably in it because the new plant was built back in 1924.

KN: As we're looking at this I'm reminded of this question that I've been wanting to ask you. You got a lot of these dates and the history in your head, you know, you just pull them up like that. Is this just stuff that you were interested in picking up over the years learning the--. Cause all of this is before--. What we've been talking about now is long before you were around.

JG: No, I don't have no--much education, but I got a pretty good mind. [Laughs]

KN: Good memory.

JG: That's what I mean.

KN: Contract furniture!

JG: We made a little bit of contract furniture especially for hotels. What we would do on that is like if we had, say, three hundred employees, and we had a suite that would come through maybe take six or eight weeks to run it through that wouldn't use all the help that we had, they knew ahead of time about--in running this suite through--how much labor would be used in it because they kept up with the production labor on that. The general sales manager would--if he had the opportunity--would go out and take contracts--bid contracts--on hotel furniture and stuff like that when they build new hotels. Sometimes they would pull in orders that way, maybe five hundred or a thousand bedroom suites.

KN: Right.

JG: They'd run it in when they was running a cheaper suite that used less labor, they would run the hotel and that together in order to keep everything going and everybody employed. Hickory when they bought out, why, the last-- Well, they started out earlier as soon as they bought out, instead of hiring help, if they needed somebody like out on the yard to clean up or need extra help in the lumber yard or something like that they just hired temporary help. Then when, of course, they only need for a week, why, that fellow went back to temporary service then and would go somewhere's else.

Later they got into doing the same thing. Like running the furniture like I was talking about. If they run the suite to where maybe they have two or three suites where they could get by with running with two hundred employees and another would come up if they needed two hundred twenty-five, they would just hire twenty-five temporary help. As soon as that suite got through then, why, they would relieve them. They didn't worry about keeping somebody busy that way, and they didn't worry about hiring no extra help, I mean, permanent help. So the temporary service just furnished them with help whenever they needed extra.

KN: So they actually used a service?

JG: Right.

KN: To bring these people in? Uh, huh.

JG: In Mebane, you never heard of temporary help when White's had it because we didn't never need it. They managed to transfer you around. If your job caught up they'd transfer you to some other department to work where there was more work needed, but in the later years, why, they got past that. They just hired extra help, and--then when somebody else runned out they walked around.

KN: What you're just describing now that was just in the Hickory-White era, not before Hickory-White?

JG: Yeah, in the later part of White's, too.

KN: In the later part of White's, too?

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JG: Uh, huh.

KN: Okay.

JG: That's my opinion. That's how come it come up for sale because if you've got a suite come through and you need four men on that job, you've got another suite comes through behind that and you need three men, that means one of them or all of them are going to be slack, backwards and forwards. A lot of times you see one going backward and forward from the water fountain and the bathroom a whole of times then just to kill time or something like that because not enough work there to keep four people busy. But, they still draw the same pay. That's where the management comes in. Management, if you aren't making any money, got the thing set up where you can make any money, you want to try to keep everybody in a job and keep everybody on the job.

KN: I'm kind of curious about this contract work. While you were there what percentage would you say was contract work?

JG: It'd be a little hard for me to estimate because I really never--other than just part-time--worked in the rest of the plant at all. All the time I was at White's--over 41 years--I was separated out from the rest of the plant. I worked in the warehouse when I was in Hillsborough for six years, then they transferred me to Mebane and put me out in that old red building, the one that--.

KN: [laughs] The one that lasted.

JG: The one that survived the fire. Then they transferred me then over to the clothing store building where I was at when they went out of business. A lot of the people work there. I see them, and some of them I knew by name and some I just know when I see them, because I didn't associate with the, I mean, as far as work or anything. A lot of them lived out of town. I knew when they come and go and maybe know where they worked at, but I didn't know all of them by name or anything. By not working with them like that in the plant where I was coming and going all the time, why, I would know

more about-- But they had from time to time, they had several temporary help off and on.

KN: I also noticed in that contract book towards the end they get into advertisements like for mattresses and it says, "Kingsdown."

