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Interview

with

JIMMY LEE GROSS

November 22, 1994

by Patrick Huber

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

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

JIMMY LEE GROSS
NOVEMBER 22, 1994

PATRICK HUBER: The following is an interview by Patrick Huber with Jimmy Gross at his home in Hillsborough, North Carolina, on November 22, 1994. The following interview is being conducted for the Southern Oral History Program and is part of its oral history of the White Furniture Company.

I thought we might start out today, Jimmy, by having you tell us where and when you were born and about what your folks did for a living.

JIMMY GROSS: I was born in southwest Virginia in Richlands, Virginia. My father he worked in the coal mines and different places like that. Worked around coal mines, that's mostly what he done and everything.

I was born the fifteenth of June, 1963. My father, he worked around coal mines working in tipples and my brother he does the same time. He works. My father retired from it. He works there now, my brother does.

PH: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

JG: I've got six sisters and one brother. Well, two brothers, one of my brothers died when he was about nine weeks old or something like that.

PH: Did you work in the coal mine?

JG: No, I never did. Once I got out of high school and everything I moved down here. I heard there was plenty of work here in North Carolina and everything. Once I got down here I started working in construction building houses and stuff like that until I started working at White's.

PH: How was it that you got your job at White's?

JG: I just heard it was a pretty good place to work for and everything and there was plenty of work, get pretty good pay, and everything like that.

I went there, I think, and started in '78. That's when I started. They started me out there working on the rub and pack line sanding drawers for dressers and stuff like that. That's what I started out as. Then I went to working on the main line running the air sanders and using the wet oil, you know, after it was sprayed to sand them down with. I went from there and just worked my way up the line doing different things: wet sanding by hand, running the machines, sanding table tops. Then I started running a buffing machine, putting compound on the furniture and stuff. I just worked my way on up to the platform, boxing up the furniture, putting glass in the chinas and putting hardware on. I've done just about everything. I even, you know, worked in the warehouse and stuff like that sometimes. Just whatever really needed to be done, you know. Some people didn't show up or something like that, you know, I might have to go back down on the line to do certain things for them.

PH: Did you know somebody working at White's whenever you got your job there?

JG: No. Well, I knew a few of the people by just running around town and, you know, talking to people and stuff. Just meet them and get to talking to them and they'd tell me where they worked at, and they'd tell me if they worked at White's and that it was a good place to work for and everything. I just went there and put in my application and talked to Lewis Gravette. He was the one over the finish room then. Talked to him and he hired me on. I started from there.

Like I said, he started me out sanding the drawers and stuff like that, and I just worked my way on up the line. I worked in the finish room there for two and a half years or three years, something like that. I just got tired of busting my butt and not getting no pay for it. I worked hard. That's the way I've always been. My mom and dad always taught me, you know, if you work hard you're going to get places. Doesn't seem like to me that didn't happen there, you know. I wasn't making the money that I thought I should make for the work, you know, I was putting out for them.

PH: Do you mind my asking what your starting salary was there when you--?

JG: I think they started me out at \$5.50 an hour. When they shut down the Hillsborough plant I think I wasn't making but about \$7.00 an hour.

PH: How long had you been there from the time that you started?

JG: Two and a half, three years. Still that was pretty good pay for just being there that long, you know, I guess. I think I was making right at \$7.00 an hour or something like that.

[In the background there is the sound of traffic.]

Like I said, I wasn't pleased with the pay so I got Glen Farabee, he was the plant manager, he transferred me up to the machine room. I worked up there probably two more years in the machine room before they closed the plant. They kept me at the rate of pay of what they was giving me which was about \$7.00 an hour. They put me on like a ninety-day probation period after I went up to the machine room. Then they put me up to like \$7.86 or something like that an hour after I had been there like sixty or ninety days up there. They put me to running the edge sander, worked hand shaping the chair legs, and working on the band saw and router, gluing up stock and all kinds of stuff. It was the same thing more or less, you know, just running the machines.

PH: Was that easier work up in the machine room?

JG: Not necessarily easier, I just enjoyed it more, running the machines.

PH: Did you have to bust your butt as much?

JG: Not quite as hard. It was a totally different thing from what I was doing the first time, you know. I liked it up there in the machine room. I liked it in the finish room, but I just couldn't get along with some of the supervisors in the finishing room. That's the reason I transferred out--to get away from them.

PH: Would they ride you?

JG: Ride your butt, yeah. I mean, the way they had that furniture coming down the line you didn't have no time to even get your breath. As quick as you did one piece

you'd have to turn around and do another one. That line constantly running, I mean, they just worried about putting the furniture out more or less and not what it looked like, back then anyway. They was wanting the quantity not the quality. They kept preaching, you know, quality, but it didn't seem to very much matter, you know. I mean, the furniture still looked good, but a lot of it come back about--the finish peeling off of it and stuff. See what it was, they'd run it through them ovens too fast and not give it time to cure, for the finish to cure right on it. That's the reason a lot of it come back.

PH: When you say it would come back would customers who bought it send it back?

JG: Yes, right. See, they shipped a lot of the stuff to California and New York and places like that. With the money they was charging for the stuff, wouldn't you? If you paid like two thousand or twenty-five hundred dollars for a dresser for one piece, wouldn't you send it back if it started peeling? So, that's what they did.

