

University of Arkansas Fort Smith

Interviewee: Don Flanders

Date of Interview: December 21, 2009 (Second interview)

Place: Main Office, Flanders Industries, Inc. 1901 Wheeler Avenue, Fort Smith, Arkansas 72901 479-785-2351

Interviewers: Billy D. Higgins and Larry J. Oleson

Joe Oleson: Okay we are recording.

Don Flanders: I don't think that changed it as much as the buying public shifted away to the North Carolina plants, the, but anyhow, that's anybody's guess.

Billy Higgins: Why, I . . .

DF: One question I thought you would probably going to ask me, when I came to Fort Smith, how many furniture manufacturers were there and to enumerated them? And, those names are gone now and the principals involved are gone. I think there were twenty-four of them. I'm not sure I can come up with all of them, but I can come up with most of them.

BH: Ok. I would like that. I'm Billy Higgins and we are here for our second interview with Mr. Don Flanders. Uh, and in our previous interview which occurred on December 14, we had left with Mr. Flanders describing his entry into the business and his niche, uh, that he took command of and the way that he marketed his furniture produced in Fort Smith and so now we are here for the second interview which is at 10:30 AM on December 21, 2009 in Mr. Flanders' office. Previously I had asked him about uh, maybe the impact, and he answered this as the video first started, the impact of Norge and Whirlpool on the furniture industry in Fort Smith. And then he, uh, we would like to begin today with his recollections of the number of furniture plants and industries in Fort Smith back in the 50's and 60's. So, Mr. Flanders you mentioned to me there must have been some twenty-five companies.

DF: Something like that.

BH: Do you remember the names of those companies?

DF: Yeah, I can remember a lot of them, anyhow. I kind of go by the location in the factory district on North Second Street. Paul Rush had Rush Manufacturing, an upholstery plant there, and then beyond him there was Mr. Tullis, he had a finishing, a furniture finishing shop at the turn there on Second Street and then you had Fort Smith Chair Company which was owned by Walter Ayers which later became Ayers Manufacturing; and then we had Fort Smith Couch and Bedding which was run and owned by Joe Ballman; then Garrison Furniture which was owned and run by Frank Grober; then we had Border

Queen Kitchen Cabinet which was owned by Kenneth Kropp; and then we had, uh, Milton Kropp and forgot the name . . .

BH: Yes and I should know that, too. Was it the Table Company?

DF: Fort Smith Folding Bed and Table, that's what it was.

BH: Yes, sir.

DF: Milton Kropp. Then we had Ballman-Cummings which is owned by Mont Echols at that time. Then we had Willard Mirror Company which supplied mirrors for all the plants and then Ward Manufacturing; and Border Queen and then Acme, Mitchell Manufacturing; then Acme Spring Bed and Mattress which was owned by Albert Mitchell; and then you had Riverside

BH: Was Riverside over in that factory district, too?

DF: No, I had to jump over to the other side of town. We had Riverside manufacturing which manufactured juvenile goods; then Okla Homer Smith Furniture Manufacturing Company manufactured baby cribs; uh, those are the ones that come to mind right now. Uh, then of course we had Western Wheelbarrow there in . . .

BH: Fort Smith Rim and Bow.

DF: Fort Smith Rim and Bow, owned by the Cuttings, Briar and Tom Cutting. We had Tucker Duck and Rubber Company and they manufactured cots and . . .

BH: And awnings? Then there was the casket company, of course.

DF: The casket company was right there across the street from Western Wheelbarrow. That gets most of them.

BH: This is, this is a real manufacturing center then, isn't it? Wood products . . .

DF: Yeah, it was the largest concentration of furniture manufacturing west of the Mississippi River. By this time, the High Point market . . .

BH: Grand Rapids?

DF: It exceeded what Grand Rapids produced. So, we had High Point-Virginia-North Carolina group, then Fort Smith and then Michigan operations. But there were also concentration of furniture

manufacturing in Louisville, Kentucky, - Drexel Manufacturing and CH Wood (?) and one or two others in Louisville.

BH: Was there anyway that your company or any of these other [Fort Smith] companies cooperated with companies in Louisville or High Point or were you strictly competitors with them in the furniture industry?