JG: Now here's a good picture of White's before the fire. This is 1897 to 1907. They had the saw mill. Hillsborough still had their own saw mill that sawed all the lumber for the crating to go into the bottom of the racks for the furniture to sit on when they crated it in boxes. They still bought the pine logs and sawed all the crating for that. But that shows the Mebane plant, and, of course, they didn't have the Hillsborough plant at that time. That shows the Mebane plant there and the saw mill back in the lumber yard back behind the factory.

KN: Here we go. Here's that same railroad picture going to Panama.

JG: They got the history of it.

KN: Is this part of it?

JG: Yeah, I think it is.

KN: Oh, so you know what, this is the same as this. We've got two copies of this. This is an Illustrative of North Carolina's Progress.

PH: Does that have a date on it?

KN: Yes. Supplement to The News and Observer, November 6, 1907. That's what we've been talking about.

JG: We just looked at a few of these. We didn't go down through all of these.

PH: Yeah, we didn't get to the bottom of the box.

KN: Oh, we're making progress then. [laughs] [Pause] That's very interesting. [There is no talking for a few moments as Kathy, Patrick and Mr. Gilland look through the box]

JG: I don't know if this is an account book or what. It's got names in it where they got--.

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KN: Is it some kind of account book?

JG: 1960. Edith Johnson, she worked in the office. [Inaudible] two number seventy-five hundred.

[Talking has stopped again as they continue to look through the box.]

KN: [laughs] You know what pictures to look for.

JG: Well, that may be what she had in the office in selling second-hand furniture and stuff that way because it's got prices in it. When they'd discontinue a suite or just odds and ends left or something like that, why, they'd sell it to employees real cheap. Probably twenty-five percent off or something like that. That may be what that is. It doesn't say at the top, but it's got prices and everything in it and names.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: Here's another book here. Looks like a new one--eighty-six years old!

PH: [laughs]

JG: 1908.

KN: We ought to figure out what kind of paper they were using.

JG: I tell you that right there, that ain't even yellowed or anything. It is just as new right there as anything that you get now.

But, we saw some of them here when we were looking the other day, though, where the whole bedroom suite was twenty-two dollars or something like that.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: Dresser, chest, and wash stand and bench and everything.

KN: I know we're always still so struck by that. I think when I talk with my students sometime about, you know, what something cost, let's say, in the 1920s, it just sounds--. It's pennies to us. They just can't believe it.

JG: When I went to work for them in '51 minimum wage was seventy-five cents an hour. What is it now? They was talking about getting four dollars an hour. Did they ever make it to four dollars?

PH: Minimum wage?

JG: Yeah.

KN and PH: Yeah.

PH: A little over four, isn't it?

KN: Four twenty-five, I think.

JG: That's what they were working on when Bush was in there, I think, getting it on up there from three thirty-five or something like that. Then I think it went to three eighty or something that way, then it jumped on over in the four hundreds.

KN: I think this is a very interesting book because in here it looks like someone was buying on time.

JG: I believe Mary or Margaret-Ellen, one of my daughters, maybe Margaret-Ellen, has got that table right there.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: That's 1908.

KN: Yeah, that's a very--. You see that model a lot.

JG: I have two of them, that oak table like that. I think Mary has one, and Margaret-Ellen has one, I believe, my two daughters that lives here. One of them is a round one, and the other one is a square one.

KN: And do you think that they actually are the White line or just they look like that?

JG: Oh, no. They are White's.

KN: They are White's, uh, huh.

JG: Here's another 1907. A year before that one.

KN: Yeah.

JG: About everything they made back then was oak.

KN: In the early part of the century you think they were mainly working in oak?

JG: It looks to be.

KN: When you closed what wood do you think--? When Hickory-White closed what lumber do you think they were using the most or while you were there?

JG: They were using about the same type of lumber that White's was using. We had cherry, walnut, mahogany, and sycamore, and butternut. Different suites they used different lumbers on it cause they had--. That was one thing, too, that White's would use the lumber--. If they run a cherry suite all of their posts would be cherry. Just like that buffet over there, the solid posts down the corners and the door frames and everything would be made out of cherry. Not so with Hickory. They made it out of popular or gum and just finished it cherry. That's a whole lot cheaper lumber.