One lady, I think she was from New York, sent us a video and showed us what all was wrong with the furniture. She sent back three pieces, I think. She paid for the shipping and handling to send it back and everything. They just sent her a whole new suite. The drawers was messed up on it. You'd go to pull the drawers out of it, they'd stick. When you go to push it back in the drawer would drop wobble and stuff. Just simple little things like that, and they didn't like the way it was scratched up and stuff like that, you know.

PH: What would the supervisor say when the stuff came back in or on the video?

JG: Well, the plant supervisor made us all--the whole plant--sit down and watch it.

PH: At one time?

JG: Yeah, and he's still preaching quality. But still when you get in there and doing your job the only thing they wanted was quantity, you know.

PH: Did any of the workers say something to that effect to them?

JG: If you got to grouching about it or whatever they didn't care. The way they looked at it you was there just to do that job. They didn't want to hear no bullshit from you. You keep your mouth shut or you go out the door.

PH: This was all under Hickory?

JG: Yeah.

PH: After Hickory bought it.

JG: Yeah.

PH: You never worked there when White's owned it?

JG: Naw. It was still called White's Furniture, the Hillsborough plant was when I started, but Hickory had owned it for probably a year or two after I started there, which in my opinion they had plans to shut down the Mebane plant and the Hillsborough plant all along, because they've got five or six other plants in other states and stuff.

PH: Do you think they bought with those intentions?

JG: Yeah, they just want to make that quick money. That's the reason they didn't care about what the furniture looked like, because they knew they was going to shut the place down. And after it shut down they ain't got no place to send the furniture back to. So they're just stuck with the furniture, which that ain't no way to run no business. I mean, I can understand them wanting to make the money, if they wanted to keep making that money, but they didn't want to keep making it. They just wanted to make it for two or three years, you know.

Well, I worked for Hillsborough plant for probably four or five years all together. I worked for Mebane plant probably a year or a year and a half before they shut it down. Still the Mebane plant is about the same way. They didn't [inaudible]-- When I first started there I thought it was maybe a difference there, but it wasn't. They didn't care about the quality. They just wanted the quantity. The same thing, you know.

If you didn't make a certain production on the stuff they would grouch about it, you know, and raise hell on you. They wanted a certain amount like dressers or chests

and they wanted like two or three hundred or four hundred of them a day. It would be all you could do to put them out, you know, like chinas or something like that they'd have to have a hundred and fifty of them a day. Which on a china cabinet you got a glass amount, put molding on them, and all kinds of stuff, man, and it takes a long time to do just one. It takes probably thirty minutes a piece or something like that to do one china.

They made you work for what little bit they did pay you. To me they should have been paying you nine or ten dollars an hour instead of that little six or seven, you know, for as hard as you worked.

PH: You were a pretty young worker there and had just come in from the outside and hadn't been there for very long, but how did some of like the old-timers who had been there for like twenty or thirty years who had always done it the White's way, where they didn't push them to get that production out--that's what other people have told me--how did they kind of react?

JG: Well, they said--the ones that I talked to--the older men and stuff said it was a good place--until Hickory took over--to work for, because they would pay you for production and had that profit sharing and stuff like that, you know, and had another thing where you could invest money back into the company if you wanted to and stuff like that.

They give you good bonuses like on Christmas and stuff. Like if we'd been there a year or two and stuff like that they give you five hundred dollar bonuses plus, you know, your weekly check. That means a lot getting good bonuses like that. It'd give you the incentive to do good work for them. But when I started there, you know, you got two paydays, but you worked for them two paydays, you know, for Christmas and stuff. They'd make you put out double what needed to be put out, you know, before you went on vacation.

PH: What would Hickory give you for--? They didn't give you bonuses at Christmastime?

JG: No, they just give you a cost-of-living raise and you get your two pay checks. You get the cost-of-living raise which I think back then was only like four percent of what you made in a year. They give you that one time a year which, you know, didn't amount to really be anything.

But some weeks you'd work fifty and sixty hours a week according, you know, to what all had to be put out, how much they needed of it put out and everything like that.

PH: Other people I've talked to have told me that they would pull bad pieces off the line--bad parts--and, then at the end of the day if they didn't have enough parts to make like a finished dresser, they would use these bad parts. Had you seen any of that?

JG: Yeah, we used to have to take them apart like that up on the platform when I worked in the finishing room. Take parts off one or two and have one that was half-way good and take part of the parts off of one and make one. I say, you'd have two bad cases or whatever, you take parts off them two bad cases and put them on another case.

PH: What did you think about that?

JG: I didn't think it was right, I mean, you try to use the best parts you could, but like I said, if you didn't have enough parts to finish out they would use a bad part. They'd just cover it up with some kind of, they called it burn in. All it is is a wax-like deal and they just burn it. Like big scratches and stuff in it, they take that wax and burn into it and cover it. They have different colored wax and stuff and it come right out. If it ever got wet or anything like that it would just come right off. That's what was wrong with the finish. If it got damp or started drawing moisture the finish would peel right off of it. I've seen them come in there and the whole tops of the dressers would be peeled off. Then they would just sand them down, refinish them, and then send them back out again to be resold, you know, sell them as new furniture.