DF: We were very competitive with them. I don't remember any cooperation. And there was some other manufacturing in Arkansas. In Camden, Arkansas, Camden Manufacturing and then there was McCoy Couch in Benton, Arkansas, and Owasso in Benton, Arkansas. They all contributed to the Arkansas production of furniture.

BH: You told us a little bit about your market. Generally speaking for all these manufacturers in Fort Smith what defined the marketing area? Was there a nation-wide marketing here?

DF: Yes, it was nation-wide, however, we were very strong in the southwest territory, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri. That was a major part of our market. But shipments were made to all forty-eight states, then.

BH: At the time of your, at the beginning of your desk manufacturing here, was Okla Homer Smith, was he manufacturing down at his site? Was he already in business then?

DF: Oh, yes. He was there. As a matter of fact when I first got started on North 32nd Street, Okla Smith came over to see me and he said, "Don, I want you to know I have gone through exactly what you are going through in getting a plant started from scratch. And I know the obstacles you got ahead and he said I want you to know that I will help you in any possible way that I can. And, he says as a matter of fact I've got this mailing list that I send out my catalogs and that sort of thing, too, and you are welcome to use it. Anything else, just call me and I'll try to do my best to help you. He did that and we used the mailing list and that sort of thing. One Friday, I lacked \$2500 to cover my payroll. I was up to my limit at the bank and didn't know how I was going to cover it, but I called Okla and I told him I really hate to look a gift horse in the mouth - you've been so nice to me and you've done so many things for me, but I need \$2500 until next Tuesday.

BH: You came right straight with it, eh?

DF: Is there any way that you could help me? He said 'you've got it.' I said, alright I'll be right over for it. He said, 'no, I'll bring it to you.' So in the meantime I wrote out a note to him for the \$2500 and when he got there, he handed me a check for \$2500 and I handed him the note. He took the note tore it, 'no, no you just pay me back when you can.' But I paid him back the next Tuesday. That, I consider a friend who went far beyond the normal bounds of friendship.

BH: He was a true businessman.

DF: Yes, but he trusted me, so I always felt indebted to Okla Smith.

BH: And he had his niche with those baby cribs?

DF: Oh, year. I think, if he wasn't the largest producer of baby cribs in the United States, he was either one or two. He had a wonderful operation.

BH: Can you give me some of your recollections on Willard Mirror, as well and maybe even Harding Glass?

DF: Well now, Harding Glass really was not tied into the furniture industry. It was glass for windows and that sort of thing and that's a different area than Willard Mirror, though was very closely aligned with the furniture industry and they supplied mirrors to those manufacturers who were producing bedroom furniture. Ward was probably their largest customer and then there was Ballman-Cummings and then McCoy Couch and Owasso in Benton, Arkansas. That was their major customers at that time and they really prospered as those plants increased in volume. It was owned by Mr. Willard. It was originally Porter Glass Company. Then Mr. Willard bought it out from the Porters and then Kaye Willard and Weed Williams. Kaye Willard was Mr. Willard's son and Weed Williams was his nephew and they ran the operation when I came up to Fort Smith.

BH: So, that operation consisted of, I guess, cutting the mirrors and framing them, or did they did they actually manufacture the mirrors themselves?

DF: No, they bought the glass from I guess Pittsburgh Plate Glass or something. They had to condition their water although Fort Smith had very pure water, they had to have an ionization machine that further purified the water. When they mixed the water with the mercury to put the silver on it, there cannot be any contaminates in it at all. If there're any contaminates in there, the mirror will not be true. It will have distortions. Now the window glass that was made out at Harding Glass, you put it in a window, you can see some distortions as you look through. But on the plate glass that Willard used, there wasn't any distortion.

BH: Willard Mirror lasted there until I guess the furniture industry began to

DF: Oh, yeah. It continued there after Ballman-Cummings left and Ward closed and they even had a plant out near the airport in the final years of Willard's existence.

