



**PEBLEY CENTER**  
**Oral History Program**



**Interview with Hugh Hammersley by Billy Higgins 08/23/2011**

Billy Higgins: Well by way of introduction, I'm Billy Higgins, the speaker here. It is August the 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2011, a Tuesday. We're at the home of Mr. Hugh Hammersley in Fort Smith, Arkansas about to do a digital interview with Mr. Hammersley regarding his career and experiences with the furniture industry in Fort Smith. Mr. Hammersley, do you mind giving us your full name and nickname and when you became active in the furniture industry?

Hugh Hammersley: I'm Hugh Hammersley; I got in the furniture business after WWII after I got out of the service. It was pretty hectic.

BH: Yes, so you returned to Fort Smith in the middle forties and that's exactly where you went to work then?

HH: Let's see, I left the service in '45, came home and I telephoned a few friends. One of 'em happened to be Jimmy Henson and I found out from his wife that he was someplace on South 6<sup>th</sup> Street making furniture. So I went. She gave me the address and I went there and Jim was making sofa sleepers. He would buy the parts, the wood frames, and he was by himself assembling the wood frames. And then he had one upholsterer who would upholster a studio bed or studio couch, as we called it. And I would visit with him quite a bit maybe a next day or two go back and I saw he needed a little help and I'd get a hammer or staple gun or something and help out. The next thing I knew I was in the furniture business. In those days you didn't have to sell anything you just let a furniture store know you had something to sell. That's the way I experienced my first furniture manufacturing. I left later on and started my own company, and we, Southland Furniture, we were incorporated under that name. That...

BH: Where was that located sir, your building?

HH: On Wheeler Avenue, a three story building on Wheeler Avenue. Not an ideal situation but then you couldn't find any buildings or anything. One night it caught fire. We had the largest fire Fort Smith had had in over thirty years. It was all on one floor when it finished.

Bob Worley: What year was that?

HH: Now actually that was not at Southland Furniture.

Lisa Hammersley: That fire was in 1952.

HH: Yeah, yeah. It was after that that I went in on Southland Furniture. I decided to get away. We were inadequately insured and everything else and I went on Southland Furniture.

BH: Did you invent the name of the company and what went into that?

HH: Well tried to call it Southland and found out that Southland was already gone because of Southland Oil. We couldn't incorporate under just Southland so I went as Southland Furniture yes, yes. I was responsible for that.

BH: And your first product then at Southland, your main...

HH: Well we just went into upholstered furniture and we got a designer by the name of Morrie Fisher and he designed some pieces. I'm sure he copied them from somebody else but anyway that's how we started just with his designs. We did fairly well you know for after a war and all there'd been such a shortage. We then, let's see, had a building on Towson Avenue. It was a rock building, a big rock building, it's still there. Then we needed more space and I went down to First National Bank and talked to them about a building out on North 32<sup>nd</sup> Street. That gave us more room and the bank furnished the money to purchase the building. Don Flanders was up the street on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street there.

One day Don called me and said he had a problem with his finishing room about air, couldn't seem to get enough air pressure. He had the compressor set some distance from his finishing room. I went up there and looked at it and he did, he had a big compressor; he had a line and all except it was not adequate. It was too small and I said Don you got a distribution problem not a pressure problem. Your just using air faster than it'd come through that half inch line. He put in another line and he didn't have any more trouble. Don will remember that. So we stayed on North 32<sup>nd</sup> I believe five years. '58, yes, when we moved. We moved, had a chance to buy a building out by the airport. I forget now who was in that building. Oh yes, Jack Rose and Doctor - know him so well, he died long ago, but I can't recall his name. Anyway, they got Jack Rose interested and they were making furniture out there and it was not successful at all so that's why the building was empty. We wound up buying the building and the First National Bank was kind again and we bought the building. So we were there from 1958 until 1971.

BH: Was this the peak of Southland Furniture in that building?

HH: Oh, yes.

BH: Your work force, can you explain where your workers came from and how many you had?