PH: Were the supervisors telling workers to--?

JG: Yeah, they'd tell you to do it. I mean, they didn't throw nothing away. If anything went out of there it went to some of the supervisors, and they would take it and

sell it to other people. I've seen them carry out truck loads of furniture out of there and taking it to a supervisor's house. I ain't going to name no names on that, but it happened too many times that I've seen them take it out on the back of pick-up trucks. He probably paid, you know, a little bit for the furniture. They weren't giving it to him or nothing, but he was paying just a dime compared to a damn two or three thousand dollars, you know, what it usually cost.

PH: Because it was slightly damaged?

JG: Yeah. They'd do the work on them and fix them up there and getting paid for it. They would take them home with them. Put them in the back of the trucks at lunchtime and take them home and come back to work. This company was paying them to fix furniture that they was going to make money on, you see?

PH: When the Hillsborough plant shut down you got transferred to White's?

JG: Yeah, in Mebane.

PH: In Mebane.

JG: Yeah, I helped them tear out all the stuff and move all the machines out of the Hillsborough plant. Stripped everything out of it. All the machines, all the duct work. Had to take everything out of the finishing room which me and Carlton Lane-- Carlton Lane is the one that hired me, you know, to help him do that. He got me to stay there at the Hillsborough plant. Once I done that they sent me to the Mebane plant. It took us probably three or four months, I guess, to tear out everything out of the Hillsborough plant.

Then they transferred me down to the Mebane plant and put me in the sanding room down there. Edge sanding, let me mold, sand, and all kinds of stuff. It's still the same thing, just everywhere they needed you. Sometimes I'd go up in the rub and pack to help them box up furniture, you know, even though I was supposed to be in the sanding room working. If I didn't have work to do they'd put me up in rub and pack to work.

PH: Did all the workers at the Hillsborough plant get transferred to Mebane?

JG: Most of them, yeah. Some of them decided they didn't want to go to Mebane. Some of them had already worked there and stuff like that and didn't like it at Mebane. So they either quit and found them other jobs or they went down there. Some of the stayed for a while and then they quit and found another job somewhere else once they got to Mebane. Quite a few of the older workers had already worked for the Mebane plant, and they didn't like it down there, so they got transferred to the Hillsborough plant. Once they closed it down they didn't have much of a choice, you know, find another job or go to the Mebane plant.

Robin Hart, he run the place for the longest time. As far as I ever heard he was the one that was running it. He was like a pain in the butt. He'd watch over you like a hawk. If he didn't like the way you do, he would come and grouch at you and everything, bitch at you or whatever.

To me there wasn't no use in all the bitching, you know, riding people's ass like that. It didn't make no sense. Which like I said, they weren't really worried about what the furniture looked like anyway. Everybody was doing the best they could do. The fact was if they had put money into the plant, got better machines and stuff like that, it would have been easier to do the work, you know, get better quality out of the furniture. They wasn't about to invest some money in something they had plans to close down anyway.

PH: Did you like it at Mebane better than Hillsborough?

JG: No, I liked Hillsborough plant better.

PH: Did you?

JG: Because I knew all the people and everything. Well, I worked with the people and knew just about everybody in the whole Hillsborough plant, well, which a lot of them from the Hillsborough plant went to Mebane. They was all working in different departments, you know. All the people that was in the sanding room in Mebane I didn't hardly know any of them, but I got to know them. Some of them work down at Craftique now, where I work now. Seems like everybody is following each other.

PH: How many people were in the sanding department when you went to Mebane?

JG: Probably fifteen to twenty people in the sanding room.

PH: Mostly men or--?

JG: Yeah.

PH: Were there some women?

JG: There was one or two women. Most of them was men. They just had the women like hand sanding, you know, the small parts like where they be routed out and it'd be rough inside the grooves and stuff. They'd have them sanding and gluing up, putting dowels in them and stuff like that. That's mostly what the women did. You know, they'd get them to help on certain machines here and there when they needed them to. They just put you wherever they needed you.

If you didn't do a good job they wouldn't let you come back and do that job again, you know, which a lot of people that didn't want to try to do different things, they just wanted to do one job. That's the reason a lot of them didn't make no money. If you got out there and done the best you could do and go to whatever job they wanted you to go on and do the best you could on it, they'd send you back to do it most of the time to do the same job.

I liked it like that. I didn't want to be on one job all the time doing the same old thing. I'd rather be doing something different everyday or every other day. Most of the times you'd be doing the same thing for a week or two weeks at a time, then they'd pull you off that and you'd go and do something else somewhere else in the plant. I'd even help them on maintenance and stuff like that.

PH: Would Robin Hart walk through the plant or did people not see him very much?

JG: You'd see him just about everyday, but like I said, he was always a butt hole. I don't know, he'd stand there and watch you and sometimes not say nothing and then

other times walk up to you, "You ain't doing that job right," even though you'd been doing it for the past year, you ain't doing it right.

PH: You've had that happen to you?

JG: Yeah. Jim Murray, he was the plant supervisor, I think, the personnel supervisor down there at Mebane. He was a good fellow. He tried to treat everybody right, but, you know, he really didn't have no authority, but he would try to give you good raises and stuff, you know, when your time come to get a raise and stuff. They always went on how many days of work you missed and stuff like that. They'd give you a raise every six months or something like that, but most of the time it was at least anywhere from a quarter to fifty cent raise every six months.