BH: You know in one of our hardwood museum meetings, we talked about Joe Ballman and his, uh, or one of the Ballmans' and their early involvement in preserving National Forests. Were you a part of . . . did you bring that subject up? Or was that Bob or Bob Gillson?

DF: No. I was aware that there had been some. When I came to Fort Smith, Mr. Joe Ballman was the most prominent figure in the furniture industry. Walter Ayers was second. Then came Jimmy Ward and they had an association show floor down on about Tenth Street, seem like Tenth and B, I believe, where each one of those people that belonged to that association would exhibit their products and bring their customers in there to see what they were making.

BH: What about that association? What are your recollections on the local association? Bob Worley was involved in that, was he not?

DF: Oh, yeah. As an association, they used Bob Worley's freight bureau to get the best possible freight rates for their products being shipped anywhere in the United States. There was some discrimination about products made west of the Mississippi River that changed the rate structure. Bob can tell you about that difference. They were able to get it where Fort Smith people competed with the North Carolina dealers. As I remember, North Carolina could ship product to California cheaper than Fort Smith could. So, that was changed.

BH: Did the association ever employ a lobbyist as well as attorneys to go down to the state legislature or even the Congress?

DF: Not that I am aware of. The association was most of those plants that I mentioned except Ward and Garrison, Mitchell Manufacturing were not members of the association. Acme Spring Bed and Ballman-Cummings and the Chair Company and Couch and Bedding, those were members of that association.

BH: And your company?

DF: No.

BH: Your company was not a member?

DF: No. We competed with them.

BH: I see. Who was the original owner/operator of Riverside Manufacturing?

DF: Herman Udouj. Originally, Riverside was started by Okla Smith. Herman Udouj was the manager of it. At one point in time, Okla and Herman parted company and Herman took the Riverside and Okla backed off of that involvement.

BH: What was their key product during those early years?

DF: Well, at that time, Riverside was making juvenile products which tied in with Okla Smith's product line. But then after he parted company with Okla, then he got into making occasional tables and Okla continued to make cribs and that sort of thing. We were making case goods.

DF: Well, at that time, Riverside was making juvenile products which tied in with Okla Smith's product line. But then after he parted company with Okla, then he got into making occasional tables and Okla continued to make cribs and that sort of thing. We were making case goods. Riverside and ourselves were selling together and shipping together, and displaying together at the markets.

BH: How Rim and Bow fit into this? Were they specialty items?

DF: Yeah. Really that is a different marketing and they . . . although I knew the Cuttings who ran it, I was not too familiar with the operation. They made wheelbarrows and they made the carts that were used at each of the railroad depots to pick up the merchandise on these wheeled carts. That's what they made. They made wooden thresholds, and door framing and window framing and that sort of thing.

BH: Almost cabinet work, I guess. Did they have a kiln there?

DF: They had a kiln, yes. They had a kiln; Garrison had a kiln; Ward had a kiln; Ballman-Cummings had a kiln; that's it.

BH: Were they all powered by natural gas?

DF: Yes. Some of them used chips, though. Garrison used chips. I'm trying to think . . . most of the kilns were gas.

BH: We were told that the Casket Company used a furnace, a wood burning furnace for not only heating the building but also the kiln as well.

DF: They could have. I am not too familiar with that operation. I know where it was and who were the principals involved in it, but that's about it. But it was very successful casket company.

BH: We've got a catalog on them and, of course, one of the principals there has talked with us a little bit. There's a question from the hardwood association about the availability and sources of wood and

during your time of manufacturing, did those sources change for you? I know you spoke about bring in maple from Kansas a little bit later [in the Flanders manufacturing years]. I think this is sort of directed at your company and the other companies as well.

DF: Riverside brought some too.

BH: In from Kansas?

DF: Uh, huh.

BH: So you were always on the scout for good lumber to bring to Fort Smith for this?

DF: Yes. We needed the typical hardwoods for our interiors of our furniture and then we needed the fascia woods for the drawer fronts and the doors and the outside of the product.

BH: Did the industry in town have the machinery and equipment to strip hardwood in veneers?

DF: No. The closest one that did that was in Fayetteville. There was another plant over in Cotton Plant, Arkansas that was able to strip into veneers. Owasso did some stripping into veneers in Benton, but no one else that I know of made veneers.