That's a receipt book there. Railway Express Agent.

KN: Now, here we go. We're still figuring out this date thing. Here's a book thirty-one years later so that's 1912. Am I doing my math right?

PH: Yeah.

KN: All right. [Reading from the book] "Almost one third of a century growing from a small saw mill into the largest and oldest furniture factory of the South."

JG: What you got is the same thing I got here. Naw.

KN: Not quite.

JG: There's three of these I see there like this one.

KN: Is this leather, this cover?

JG: Yeah.

KN: I thought so.

PH: It is, huh.

KN: The flush years. [laughs]

PH: Yes.

JG: This is 1927. That was the year I was born in.

KN: Well, check out--. Check out where you were going to work; what they were doing on the year of your birth.

Golden oak and mahogany--the same book from 1931 or whenever we decided it was. [laughs]

JG: [Reading from the book] "White bedroom furniture, made in mahogany, walnut, and maple."

KN: Mr. Gilland, that was a popular year that you were born. Here we got three of these books all from your birth year.

JG: [Reading from the book] "The White Furniture Company of Mebane, North Carolina, ideal of forty-seven years." Said to be the "best equipped, most efficient furniture factory in the United States." I tell you that's putting it on, ain't it? [laughs]

KN: [laughs]

PH: [laughs]

JG: 1927. [laughs]

KN: Well, that was a good year to be putting it on because a couple of years later you wouldn't be able to be saying that.

JG: That was just right before the Depression.

KN: Yep. Do you know anything about how the company survived The Depression?

JG: No.

KN: No.

JG: There used to be an old man lived down behind me back there where G.E. is at. He said he worked at White Furniture Company during the Depression. They didn't have money. They made furniture and sold it, but what they sold they put it back into the plant in production. They had their own country store, and they would just give you certificates--. Give you so much money, just what you had to have and give you certificates to buy your clothes and groceries at the country store.

PH: Do you know what his name was?

JG: Ernest Evans. He has three or four boys. One of them died. I think he's still got two. Lives here in Mebane as painters; paints houses. I think about eight of them in the family; girls and boys.

PH: He's still around though, huh?

JG: Huh?

PH: He's still around, too, Ernest?

JG: No.

PH: Oh, no.

JG: He's been gone about thirty years.

KN and PH: [laughing]

KN: Oh, just a few minutes. [laughs]

JG: When I was building my house he came by here. He worked as a carpenter and he come by here and he'd stop. Didn't have no road to this house then. Same road where G.E. goes in and out now. It wasn't nothing, just muddy in the wintertime. Couldn't even get a car in there, they'd have to park up here on the road and walk in. It's almost back to where the super highway is at, way to the back end of the field. They'd let him out up here, and he'd come over here and sit and watch me. Every evening when I'd come in from work I'd jump on my house work until ten or eleven o'clock at night. He'd watch me, and he kept telling me all the time that I was going to have put up scaffolds and everything like that. I kept on and I built the whole house and never had a scaffold in it, and he said, "I've carpentered all my life," said, "I've never seen a house built without a scaffold." I said, "Yes, you have, too." He said, "Where at?" I said, "Right here."

KN and PH: [laughs]

PH: Did you meet a lot of old timers when you first started in '51 at Hillsborough who had been working at White's?

JG: No, the ones that--. See, White's hadn't had that, that long. They bought that in '40 down there, and I went to work in '51. Some of the ones down there was still there

from when they bought it out, and they changed it over to dining room furniture. They were makers of small upholstered furniture. Cheap upholstered furniture.

PH: Uh, huh.

JG: They run it for a little while like that, then they closed up the upholstering part of it and changed over to making dining room. Back then they even made fancy stuff. Look at that.

KN: I was just looking at that. I think it was in this catalogue, too. In fact, we might be looking at the same-- Well, not the same year, but close.

JG: No, you had one of them over there. I think two or three of the same thing.

PH: With that White's emblem?

JG: Huh?

PH: With that White's emblem on the furniture?