Glen Farabee, he was the plant supervisor for Hillsborough plant. What I understood, he worked in Mebane, too, before he become the plant supervisor in Hillsborough. He couldn't get along with some of the people down in Mebane, so once they shut down the Hillsborough plant they didn't want him in Mebane so they just give him the boot. He's running some furniture plant now down there in Saxapahaw or some place down in there. He was just like Robin Hart, he'd ride your ass over any kind of just a little thing. That's what they wanted. They wanted supervisors to ride everybody's ass, you know, try to keep them in line. Kind of like being in prison but you are getting paid for it in a lot of ways. [Pause] Like working on a chain gang.

PH: What sort of things would you do to counteract somebody coming in and riding your ass? How would you react to that?

JG: Wasn't much you could do. You just had to shake it off. You'd just either walk away from them, try to get out of their face or something, you know. Go hide from them if nothing else. Then go back and do your job the way you're supposed to do. I'd get so mad sometimes I'd be about ready to explode. I'd just go clock out and go home sometimes because I'd get so made I couldn't--. I mean, if I get that mad I'd just go to my supervisor and say, "Look, I'm going home." If he'd say, "What's wrong?" I'd say, "I'm

sick." I'd lie to them. There'd be nothing wrong with me, but I'd be just so mad I couldn't stand to stay there. I'd just clock out and go to the house.

PH: How many times did you do that would you say?

JG: I done it a bunch of times at the Hillsborough plant. Because I worked, you know, every day and stuff like that they'd let certain little things slide, you know, like-- I don't know how many times really. Probably at the Hillsborough plant I probably done it three or four times, five times in probably three or four years that I was there. I think I done it once or twice at Mebane. I got fired once because of it.

PH: Because you did that?

JG: Yeah. See, I told them I wanted to go home. What it was it was the day before my birthday. It was a Friday and my birthday was Saturday. I was wanting to get off a half day Friday. He wouldn't let me off. I told him the day before that I wanted off, and he said he would see what he could do. And when I went and told him that I was going to leave he said, "You go home you're fired." I thought he was just kidding because me and him was pretty good friends, but he was a supervisor, you know, which he lived here and everything then in the same house right here.

PH: He was living--

JG: He was living here, yes. I was living across from the Hillsborough plant then. Went in Monday morning and went in there and went back to work. He come in there and said, "Come here, I need to talk to you a minute." Took me in there in the break room and said, "I fired you Friday." I said, "What?" He said, "I fired you." I didn't cuss him out or noting. I just got all red in the face and got mad, you know, said, "Alright, I'll see you around," and walked on out the door. I stayed gone almost a year I think it was. Then they sent word for me to come back down there if I wanted the job back. [Pause] They do some crazy stuff.

PH: So you just stayed out of work for a year, huh?

JG: No, I went back to doing construction work and stuff like that then. Well, construction work and then I was working out there building massage tables out here in the business center out here. I'd been working there for seven or eight months and they sent word for me to come back down there if I wanted the job back at the pay that I was getting. It was almost \$8.00 an hour, which I wasn't making but about \$6.50 or something out there. That's the reason I went back down there was because of the pay. That was probably a year before they closed the Mebane plant.

PH: Why do you think they gave you your job back?

JG: Just cause I worked hard and everything. I worked everyday. I probably might miss one or two days a year, you know, and a lot of people missed twenty and thirty days a year. Just the fact, you know, that I hardly missed no days, and I done a good job and everything for them. I bust my butt. I know all the people, and I knew a lot of the supervisors. You know, most of them is pretty good people. You've got your butt holes in a crowd. That's just the way it is.

PH: Did any workers ever take a swing at a supervisor or something like that?

JG: I've heard rumors of like--. Mostly it's like this, white supervisors would ride the blacks' butts. One time a black guy took and went to his head and whipped the tar out of him from what I understood, you know, busted his nose and everything.

PH: Right there on the job, huh?

JG: Yeah, and they fired him. Kept the supervisor and fired him. Now, that wasn't right, which he egged it on calling him a "nigger" and stuff. Yeah, and he was standing there trying to do a job and a white supervisor was saying, "Get your ass in gear, nigger." When he got to the door or something like that and he turned around and knocked the hell out of him.

PH: This was at Mebane?

JG: Yeah.

PH: Recently, like in the late '80s when you were there?

JG: Let's see. It was probably six months before the plant closed or something. Six months or a year before the plant closed. [Pause] They do stupid stuff like that.

[There is a small child in the background talking.]

Robin Hart, he was the plant supervisor, I mean-- Yeah, I guess that's what you call him, plant supervisor. He got the cancer. [pause] All the hell that he give and raise on everybody is coming back to him the way I see it.

PH: How'd you find that out?

JG: Carlton [Lane] told me about it.

PH: Oh. Where's he at now, do you know?

JG: No. I don't know what Robin's doing.

PH: So the workers didn't think much of him, huh?

JG: No, didn't nobody like him just because he tried to push everybody around. He let his authority get to his head. He didn't try to treat you like a person. He tried to treat you like a dog, somebody to kick around. He acted like he got his thrills out of doing that or something, you know?