BH: So, from the Ozarks themselves, the counties north of here where there were local sawmills, did that wood product ever reach the Fort Smith furniture industry in any significant way?

DF: Not too much. There was a veneer company in Fayetteville that made veneers for that, but that's the only product I know from that area that came in as a supplier for the furniture industry.

BH: Mr. Flanders, what financial institutions in Fort Smith seemed to be the most helpful to the furniture industry here in your recollection? Was there enough financing here for such a large industrial operation?

DF: Oh, yes, yes. But, of course, Mont Echols, who owned Ballman-Cummings, he was head of the Merchants Bank at that time, so the other furniture plants did not go with Merchants because of their competitive situation with Mr. Echols. Fort Smith, the First National Bank was a great partner and supplied capital to Garrison Furniture and to Ward Furniture and to Walter Ayers, to Joe Ballman. Then City National came in and we went with City National when we started our plant because we didn't want any information about how we were doing filtered into the rest of the furniture industry. And City National was able to help us to the extent that we needed it. We were able to shield any quick access to information about how we were doing.

BH: And there was the First Federal Savings and Loan, too. Would that enter into . . .

DF: Not in the furniture industry. That was strictly housing. That was R. K. Rodgers. Now R. K. was very helpful to the furniture industry personally, but I don't think First Federal played a part in that.

BH: We have noted that in the mid-sixties the furniture industry seemed to on the decline a bit as Fort Smith's primary employer and capital formation and interests, but about that time Norge which later became Whirlpool moved into Fort Smith and before there had been Dixie Cup.

DF: Dixie Cup.

BH: I think Norge was unionized. I'm not sure about Dixie Cup.

DF: Yes, they were, too.

BH: Did that have an impact, in your opinion, on the furniture industry in Fort Smith?

DF: Oh, yes. When I first came to Fort Smith furniture manufacturing was the primary manufactured product of the town. Then, Paul Latture was successful in bringing in first Dixie Cup, was the first of those that came in and that started to diversify the working group. Then, Orval Faubus was successful in getting Norge to consider Fort Smith and he would work with Paul Latture to get the Norge plant and that diversified it even more. Their wage level was higher than the wage level in the furniture industry, too.

BH: But did that play a . . . , did you think the labor costs seem to go up in the mid-sixties for the furniture industry?

DF: Yes, it did at some point. It was more difficult to compete with the North Carolina plants at that time because their wage structure remained the same. That worked against the [Fort Smith] furniture industry, because they were paying to some degree higher wages in Fort Smith than they were in North Carolina.

BH: As an aside to this, I have a friend who is from Fort Smith who lives in western North Carolina now. His name is Barry Bearden. You might know Dennis and Barry Bearden, they've done well in business in Houston. But, he [Barry] tells me that the furniture industry in western North Carolina is about gone, that there are very few actual manufacturing left there, they have some retailing like Riverside.

DF: At this point in time, seventy percent of the furniture bought by consumers in the United States is made in China. There are at least a hundred furniture plants closed between North Carolina and Arkansas due to the taking over of the furniture industry by the Chinese.

BH: In your career as a businessman and as an industrialist, did you keep an eye on labor cost in other industries throughout the country during your day? Did you make a study of that as you made studies of other things?

DF: Yes. We were aware of what was being done in each area of the country and how it compared with ours, yes.

BH: And can you give me a, maybe a general view of your workforce as to where they came from, male, female, and division or in general for the furniture industry in Fort Smith? About the demographics of it? Where did your workers . . .

DF: Well a big part of our workers came from Oklahoma, but a lot of them were local, of course. Forty percent of our work forces was female. We only had at that time about eight or nine percent minority population in Fort Smith, but, of course, that has changed significantly now.

BH: Did the furniture work force represent that minority population structure, too? Say eight or nine percent of the people in furniture . . . ?