JG: Yeah.

KN: Peruvian green enamel decorated. That is very fancy.

JG: Well, you could say anything about any kind of furniture you want to, and you can name it, but White's has probably made it.

KN: Now, here's one we haven't seen before. Here's 1901 and '02.

JG: No, we ain't seen nothing that far back.

KN: Nope.

JG: I'm just surprised that this stuff all lasted as long as it did.

PH: Uh, huh.

JG: Even with fire or no fire.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: Cause different people coming in all the time and working. Different people in the stockroom--that's where they kept it and all. They just got in there that one day and decided to clean up, and out she went.

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KN: Actually, I didn't notice this until I got into it. This one is a joint catalogue for White Furniture Company, Melville Furniture Company, and Continental Chair.

JG: See, that's what I said. Melville was the name, but then they changed it to Mebane.

KN: Do you know anything about this other piece, the Continental Chair?

JG: No, but it's possible--. No, it wouldn't have that, no. I started to talk about Mr. Bean, but he didn't come in, I don't think, until about '38 or '40, somewhere along there.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: I don't know. They might have worked together a contract and to make their chairs for them even back then cause it takes different kind of machinery to make chairs. If you got machinery to make chairs, why, a lot of times you can't make other furniture cause it's a different kind of carving machine and stuff like that where you have to have different kinds in order to carve different stuff. What you would use making chairs, why, you probably couldn't use carving flat boards and stuff like that with.

KN: Actually, when you were talking about that before I was thinking about asking that cause I've heard like if you just build you own furniture a chair is very hard to make, a lot harder.

JG: The thing of it is, it's so many operations on it that if you go into it yourself, why, you could probably buy four or five chairs for what you would put in it in labor having to make all the changes. I know down there in Tennessee where we was at down there this fellow come by and he said he had a little chair he wanted us to make. We made him twenty-five of them and he said, "Make twenty-five and that way you get a good idea of how long it takes to make them." You can't make two or three cause it's too much time lost in switching back and forth making set ups and stuff like that. So we made him twenty-five, and then divided the cost by twenty-five then that give us the idea the average for what it takes to make one chair. It's just like when I go out to my shop to

make something. Had to change my saw and everything else from one to the other and back and forwards every time I needed a piece, why, go change it for minor cutting. The next time I need a straight cut I got to go switch it back to a straight cut. [laughs] It's just back and forward, but if you run stuff like that, why, if it's only minor you can probably set it up that way and run it for half a day just a sawing all the pieces with minor cuts on them.

KN: Your shop back there, have you always built things on your own?

JG: Yeah, me and my wife built the whole house.

KN: I remember that. In fact, before we leave I want you to--. I remember you said you started in one room. You built one room.

JG: No, we built a little shack out here beside the house and lived in it for about three years. Then we built this one. It took us two years to get it up and get the roof on it. It just had black paper on the gable ends of it, and we went back and got cedar shingles and put on the gable ends. We started upstairs, and we fixed one room upstairs. We'd come over and stay the evening and watch television. We took my Christmas bonus money that the company give us and bought us a television.

KN: [laughs]

JG: We'd come over here and sat upstairs--nice and warm and everything--and we'd go back to the little house and go to bed then. We didn't have no power over here then. We had the power run to it, and we'd just run us a drop cord over here. We went ahead and fixed the upstairs. It's a mess, but downstairs--. Since my wife died I've gotten rid of my dining room suite and everything. I just pulled everything up and packed it in boxes and everything. Put it in the living room. I repainted the dining room and everything. Cleaned the floors and painted the ceiling and walls and everything. Just getting that done--. I want to start on the living room next. Repaint it. I painted all the outside last year, and I just thought I would start one room at a time when I had time.

The house is pretty well in a mess right now with everything tore up and packed up and everything else. But the living room and dining room is not too bad. The living room is sort of cluttered up a little bit. The bedroom, why, that closet is full of clothes in there that belonged to my wife, and a lot of stuff. We went through the dresser drawers and cleaned them out. What my girls could wear, why, they took, and what they couldn't they carried them to Goodwill. Still got a whole lot of that to do yet. Got closets upstairs that's full. Talking about pack rats, we just keep packing everything back.