PH: How old of a guy was he?

JG: He's probably-- I'd say he's about fifty-five or sixty now or something like that. He was probably about fifty-three or something like that then or fifty-five. He might have been older. I'm not sure, really, how old he was.

PH: Who were you closest to there at the Mebane plant? Who were your closest friends?

JG: Well, her niece, [referring to his wife] she worked there, too, Tammy Shortridge. Me and her always rode to work together and everything. We worked together at the-- That's how she got a job at the Hillsborough plant was through me.

The supervisor come and asked me, you know, about her and what kind of person she was and everything. He hired her the next day and put her to work.

PH: Did you all come down here together?

JG: Yeah, all of us. Me and her and her niece's husband and her and her little boy. We all come down here about the same time. That was about ten years ago or something like that.

PH: You just heard that there were jobs down in this part of the country?

JG: Yeah, yeah. Heard there was plenty of work and everything. We come down here-- I had been down here a couple of times before but mostly just working construction. When I started there at White's that's the only company I had ever worked for before.

PH: Did construction not pay as well?

JG: No. When it rained and stuff like that you'd be knocked out of work. Just seasonal work was really what it was. When it was good and hot and stuff you could make good money. You could put in plenty of hours and stuff like that, but if it rained or snowed and stuff like that you couldn't get no hours then. Some weeks you'd make a good payday and some weeks you wouldn't. Some weeks you wouldn't make nothing. So I got tired of that and that's the reason I started working at a furniture factory because of the fact that you could at least get your forty hours a week or more.

PH: Did you have any other close friends there at the plant that you'd hang out with after work?

JG: I had a lot of friends from down there. Tracy, my wife, she worked there. Tammy Shortridge and her husband, Kenny, that's the only family we had down here and everything. We were all one big family more or less. [Pause]

Some of the Hillsborough workers and stuff like that they'd come over and we'd drink a few beers and stuff like that together sometimes. Just hang out and maybe go to the bar or something like that every now and then. Just ran around a little bit together.

PH: Did a lot of people who worked there do stuff outside of work with one another?

JG: Yeah, I'd say they did. A lot of them, you know, liked working on furniture for themselves and stuff. They'd repair them and refinish them and stuff like that. That's what Carlton does, he builds cabinets and stuff like that. He built his whole kitchen set and everything in his house. He built a bunch of sets for other people.

PH: What was your normal work day like? What time would you have to get up in the morning?

JG: I had to get up at about five-thirty or six o'clock to be to work at seven and get off about three-thirty or four o'clock.

PH: And you carpooled, though, with Tammy every--?

JG: Yeah, rode everyday together and everything.

PH: And then during the day you'd get a break at--?

JG: Let's see, they'd give us a break about nine or nine-thirty. Then we would get our lunch break at twelve and get another break about two or a little bit after two or something like that. Then we would go home about three-thirty or four o'clock. It is required by law to give you at least two breaks a day besides, you know, your lunch break and stuff like that.

PH: What would people do on break?

JG: Sit in the break room and talk about, you know, about anything I guess, anything and everything. When you work with somebody for four or five years you become like--. They're part of your family, really. You get pretty close and you feel like you can talk to them about anything. [hesitation] Discuss your problems with them, have an objective view about things that was bothering you. Somebody else, you know, give you their view of how they felt things should be or whatever. If you're having problems you could discuss it with them. Wouldn't have to worry about, you know--[Pause] That's the way it is when you work with somebody like that for so long, you do become

real close. Feel like you are in a family but--. The company wasn't family, just the people working for the company felt like you was family. You didn't give a shit about the company, because the company didn't give a shit about you. That's what it boiled down to be. [hesitation] A lot of good people worked for White's. Some of them went to Hickory, I reckon. I don't know how many of us went down there.

PH: Did they give people that option or only certain people?

JG: Yeah, if you wanted a job you'd either have to move or either drive two hours, you know, from Mebane or whatever to get down there. A lot of people considered moving down there to Hickory around that area just so they could keep a job and stuff. Some of them I guess that went down there and everything they're driving two or two and a half hours just to go down there and go to work, you know. Some of them went and some of them didn't.

PH: Do you know anybody who went down there?

JG: Not right off hand that I can think of. Most of the people when they closed down the Mebane plant went to work like at the Craftique. [Jimmy then asks his wife in the background the name of the place that Carolyn works.]

Yeah, A.O. Smith and places like that and mattress companies and stuff down there in Mebane. There's different places right around there, you know. They didn't want to have to drive that two and a half hours just to go to work so they had to get them a job somewhere else. They didn't have no choice.

PH: Do you still see people occasionally who worked there?

JG: Yeah.

PH: Do you?

JG: I'll see them at the flea market and stuff like that. Just about the whole machine room down there at Craftique is all Mebane workers. Ain't but about two or three of them down there that work in the machine room that didn't work in Mebane. See,

out of the whole plant three quarters of the workers are Mebane workers, finishing and rub and pack and all.

Some of them people down at Craftique have been there like ten or fifteen or twenty years and they ain't making but six dollars an hour. They don't want to pay you nothing. It ain't like White's, though.

PH: How's that?

JG: They don't push you. You work at your own pace. You do what you want to do. Take a break when you want to take a break. It's a good place to work for if they'd just pay you more money and everything.