DF: That was about the same percent as what existed here, yes. We had a thing happen here; our plant manager here was an assistant chief of an Indian tribe. He had a call from some officer in the EOE in Washington, who said, "We've got a report that you are discriminating against the black in your hiring practices." He said, "I don't know where you got your information. Can you tell me where it came from?" Said, "No, I can't tell you where it came from." He said, "Well, I can tell you this. I am a full blooded Indian and my superintendent of the plant is black and we have 11% of our workforce is black, and there's only a 7 or 8% population in the city, and we have 47% women." He said "so I can't see how you could say we are discriminating against it." The fellow said, "Well, I sorry. I think I made a wrong call." Sure he just fishing apparently. He doubted he ever had a phone call reporting us.

BH: That's a good story. Anything else about the furniture industry?

DF: It is sad that it has deteriorated to the point that there is virtually no furniture manufacturing made in Fort Smith anymore.

BH: What's your prediction? People are still going to need furniture. China cannot sustain this forever, I wouldn't think.

DF: No. There will be a point in time in which there will be a recovery from that, but I think that it is seven or eight, ten years away.

Joe Oleson: Do you know if they're doing anything in this country to like replenish our hardwoods in the time that China's producing all of the furniture? Are we doing anything to get the forests back so we've got the woods in case it ever comes back?

DF: Not much because hardwoods, to harvest a hardwood tree it has to be seventy to a hundred years old and that's longer than most people would want to wait. Now pine's different, twenty years for newsprint and that sort of thing.

JO: So, for hardwoods though they would have had to start it back when industry started and done the replanting all along.

DF: There has been some replanting but not enough of it is being done.

JO: Thank you.

BH: Currently, Flanders Manufacturing is still turning out . . . what sort of wood products?

DF: Well, we make wicker furniture now. It's made in our plant in Michigan.

BH: Where is that plant, sir?

DF: In Menominee, Michigan, it's up, it's in the upper peninsula of Michigan, sixty miles north of Green Bay.

BH: Is there, are there advantages to that location for wicker furniture?

DF: Not that I know of. It started out, wicker was made where you could use the Great Lakes to bring the raw material product to you.

BH: What is the raw material?

DF: Sisal.

BH: Sisal plant. And that's tropical, isn't it?

DF: Uh, huh. Of course, there's certain times of the year when the Lakes are frozen over and you can't use them. They haul logs across the lakes on the ice.

BH: How often do you visit that plant?

DF: We are up there nearly every week, but I don't go as much now since I've retired. Dudley is there about three weeks out of the month.

BH: That is a full line of wicker outdoor furniture?

DF: Yes. Outdoor and indoor, also. He started the category of making wicker available for use in the outdoor before we got into it. Wicker could only be used indoors.

BH: Did you ever manufacture wicker furniture in Fort Smith?

DF: No. We did assembly some wicker products, but the wicker was done in Menominee and brought down here.

BH: I would like to visit the Upper Peninsula myself one day.

DF: We make our own fiber, weave it on looms and make our own fabric out the fiber that we make.

BH: Of this concentration of furniture industries that you outlined at the beginning here, the one with the largest production would have been Ward?

DF: Yes. At that time, the largest dollar volume was done by Ward.

BH: And their product was?

DF: Bedroom furniture.

BH: So that's case work, too?

DF: Case goods. Ballman-Cummings was bedroom, also.

BH: So, in the furniture industry, is this still true today, so far as the un-upholstery, bedroom furniture is the biggest seller, is that still the biggest part of the pie?

DF: No. Upholstery is the largest part.

BH: Upholstery is. But of the non-upholstery?

DF: Non-upholstery? Yes.

BH: So that's the reason . . .

DF: Dining rooms, like Garrison made, so many homes now don't even have dining rooms. That limited its . . .

BH: And bedrooms have increased in the houses.

DF: Right. They keep having larger, more and more bedrooms in the house.

BH: Uh, I'm not sure we got this on tape last time, but if you could zoom in on that picture of Reagan and Rockefeller up there with the Flanders desk between them. And could you, uh, I'm not sure we caught this on tape last time.