Of course, my wife, she come up during the war in Germany. She was German. By that, why, you learnt to save everything because if you didn't need it, why, somebody else might. So that's why we would do that way. My home was in Tennessee, and when we'd go home--I've got three sisters lives over there--and there's lot of people live out in the country that way, too, that didn't have clothes for their kids. A lot of them are on welfare because they live in places where there is no work or anything like that. So when we go that way, why, if we got any good second-hand clothes or anything I'd just pack the truck full of whatever and carry them down there and just give them to her and she distributes them out wherever that anybody that she find that need it.

KN: Does your daughter--? She lives nearby, doesn't she?

JG: I have two of them that live here in Mebane and one that lives up in Boone--up in the mountains. She went to college up there, met a boy up there, got married, went to Chapel Hill. His parents live in, oh, shoot, what's that little town right across the super highway from the airport down there?

KN: Morrisville?

JG: Morrisville. His parents live in Morrisville. They moved to Chapel Hill and stayed one month and come by here one evening. They said, "We're thinking about--. We talked about it and we're moving back to the mountains." I said, "When?" They said, "We're on our way now. We just stopped to let you know." They had a U-Haul truck out

there in the driveway with all their furniture on it. So they moved back to the mountains, and they've been up there ever since.

KN: I can see that. I think that that's--. I wouldn't mind living in the mountains.

JG: Well, see, we lived, I mean,--. Well, she was too small to even know at that time, cause she was only about two when we moved up here--not quite two--in '51. But, I'm really from the mountain because Newport, where my hometown is, is only about ten miles east coming this way, and you start entering the mountains. The North Carolina line is only fifteen miles. You go fifteen miles and you're in North Carolina. You start in the mountains then and you've got about seventy miles of mountains from there to Asheville coming this way on old 70. Of course, that's the only way you had to travel before they built 85 and 40.

KN: And now they are building--. There's another one that's opening up from Asheville into Tennessee.

PH: Another highway?

KN: I just read about that. Or maybe I heard about it on the news that they are ahead of schedule on this new highway. I think it runs from Asheville. 26, or am I--?

JG: Winston-Salem just got done, I think they finished with it, building a--what you call it?

KN: Oh, bypass?

JG: Bypass at Winston-Salem on 40. We went through there going home. We'd go 40--we had to go through that way--on in through Winston and then on through Thomasville and on to Asheville. We went through there. At times we'd leave right after I get out of work. We'd hit Winston-Salem about six o'clock in the evening, and it would take us forty-five minutes to an hour just to get through Winston-Salem.

KN: Yeah, that was terrible, I remember that.

JG: Sometimes you'd even have to stop, I mean, just stop and sit. There was so much work traffic getting on and getting off that was using that bypass--what I was trying

to think of. They built that now. I didn't know they was building another highway now. They've been working on 40 across the mountain now. They had rock slides and things up there. I think they just about had to rebuild several miles of Interstate 40 there across the mountain after you leave Asheville going on towards Newport into Tennessee.

KN: Uh, huh. Well, I wish I could remember what I was thinking.

Were these two things White's things, too?

JG: Yeah. I don't know whether there's anything in there or not.

KN: Oh, this looks like a catalogue of tools and machinery.

JG: Uh, huh.

KN: Right. That's an interesting thing to be in with the rest of this.

JG: First half, December 1905, Christmas Double Number.

KN: Stock record.

PH: Is that for White's, too?

KN: Can't tell. Not familiar enough with what it is. Well, here it says something up in the corner, suite number.

JG: Huh, this is pretty good.

KN: What's that?

JG: [Mr. Gilland is reading from catalogue] "This issue consists of twenty-six pages full of illustrations, hot stuff, and timely matters from the birth of Job down to Thanksgiving Day in this year of grace."

PH: [laughs]

KN: That being 1905? [laughs]

JG: Right. [laughs] Greensboro, North Carolina. Ten cents. That must be a business catalogue.