PH: How do the benefits compare at White's?

JG: Well, down there you've got to work there two years before you get paid for vacation.

PH: Really?

JG: Yeah.

PH: What about the insurance?

JG: You don't really have no kind of life insurance policy on you or anything like that.

PH: None?

JG: They've got what they call a life insurance policy, but it really don't amount to nothing, you know. If you don't get that--. Of course, you don't get no kind of insurance down there until you've been there six months. When I worked for White's after sixty or ninety days they give you insurance there.

At Craftique you've got--. Things have changed so much, people come and go so much, you know, at a furniture factory, you know, quitting and everything. Well, what I understood that's the way all the factories are going to start doing, going to have no benefits at all until you have been there at least six months. Like I say, you don't get paid for vacation or nothing like that until you've been there two years.

PH: Were there rumors going around the plant in Mebane that it was going to close?

JG: Yeah. The day that they told us they told us that we was going to have a meeting and for everybody to go down to where they stored furniture and everything because it was a bigger area and everything. They sent the whole plant down there. I knew right there that they were going to close because it seemed like to me that's the same way they done the Hillsborough plant, you know.

PH: Oh, uh, huh.

JG: I just had a funny feeling that they was going to close, and that's what I told the supervisor. I said, "They closing the plant, ain't they?" He said, "Naw, I don't know. I ain't got no authority to say anything," that's what he told me. When he said that I knew, I knew they was going to close. I started telling everybody. I said, "Look, they're going to shut the plant." Sure enough, there was the main--Richard Hinkle, I think--Hinkle or something like that--anyway, he was the main one over Hickory, and he come down there and started talking to us. Said, "We've got to close the plant. Not making no money." I don't see why they wasn't making no money as much furniture as we was putting out of that place.

PH: Uh, huh.

JG: So they shut it down and sold all the machines. Some of them machines--routers and stuff--sold for hundred of thousands of dollars. Computers and--.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

JIMMY LEE GROSS
NOVEMBER 22, 1994

PH: Do you remember what you thought whenever you found out, whenever they told ya'll that they were going to close it?

JG: I was just trying to figure out what I was going to do. Where I was going to find me a job and everything like that. How long I was going to have to wait before I found me a job.

PH: Were you pissed off or angry?

JG: A little of both, I guess. Uncertain about what I was going to do, whether to try to find a job doing something else, go into a different field of work or what. After they closed the plant, I went back to construction work. I can always fall back on that, swinging a hammer. Before I got the job down there at Craftique--. I was out of work probably a year before I got the job down at Craftique. Sat back and drewed unemployment for a while. That was about all you could do.

PH: Were you working any construction at the time that you were out of work?

JG: Yeah. I was doing a little construction. I know a guy that does some plumbing work on the side, and I make a little money with him on weekends and during the week doing some plumbing work and stuff enough. You know, it wasn't like he was making no good payday a week; making just a few dollars here and there.

PH: Were things pretty tight at that point for you?

JG: Yes. We had even considered selling everything we had and moving back to Virginia where we could be around family and everything. We decided to stay because up there where we are from in Virginia and everything it ain't nothing but coal mines and coal mines, are about like a furniture factory is any more, a hopeless case. Age of a dinosaur, you know, it's all coming to a cease.

PH: How did you get your job then down at Craftique?

JG: I knew the supervisor in the machine room. He was the assistant supervisor at the Hillsborough plant. He worked in Mebane, too. Me and him was real good friends. He knew I was a good worker and everything. He sent word to Carlton Lane. We told Carlton Lane when Carlton started down there. He's been there a little better than six months now or right at a year or something like that. He sent word to Carlton that if I want a job to come down there and put in an application. I went down there and talked to him, went and took my drug test and all that. Passed my drug test and they put me to work Monday morning.

PH: So how long have you been working there?

JG: Ah, right at two months now. It's a good place to work for. All I do down there is sand. They've got like a turning lathe. You put stock on there after it's been shaped, got the different shapes on it and stuff. You hand sand it. You drill holes in it, like the bedposts and stuff like that. That's what I do. It's running like an air-bore machine. Sand it, turn it around and stick it in a boring machine and drill a hole in the bottom of it, put it on the truck, push it somewhere else if there is something else to be done to it.

PH: You pretty much do the same job there at Craftique everyday?

JG: Yeah. Stand in one spot and sand. It gets a little boring, but I've got me a radio down there. It helps to pass the time by a little bit.

PH: Do you have a headset?

JG: No. They let you have your radio right there.

PH: Did they do that at White's, too?

JG: No, they won't let you have anything like that.

PH: No radios, huh?

JG: No. If you wore a headset they'd make you take and put it in the car or something like that. They wouldn't allow them in the plant.

PH: Why was that?

JG: I don't know. Just one of the rules they always had ever since I was there. Didn't want you to enjoy anything, I guess. [Laughs]

PH: What other sorts of rules did they have at White's?

[In the background his wife says "the point system."]

JG: Yeah, they would write you up if you missed a certain amount of days and stuff like that, and when it come to get your raise you wouldn't get one or hardly get anything--a nickel or something like that.

PH: Uh, huh.

JG: They wanted you to be there everyday. If you didn't work everyday they'd slowly ease your way out of there.