DF: Oh. Well, when Winthrop Rockefeller was governor of Arkansas, he had a Republican governors' conference in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and all the Republican governors came in to Hot Springs to this conference. And I got a call from Win asking . . . He said, "We need to give them a product while they're here that's made in Fort Smith, uh, in Arkansas. Can you think of anything we can do?" And I said well yes, we just started building a Winthrop Rockefeller desk. It's a petite desk used by women. I sent him a picture of it and he said, "That's just what we want!" So, we made twenty of them, there were twenty Republican governors here, and we put a little metal plaque on it as "To Governor Ronald Reagan" who was governor of California at that time and whoever, from the state of Arkansas and Winthrop Rockefeller. We lost track of it after that time but then Time magazine in that issue in which Ronald Reagan was the Man of the Year and they had a write up about Reagan's ranch and showed a picture of Mrs. Reagan's desk sitting right there and sure enough that's the desk that we had given to them when they had the governors' conference there. So we know what happened to it.

BH: Yes. And if we do have the furniture museum that would be a . . . that, or one that was off that line

DF: I have one just like it in my house, so yes there is one available!

BH: Well, Joe do you have any other questions for Mr. Flanders? Or Mr. Flanders, Mr. Flanders do you have . . .

DF: No, I don't have any.

BH: any other recollections that you would like to include?

JO: Did you ever have any children?

DF: Oh! Yeah! Two sons and a daughter.

JO: Two sons. Are they in the business? Did they go on, is this one of your sons here?

DF: Dudley runs the company now.

JO: Okay.

DF: The other son who lives in Maine - I'll bet he's getting clobbered right now by the snow.

BH: And his name is?

DF: He's Don, Jr. and then this is Dudley Flanders here. I have a daughter named Kathy who lives in Fayetteville.

BH: And Don Junior is in the public history business, is that correct? Or a curator?

DF: He's manager of a discovery museum in Bangor, Maine.

BH: And have you visited Bangor? Have you gone to . . .

DF: I've never been to Bangor. I've been to Portland, but I've never been to Bangor.

BH: Uh, huh. And your daughter, her name is?

DF: Kathy Flanders.

BH: And she lives in Fayetteville?

DF: Fayetteville, uh, huh.

BH: Is she engaged in the furniture business in any way?

DF: No, uh, she works for a company called E-Ventures that sets up events. That's what she does.

BH: I'll ask one more question here, uh, uh, it doesn't seem like I can ever get finished asking questions, but did your company ever put out a newsletter, an employee newsletter or a stock holder newsletter, or . . . ?

DF: Yes, we had a news letters from time to time.

BH: Is there, is there a file of those newsletters?

DF: I'm not sure. I would have to check with my secretary. I've had the same secretary for fifty-two years.

BH: I was thinking about posterity that is something that could be added.

DF: I'd have to check and see.

BH: And did you know of any other of these businesses that may've had such periodic publications about business?

DF: No. Not really.

BH: Did any of the companies here, yours included, advertise in the local medium, such as newspapers? Did you ever take out newspaper ads, advertisements?

DF: No. We would work with the dealers in buying ads and things. But, we bought in national magazines like House Beautiful and that sort of thing, we would put in ads of our furniture there and hope they would go to the dealer and ask for our furniture when they bought it, our product.

BH: Do you have a file of those kind of advertisements?

DF: Yes, I probably do.

BH: And would other companies do the same, advertise in national magazines?

DF: Some did, but not very many others did.

BH: What would you say as far as national recognition or reputation would Flanders Manufacturing have held?

DF: Well, at one time we were considered the largest home desk manufacturer, not commercial desks but home desks.

BH: You had talked about the attention to detail you made on the finish on those desks. What area of the plant . . . uh, was that a . . . did you have that sealed against dust or from the other woodworking activities? Seemed like that . . .

DF: Well, the room, yes. The finishing has to be. And humidity controlled, too.

BH: So, that was the last step, specially set up. So, when you begin to designed this and perfect your finish, you, uh, made an investment in that kind of facility.

DF: OH, yeah. That room was cut off from the rest of the plant. We couldn't afford to have any dust in there and we had filtering fans that filtered the air that went in the finishing room.

BH: So, your employees were pretty specialized at times? Uh, if they worked in that area, they usually didn't cross over into the other part of the plant?