KN: It's some kind of record organized by suites of stock coming in. It's pretty interesting.

PH: Mr. Gilland, we're going to interview some more people. I was wondering if you knew, any of your friends or people that you knew who might talk to us about working at White Furniture? Can you think of anybody who would sit down and talk to us?

JG: Ernest Richmond probably would. He was the one I was talking about that's in our church. He was the yard supervisor for years.

PH: He lives here in Mebane, huh?

JG: Uh, huh.

KN: That name sounds familiar. Do you know if he was at the--where we all met you--at the opening that February?

JG: I didn't see him, but I'm sure he was down there.

KN: His name sounds a little familiar.

JG: But, there's a lot of others that just come and went. A lot of times you get people that way. All they want to do was to just make four o'clock on Friday.

PH: Uh, huh.

JG: Some of them didn't take interest in their job or anything. But the Wynn boys, now there was a whole bunch of them. They all worked there from time to time. Jimmy over here and he's got a brother that lives straight down our road, I don't know, Benny Wynn. Did you interview him?

KN: No. Is Jimmy Wynn, James Wynn?

JG: Yeah.

KN: And then Robert, his brother also, is that right?

JG: Yeah. I think he lives back towards the super highway, but this one lives right across--. If you go down my road here going towards town you come to Mattress Factory Road. Well, after you pass Byrd's Warehouse there's a hard surface there, but the next hard surface road is Mattress Factory Road. Just after you cross over it going on towards town--across Mattress Factory Road--he lives in the corner house right there.

PH: Oh, does he?

JG: Uh, huh.

PH: Okay.

KN: And that's Benny?

JG: Benny Wynn.

KN: Right.

JG: I don't know what his real name is, I mean, that's what I've always heard him called, Benny Wynn. He's not quite as tall as Jimmy is. Jimmy is a little more slimmer than him. He's sort of medium built, Jimmy's sort of slim. [pause and the rustling of paper] Saw mill and train load of furniture, 1905.

PH: You made it to the bottom of the box, huh?

JG: Yeah.

KN: We did all right.

JG: Well, as I told him [Patrick] when he was up here, I didn't know were any of this stuff you use or not, but if you wanted to spend the time to come and see you could, and you're welcome to anything that you think--.

KN: Thanks. Yeah, I think we should--.

JG: Just take it, if it'll help you. Some of these here where there's papers with their write-ups about the company there's more than one of them. This here there is two or three of them and different things like that, but you're still welcome even where there's only one of them as far as the history is concerned you're welcomed to it if there's just one of them, because other than just to keep, why, memory sake or something like that, why, it sure won't do me no good.

KN: Right.

JG: But that go down in history that way where everybody could see it in years to come.

PH: Uh, huh.

KN: Right. One of the things that's helpful about this is and we haven't done this real thoroughly, but we've been asking about company records which this isn't quite, but just things from the past and we haven't turned anything up.

JG: Well, you'd be surprised, even a case like this, you'd be surprised at how many withhold things like that.

KN and PH: Uh, huh.

JG: They'd rather hold it and let it die with them, I reckon.

KN: Right. [laughs] But eventually--this is just off the top of my head cause we haven't given it any thought--but it would be interesting to know who would be interested in having these materials so that they would be available in the future. There's that furniture museum--.

PH: In High Point.

KN: They might be interested or the Mebane Public Library might be interested because this research that we're doing and these interviews will go there, too, so that they will be available for people living in town to know about that big building on the corner there, what was it all about? [laughs]

JG: I saw in a Burlington paper, I think it was, or Alamance News--Graham paper it is--where they have a building down there, I believe, that AT&T moved out of, and they said it was costing the tax payers--I forgot what they said--a million dollars or something like that. I don't know where they meant it they lost a million dollars in taxes by them moving out or what, but they're going to try to get somebody back in it. I imagine White's stand the same way because they were paying city and county tax, too, for that place, so that was a big drop for them when that place closed down. That knocked a hole in the city budget, I'm sure. So when you've got a big place like that--.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

JAMES GILLAND

JUNE 2, 1994

JG: [inaudible]

KN: Pretty soon.