PH: How did they do that?

JG: Just by that point system, it seemed like. If you had to miss a lot of days--it didn't matter if you had a doctor's excuse or not, even if you was sick--if you miss a certain amount of days they'd give you a verbal warning to start with and then they'd write you up. Once you got wrote up three times they'd fire you a lot of times.

PH: Did they have rules about drinking soda or eating or smoking on the job?

JG: They won't let you smoke. Anytime you got to get you a soda or anything was at break time, or eat anything. You couldn't eat while you was working or anything like that. They didn't want you to. You got to sneak and do it if you did.

At times you wouldn't even have time to go to the bathroom. You had to get somebody to do your job--help you do your job--while you went to the bathroom. You'd go to the bathroom, hurry back as quick as you can, and it'd be backed up with stuff waiting on you. That's the way it was in the finishing room anyway because they got that track set at a certain speed to where so much furniture comes down in an hour, so many pieces an hour. That's how they got the production because they'd push you to put that much out everyday.

Some people had easy jobs and other people had the hard jobs. I was compounding at the Hillsborough plant and stuff. Shit, you'd come out there and you'd be black all over like you worked in a coal mine because the oil that you used to put on the furniture, you had a buffer, an air-dried buffer, and it run 6500 RPM. You'd go to put that stuff on there and it would sling it all over you and everybody standing around you. You had to put a wax on there to take the scratches out of it after it had been sanded and then put an oil-based stuff to put the color back in it. You had to compound it into it and it made it shine and everything. Like I said, that stuff is back to back but most of the time--. Some days you'd have it--. They'd put them every four foot apart or something like that, but other days they had a lot of stuff to put out and they'd have them back to back.

[hesitation] It was rough there when I first started there.

PH: Was it? Why was it rough?

JG: Just the fact you had to work so hard like that. I got smart, and I started catching on to doing different things. I said, "Well, I don't want to be doing this all my life, so I'm going to get smart, and I'm going to start learning this other stuff. During my breaks and stuff I'd go see how they do other things. I catch on pretty quick so I started working my way out of that hole.[Laughs]

PH: You mean out of finishing?

JG: Yeah.

PH: How did people treat you when you first went to work there?

JG: People treated you good and everything. Everybody wanting to know how come I moved all the way from Virginia to come down here to go to work in a furniture factory. Just the fact that I didn't want to go to work in no coal mines and be no [inaudible], you know.

PH: Yeah.

JG: I'd rather stay on top of the ground and not down no three or four hundred feet in it. Too many people getting killed in the coal mines. All the time rocks are falling on you and the coal falling out of the ceilings. Too many people--. A lot of my family has got killed, uncles and stuff, in mines which a lot of them has worked in there twenty years and not been hurt real seriously either. But there's all kinds of times they cave in or something like that in the mines. Too dangerous.

PH: I know that coal mining isn't even close to working in the furniture factory in terms of like the hazards of the job, but were there any dangers on the job working at White's?

JG: Just some of the machines they'd be wore out or something like that. Well, like running a hand shaper, the only thing that's holding them blades in there is a big bolt like setting on top of a big machine, an electric motor, and you got like a little head you put on top of there and that's what holds the blades in the hand shaper. I've heard stories of the older workers, one guy died, had a heart attack because one of the blades come out and swung it through his hand or something. He had a heart attack right there on the job. That was at the Hillsborough plant. That's probably seven or eight years before I started there at the Hillsborough plant. He died right there on the job.

You could see places all over inside where it had slung the bits out of it. Big holes in the wall and stuff like that. They're suppose to really have probably some kind of shields over them and stuff like that. They didn't worry about nothing like that. They had a twenty thousand dollar life insurance policy on you, and that's all they cared about. If you did get killed on the job somebody'd get some money.

PH: Did people lose fingers or tips of fingers?

JG: Yeah, Marvin Riley he got probably three fingers on each hand. He got joints of it missing off it running the hand shaper. They put me on it every now and then running chair legs and table legs and stuff like that hand shaping them out. I'd be extra careful and make sure I wouldn't get my fingers down and around it. Let somebody else

set it up. I'd just run it. I wouldn't mess with putting the blades in there. I'd let somebody else worry about that.

PH: Was that dangerous putting the blades in?

JG: Not putting the blades in there, but you had to put them in there right or they would sling them out.

PH: Was there any problem with dust?

JG: At times the system would go down. There'd be something wrong with one of the motors and stuff and you'd still have to be in there working and eating that dust or running the sander. I had to wear a mask all the time. That's when they first started sanding mahogany and stuff. It'd be so dusty that if you didn't wear that mask--it'd still cover you up sanding that mahogany because it is real soft wood, real fine when you sand it and stuff--you'd have to blow yourself off with the air hose every few minutes because of the dust. The mask still--it said right on the mask--it still won't protect your lungs. It just keeps a certain amount of the dust from getting in your lungs.

PH: Did any of the old-timers have problems with breathing and stuff like that from getting sawdust in their lungs?

JG: Yeah, most of them when they worked around them chemicals a lot of the older guys that died had cancer and stuff like that from the chemicals. That's the way I see it.

PH: But they don't say that, the company?

