

The Closing of a Factory ^[1]

White Furniture Factory was a family-owned business in Mebane, North Carolina, that opened its doors in the 1880s. Historically, the furniture factory was the largest business in town, employing over two hundred people. In 1985, the White family sold their business to Hickory Manufacturing, a national corporation. The new corporation soon shut down the plant in neighboring Hillsborough, but employees at the Mebane factory hoped for the best. In 1993, however, the employees learned that their plant would close within the year. In these interviews, former employees talk about the sorrow they felt when they learned of the plant's closing, and their fears for their future. When the factory closed, these men and women lost more than their job, they lost a way of life and a community.

Robert Riley

Robert Riley Sr. began his employment with the White Furniture Company "on the yard" at its Hillsborough, North Carolina, location, where he cut green logs into boards. He soon moved to Mebane, where he held a number of positions, including a spot in the "rub and pack" room, a position driving supplies to and from the stockroom, and what he thinks was the company's first supervisory position held by an African American. In this excerpt from a 1994 oral history interview, Riley recalls the greatest shock of his life: hearing that the White Furniture factory in Mebane was closing. While Riley remembers the news as a shock, he remembers also that the arrival of new management and a weak economy sent a clear message that the plant was at risk.

Chris Stewart

When the Hillsborough plant was sold out is that when you moved over to Mebane?

Robert Riley, Sr.

Well, the Hillsborough plant wasn't totally sold out, but I think it was in the makings. I didn't really know, but when I was asked to go to Mebane to that packing department they had some problems over there, so I went over in the packing department hoping to be able to help there and to try to make things run a little smoother. I was over there, I guess, maybe a year and a half before they decided to phase the Hillsborough plant out. Hickory had taken over at that time, so when they phased out the Hillsborough plant he had about twenty to twenty-five of those employees go over to the Mebane plant. The others were just unemployed. But as things rocked on down I think it was October or November in 1993 when we were told that Mebane was closing. It was a real shocker to me because I had been there so long and I planned to retire there. We worked there and everybody stayed there until his or her job was completed. And the way they did it they phased out certain departments at a time. If you stayed there until your job was completed you got a two-week severance pay. Some did and some found other jobs and moved on. I guess that was the biggest shock of my entire life in the president saying that we're going to have to shut the doors.

Chris Stewart

When did you find out?

Robert Riley, Sr.

They gave us a sixty-day notice.

Chris Stewart

Was it in December?

Robert Riley, Sr.

I think it was around November or December is when they told us that in ninety days they would start phasing men out. Actually I think the phasing part started sometime around January--the first phase of it. I didn't actually leave until the 15th day of April of 1993. What happened was at that time I was driving a truck. Our furniture show is every April, we have two shows, October and April. They were getting ready for the April show and any furniture that they needed from the Mebane plant to the High Point showroom they needed somebody there to be able to bring it backwards and forwards. So I stayed with them until the day of the show. That's the reason I stayed as long as I did.

Chris Stewart

Did you hear talk? Were people talking about it before you actually heard?

Robert Riley, Sr.

Oh, yeah, you could halfway see the handwriting on the wall.

Chris Stewart

What were they saying?

Robert Riley, Sr.

Well, after Hickory took over and started bringing in management from different companies with different ideas and different opinions, and the economy was kind of weak too. You could put it all together and you could halfway see the handwriting on the wall. So what Hickory chose to do was--which I guess was a smart move for Hickory--was to move a few key pieces of furniture from the Mebane plant to the Hickory plant, and at a certain time take the production from the Mebane plant to the Hickory plant and made a strong base to the Hickory plant leaving the people at the Mebane plant.

Chris Stewart

High and dry.

Robert Riley, Sr.

High and dry, high and dry.

Barbara Hanks

Barbara Hanks followed her father into the furniture industry, taking a job in the mid-1980s in the rub and pack department of the White Furniture Company in Mebane, North Carolina. In this excerpt from a 1994 oral history interview, Hanks recalls the plant's closing. She remembers her disappointment, the concerns of other employees (especially older ones), and the end of friendships.

Listen to the excerpt (5:15).

Patrick Huber

Do you remember the day that they announced that they were going to close the factory? Do you remember where you were at?

Barbara Hanks

Well, they got us all together I think down in the shipping room. They was telling all about, you know, we're not--. Cause they have a better plant in Hickory. See, I was going to go to Hickory. We was going to move down there, and I was going to start work there but they weren't going to do me right so I said, "No." They was gonna cut my pay and stuff, and I was like, "Wait a minute, I'm moving." Nay, forget it. And they was just telling us that, you know, Hickory had a newer plant, and that we wasn't making enough money to keep the plant open. But we'd all heard it. We knew what was going on. It was still a kind of a shock, though.

Patrick Huber

Do you remember how you felt when you found out?

Barbara Hanks

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

Patrick Huber

Were you?

Barbara Hanks

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

Patrick Huber

How did they go about shutting down the plant?

Barbara Hanks

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

went first.

Patrick Huber

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

Barbara Hanks

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

Patrick Huber

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

Barbara Hanks

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

Patrick Huber

Did you tell people good-bye?

Barbara Hanks

Oh, yeah. Oh, you mean--?

Patrick Huber

On your very last day that you were there?

Barbara Hanks

Like I said, it was a handful. But when everybody else was leaving cause different ones would leave at different times. And, oh, yeah, we would give each other a presses and phone numbers and try to keep in touch. Yeah, it was bad. I mean, you know, you're sad because half of them you won't never see again, and some you might in passing.

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In this excerpt from a 1994 oral history interview, Robert Riley recalls the greatest shock of his life: hearing that the White Furniture factory in Mebane was closing.

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