JG: All the time that I worked there we always had a mahogany suite and we always had a French Provincial like that piece over there, that type of furniture.

KN: Right.

JG: Now, we have it sometimes, we'd have it painted. We had a suite one time we had it solid green with white trim around the carved parts of it. We had one blue with white trim on it. Then we had white with blue, green, gold, and yellow trim on it. You could get it anyway you wanted it.

PH: Uh, huh.

JG: And also finished in the spice wood like that piece is there.

KN: Because what we've been able to see really because we--. I've seen a few actual pieces of furniture, but we would only see them the way we saw them in Bill's photographs, those very last things to be coming off the line, so this is so interesting to see the different lines at different times.

JG: There's one there, the Tiara,--.

KN: Uh, huh, the Tiara.

JG: That was their--. [hesitation] No, that's not it. That wasn't what I was thinking. They've got one in here somewhere, their seventy-fifth anniversary. Ah, here it is. That's the Tiara I, this other one is the Tiara II. That then was their seventy-fifth anniversary suite there. They started making that in 1957 because I transferred to Mebane and made up the samples, the chair samples, for the market. I know when that one went. The rest of them just went one after the other. Some of them would last a little

while, and some of it if it didn't sell they would redesign it or something. Just keep on running it.

KN: Who did the designing?

JG: Different ones, they'd have different people that would do it. It wasn't anybody from here. It just happened just like a traveling salesman. He worked for other places as well. They'd just pick up a suite or he may come through with a drawing where he got from somewhere else and changed it a little bit. He'd come through and maybe White's might be interested in it. They might take it and make a few changes in it different from what he had on it or something.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: They would design it that way, and they would make showroom samples up in it. If it sold, why, they would run it, and if it didn't sell, they'd drop it.

KN: Robert Riley was talking a little bit about shows. I guess at some time he did some driving of the truck. So then the shows were mainly out in High Point?

JG: Uh, huh. Yeah, I never did understand-- They had a lot right beside the-- they had a picnic shelter on it, right across the street from the factory, and why they didn't put up a building there, they just had a one-story free standing building there and had their own showroom there where people could come see it. Quite often people-- individual, the public--would want to see a certain suite of furniture and they would have to send them back to some furniture store that we sold it to, because they couldn't show them the furniture because in running it, you'd just run one piece at the time so they couldn't see the whole suite anyway. If they are running five hundred suites of bedroom furniture, why, they may run five hundred dressers all one behind the other. They would change over then and maybe run a chest of drawers or bed. You'd have to come in every day of the week or two weeks in order to see everything piece by piece that way.

So they'd have to send them back to the furniture store. If they'd had that, a place like that, they could have set up a bedroom suite, a dining room suite of each kind out

there and the public could look at. If they liked it then they go to a furniture and buy it. A lot of the furniture stores, they'd just had books just like these. They didn't have any on the floor cause it was quite expensive to set up and just keep for people to look at. They'd had a whole lot of money tied up in it, but some of them did, though. Then if somebody buyed it they'd say, "I want a bed or a bed just like that." They would turn the order to the factory, and they'd go by and pick it up.

KN: Any suite--? You don't know why they wouldn't have had a showroom?

JG: It was a good find to have the one in High Point, at the end of the year or twice a year for the international sales like that. For people, if they'd knew, you'd be surprised how many would just come by to look at it anytime of the year if it was just sitting there. I'm sure they would have sold a whole lot more that way, because they could have actually seen what the furniture was set up. Makes a big difference when you set up the furniture or where you just got it all crated up in boxes.

PH: Would you go to show sometime?

JG: [Train whistle blowing] What?

PH: Would you go to the furniture shows?

JG: Oh, yes. I used to go up there all the time to help set up, set the stuff up.

KN: I've heard people talk, too, about, I guess, when you said that about the seventy-fifth anniversary collection. I guess there was a hundredth year one, too, though that would have been 1981, so before Hickory.

JG: Yeah, the only thing that they made at the hundredth anniversary--I don't think they had a suite that they made up--a little bachelor chest. It was the hundredth anniversary suite. That thing sold--. I seen an advertisement in a paper that one of the dealers in New Jersey that bought from us, he had it advertised \$4,900, one piece, that anniversary piece.