JG: No. My wife was working spraying the furniture and stuff. She got pregnant, and I think she had lost the baby and I think that was because of breathing the fumes and stuff. I still think that. That was the first time she got pregnant. When she got pregnant with my son she wasn't working there in the furniture factory and everything was all right. I still blame that on the damn chemicals and stuff.

PH: You were saying a while ago that they told you about the Hillsborough closing the same way that they sort of did like Mebane, they got everybody together in a big room or warehouse.

JG: Yeah. They just let everybody know that they was going to shut the plant down. They wanted you to stay there and work until they closed the doors. What it was they'd finish up what furniture they had in there to run--all the parts and stuff--and go ahead and keep on making it and just close it down as it went through. They'd keep certain ones on, you know, that knew how to run some of the machines. They'd just let a few people go at a time till they got all the furniture out.

PH: This was at Mebane you're talking now?

JG: Yeah, Mebane and Hillsborough done the same way. They'd start like in the rough end and once they got it machined out and everything they'd let them go.

PH: Do you remember when your very last day was?

JG: Not really.

[In the background his wife whispers "January 31st."]

JG: I can't remember nothing like that. I just know I was out of there.

PH: Do you remember what you did your last day?

JG: The same thing I did everyday. I just sanded. Run the edge sander, done some mold sanding, and run a few parts. They let you work the whole day.

PH: Did people stick to their jobs even though they knew it was their last day?

JG: A lot of them were walking around and stuff like that, you know. Not doing no more than they had to. Figured they'd done enough for the plant, I guess, by sticking in there all them years. Some of them been there thirty-five and forty years and then they just turned around and closed the doors on them. No nothing, you know. A lot of them got paid maybe a certain amount. Some kind of, what was it they call it? They held a little bit of money out of your check each week for some kind of insurance policy or something they had. Some of them got probably five or six thousand. I got, I think, four

hundred and some dollars. I think they just held like a dollar a week out of your check. Something like an insurance coverage or some kind of something. I forget what it was. But a lot of them they probably got--. I've heard of some people they got like ten, fifteen thousand dollars, but they had been there like thirty-five years and stuff like that. You could have took it and put it in an IRA where you could, you know, have it for when you retired or you could took it and cashed it.

The ones that got like fifteen or twenty thousand, they wouldn't just write them a check. You'd have to fill out a form saying which bank you wanted your IRA in. If you wanted to cash it, you had to go get it from the bank because they wouldn't, you know, write no check for no fifteen or twenty thousand dollars.

PH: Yeah.

JG: If it was less than a thousand dollars, you know, they'd write you a check on that. They'd just send it to you in the mail.

PH: I was going to ask you, do you remember how you told your wife that they were going to close the plant?

JG: [hesitation] I just told her. That was the only thing I could do. Just told her that they was going to close the plant down and I'd have to find me another job somewhere.

[Train whistle in the background and Jimmy coughs.]

It makes things hard when they close down like that on you. Seems like always something happens before you can get back on your feet. Like I was saying where there's a will, there's a way. You've just got to find your way and have the will to do it.

I considered going back to school or going to college and maybe, you know, trying to go into auto mechanics or something like that, you know, or computers or something that you know you'd have a job for the rest of your life. I got to thinking that maybe I was just too old to go back to school. All kinds of things running through my head. [Pause]

It just depressed the hell out of me not knowing where my next dollar was going to come from to pay my bills. They give you food stamps and stuff like that, but still you can't make no money or anything. You can't work like no part-time job or anything or you ain't going to get nothing. You've got to be totally out of work before you can have anything. They sent us a check, just enough to cover the rent, and we get food stamps. Maybe you would have a few dollars left to buy some gas for your car, but still you've got car insurance and everything else you've got to pay. I didn't have no choice I had to go back to work. I was working a little bit doing that plumbing work and making a few dollars here and there to pay extra bills and stuff that come in after I got out of work and everything.

PH: Did you get depressed during that time when--?

JG: Yes, I drunk a lot. It helped out a little bit [Laughs]. [Pause] I guess that's just a normal feeling.

PH: Yeah.

JG: Everybody gets depressed. It's just hard times. The world's changing so much. You think you're at a place where you might want to stay the rest of your life and retire from, and then they turn around and close the doors on you.

I liked working for White's because of the pay--it was pretty good pay--and the people. But as far as the management of White's and stuff I didn't that much care for them just because of the way they treated the people and stuff. They tried to treat you like a dog instead of trying to treat you like a human being. They didn't care about how you felt or anything like that or how hard you had to work. They just wanted you there everyday and do that job.

PH: How do you think having--? How do you think White's closing up on you affected you?

JG: How, it affected me? [pause] It made me try to reevaluate my life to figure out what I was going to do. I mean, you get used to making that one certain amount of

money every week and then you don't have no money coming in. It put you in a state of shock kind of like, I guess. That's all you do you just sit there and think about what you did there at work and all your friends and stuff like that. Worry about how you're going to pay your bills. Think about what would have happened if they had stayed opened. Stuff like that.

PH: Well, those are all of my questions. Is there something that you didn't get to say, Jimmy, that you'd like to say that will remain forever on the record?

JG: Not that I can think of. I think I about covered everything.

PH: I appreciate you doing the interview. You had a lot of great stuff there.

JG: All right.

END OF INTERVIEW