DF: No. That's right. As a matter of fact, we had to make up air units in the finishing room with fans on the roof that would pump more air into the finishing rooms than the spray booths were taking out in the spraying operation to create a positive pressure in that to take it out.

JO: I've got a question, sir. Did you have one of those operations where you had the filter fans behind where the sprayers were? It was like up on wall and it was sucking the spray, the excess was going . . .

DF: Yes, we did.

JO: Well, you was talking about the positive pressure coming in from up on top is pushing this stuff back towards this little . . . your man's standing on one side and he's spraying as this thing comes down the conveyor and its being drawn back. Everything is excess . . .

DF: In the back of the spray booth, they had a wall of water that would filter finishing material in that water and the water captured the material and carry it off so it wouldn't be taken out by the fans and go outdoors.

JO: I didn't know that part. I just thought it was vented out the filters

BH: So, you did use a conveyor belt for

DF: Oh, yeah!

BH: I was thinking about tanks.

JO: Lots of them were overhead chain, weren't they chain driven hanging . . .

DF: Well, some. Ours was a floor driven conveyor.

BH: Were you powered, was that powered by electricity?

DF: Oh, yeah.

BH: What other power did you have in the plant?

DF: Gas.

BH: Natural gas.

DF: [cellphone ring] You're being paged.

BH: And we didn't get to [clock chimes sound]. If we could take another five minutes and you could tell us about your gift to the college and the Flanders Building there. How that all came about? [Pause here] Uh, is that a good story? Would you like to record that on this or, uh, had you rather not?

DF: Well, I had too much recognition for that probably. Uh, [pause] It's all right, we could . . .

BH: Maybe we could just stand here. Is it a long story? Is it take a while?

DF: No.

BH: It's a [hesitates] I'm sure that at the college, they would like it if we included this portion of it.

DF: Okay. Uh, I've been very active in Westark and UA Fort Smith since it was . . . Since I've been here. Actually it was founded before I got to Fort Smith. I moved here in 1950. But, I've always felt it was such an important thing to have education beyond the high school level available for people, for an affordable cost. I've always felt that one thing that's held Arkansas back down through the years has been the level of education of its work force. And the more people who have a college experience, the better our productivity is going to be. So, I've been on . . . I'm the oldest surviving member of the Foundation for the college. We started, I think, in '72, 1972. Back in Joel Stubblefield's reign it came time to have a fund drive in which to raise enough money to assure scholarships for those who wanted to attend college and couldn't otherwise attend. They were trying to raise three million dollars, I think as I remember. So, they scheduled everybody in town that they thought could make a gift and they called on them. And they had a suggested amount. They came, they had a card for me and they came out and visited with me. Butch Walker with the gas company and Jim Alexander and Franklin Hawkins, I think,

were the three that called on me. They came in and they said, "Don, I know you're interested in this and we've got you down for X number of dollars given." I said, well you'll never raise three million dollars if you are asking for gifts at that level because the people in Fort Smith are used to the college being supported by the county and they're not used to giving at substantial levels to the college. I said I'll make a pledge that's ten times what you ask for, hoping that would challenge some other people at their level of giving that if Don can do so and so, I can at least do as much as he did. I think it helped the college raise eight million. So, lo and behold a year or two or three later, Joel called me and said they were having a big thing and they were going to name the business school for me. So [chuckles] that's how it happened.

BH: Wow! Most appropriately and that's a great portrait that's still there - we had the one hardwood tree meeting there. Well, thank you for sharing that with us and all of your memoirs about the furniture industry and the city.

DF: Well, I'm proud of the college! And what it does and it's doing just what we hoped it should and could do.

BH: It has raised the level of everything around here.

DF: I often wish we could measure the level of education that has occurred in the county with Westark and the University above the high school, but it hadn't been done.

BH: No, but it could be and no doubt it will be. Keep up with those suggestions and the ideas that you have! They've been proven to be pure gold. Well, thank you very much.

DF: Thank you. Enjoyed it.

BH: I appreciate it very much and if, uh, when we get all this . . .

[End of Don Flanders Interview of December 21, 2009 by Billy Higgins and Joe Oleson]