KN: So they've become collectors, yeah.

JG: It's what you call an anniversary, I mean, a bachelor chest. It was a little four drawer chest. It sit up about that high. [Measures with his hand] I don't think they run but, I believe they cut a hundred of them or something like that, and I don't think they ever put them all together. They just put them together as they sold them. I'm sure a lot of the big dealers, especially that had furniture on the market--White's--stuff on the show floor, I'm sure all of the big dealers and all. It was real pretty, pretty suite.

Now, this fellow I was talking about Ernest Richmond, he got one of them.

PH: Oh, does he?

JG: Yeah, he bought one. I think they sold it to the employees, seemed like \$1,800 or something like that. I don't know what he got for his, I mean, whether he bought it then and got a discount on it or what, but I know some of them never was put together.

KN: Uh, huh. We'll call up Ernest and say, "Can we come look at your hundredth anniversary suite?" [laughs]

JG: He lives out on 5th Street. You know where Ivey Jones lives?

PH: No.

JG: That was the girl that we was talking to up there--the three of us together.

KN: Uh, huh.

JG: She lives, let's see, about two and a half blocks, I guess, after you pass our church, that big church on the right. You got the old church on the corner, then the new church on the other side of it. Ernest lives on out--you go on out 5th Street and there's a road--Hartzer Road turns to the left. It goes back down to L. Smith, an electric place back down there that makes electric motors and stuff. He lives almost across the road from it, just after you pass that he lives on the right hand side of the road. That road turns left, and he lives on the right. Our preacher lives in the corner house, if you make the turn he lives in the corner house--the church manse. He's in the phone book. Why you could look it up and get the house number, or whatever, it's in there--but it's just after you

pass that road and it turns to the left. There's a couple of little driveways turning to the left, I mean, this is a big road. It has a whole lot of traffic on it going in and out to work back there.

My daughter--we call that room on the outside out there--has an outside entrance to it--we call it the prophet chamber. We built it on [inaudible] for, for just visiting couples or if we have any missionaries with the church or anything like that, that just need a place to stay a couple of days or something like that, why, we built it so somebody could have it. Then we had a couple that lived in there. The girl was doing R.D.C.E. work with the young people at church. She got pregnant and when she got about eight months along, why, she had to quit work. I was working on it then, so her husband helped me finish it up. He was going to Durham to study to be a minister at the university down there in the daytime--classes--and was working at a factory right down the road down here, second shift at night. He was going pretty good. So they lived in there, and their baby was born. It was a boy, and they named him Nathan. Nathan, the prophet in the Bible. My wife then, why, she named it the prophet chamber because he was born and they named him Nathan.

KN: [laughs]

PH: [laughs]

JG: They've got either four or five boys now--I haven't seen them lately--but four or five boys and all of them have Bible names.

KN: It's so funny--. At first I thought you--. The first time you said it I thought you said private chamber cause you said it had that extra entrance. So it is much funnier, the prophet chamber.

JG: Well, it is private because it doesn't have a door into the house here. It has it's own outside entrance. That's where my daughter lived. They just moved out about a month ago. They still got a whole lot of junk. We had a yard sale last Saturday--Saturday a week ago--and what we didn't sell we put back in there because I wanted to

see if we couldn't drag up some more to go with it and maybe have another one in two or three weeks. A little bit of their stuff is still in there. They hadn't got all of it out yet, and then some of the other junk is yard sale.

I've got an old suite of White's in there. Any of that stuff that you want, why, just--.

KN: Well, I think we should decide which we would like to take now, and we'll just remember what the other stuff is. If you don't mind I'd love to see that suite.

JG: You bet.

The preceding has been an interview with James Gilland by Patrick Huber and Kathy Nasstrom at his home, 7310 East Washington Street Extension in Mebane, North Carolina, on June 2, 1994. The interview was conducted for the Southern Oral History Program and is part of the White Furniture Company of Mebane interview project.

END OF INTERVIEW