HH: We built up to 35 or 40 people there. We had things going pretty well and Arkansas Best they were acquiring some smaller places and they made us an offer, H. L. Hembree. H. L. Hembree and I had two or three fuss fights. I know after one of them one day, the next morning at my home a truck came in and the most beautiful table, coffee table, arrived from H. L. and so to me that meant the he was wrong, but anyway we did not

become affiliated and I'm sure glad we didn't. Don Flanders did, his company went in. Riley Coffee with Acme Spring Bed, they acquired him so we found a chance, after five years there we needed more space. The trailer factory out at Pocola, big, big area, the little towns were trying to attract industry and they built this thing. I won't mention any names here but anyway they never made a payment but they moved in and started making these mobile homes, big ones and the city of Pocola got a little unhappy and they were banking down at Heavener and anyway I made contact somehow, I've forgotten now but they were anxious to get the trailer manufacturer out of there. They looked at our statement, and checked on us and we bought that. That was pretty heavy indebtedness for me in those days, but we moved in. Made virtually the same furniture we had been making. In the meantime, Tom Condron with Ayres had contacted us and Ayres was not making any upholstered goods other than platform rockers and chairs. Fort Smith Chair Company is what it was then before it became Ayres. Tom Condron contacted us and wanted to know if we'd like to be in Fort Smith Furniture Manufacturers Association and they had a big showroom down at 9<sup>th</sup> and B.

I think Overhead Door Company is in there now. Of course we were eager to do that because it gave us a sales force. The salesmen could not sell for anyone else so that was a big boost. John Ayres was the head man there then and we got along fine and everything worked well. That went on until the furniture market became fairly saturated; competition was building. So we needed to do something else and we turned somehow, I don't remember just how, we started courting nursing homes. We knew nursing homes were going to furniture stores and buying. The . . . well it gave us an opportunity to make what they wanted not what they had to pick out in furniture stores.

BH: What was it that they did want that you could make?

HH: They wanted real uncomfortable furniture. (Laughs) Real uncomfortable, I mean they wanted it high off the floor so people could get out of their chairs and it was a success for us. That really exploded, we were the first ones to start doing that and our sales manager, John Sullivan, he was pushing it, of course I was pushing it.

BH: It was custom.

HH: That's right. That's right. Oh we shipped that all over the country. Then I had a fellow come in, a Vietnamese man from, he was working at the big steel mill in Blytheville, Arkansas. He was interested in furniture, little guy, very well educated, and he was wanting to get involved in furniture. And I thought this sounds sort of odd. Why is he leaving this big steel mill? So I got on the phone, I talked to the president of the steel mill over there and he says "Oh! You're not going to take Anthony away from me are you?" They were hiring lots of Vietnamese over there and he was Vietnamese and he was able to get people for them. But anyway he decided to leave the steel mill and I hired him. We were having trouble keeping up in our mill work and everything for our nursing homes. So Anthony told me what he could do in Vietnam. If we'd send him a sample they'd make the frame, the wood frame, rubberwood - rubberwood is a hardwood - and then ship them in containers to us. There was one bad thing about that was that customs was - not really customs - what it cost to get it in.

BW: Duty.

HH: Duty!

BH: Duties and tariffs.

HH: Couldn't say duty to save my life. That was a problem. No one else was doing that from Vietnam. So, there again, my Vietnamese boy Anthony has an answer. He said I've got a friend that lives in Canada. We can make this perfectly legal by shipping from Vietnam; send it to Canada, my friend there will send it to him of course, bill of lading and all to him and then he would put it on those containers, put them on a train and send it down to L. A. Perfectly legal, everything was all right. And we knew that Congress was trying to ease those duties at that time and we knew it was going to happen but still this was a legal way to do it. Those containers would go on freight cars out of L.A to Fort Smith, Arkansas, still far cheaper than we could produce it here.

BW: Wow!

HH: We were the first ones doing that.

BH: That was the chair frames?

HH: Yeah, just the frames. We assembled here. We had the mill to do it. But of course we bought no hardwoods of any kind then because the wood was coming in to us ready to assemble.

BH: There are two questions that really come to my mind. One, can you remember the year of that when you were making . . . ?

HH: Remember what?

BH: The year when you started building those in Vietnam?

HH: Let's see we...yes. '71-75 in there because we had acquired Pocola, the plant at Pocola at that time, that was about right.

BH: Was [Anthony] one of the relocation Vietnamese who came to Ft. Chaffee, Anthony?

HH: No he really was not. Now he helped a lot. His father, he was educated, I say educated in France.

BH: Unh huh.

HH: Because his father was a Vietnamese ambassador to France and they lived there. So as a little boy he went to school there. And then when the ambassador's job blew why up they moved back to this country. I still hear from Anthony, but he was totally honest, I would at first there, I'd go down to the bank and I'd get twenty or thirty thousand dollars in cash, put him on an airplane out here at the airport and send him to Vietnam; had no hold on him or anything else.

BW: Huh.

HH: And he would pay cash for a container at a time and then I got to mushrooming and we'd get several containers you know and that would take more money and I would send more money over there. I never told Sam Secord what I was doing. (Laughter) Put him with suitcases of cash but anyway that's the way we operated until Congress did repeal those duty laws and then we could bring 'em in direct.

BH: Mr. Hammersley, my other question about that, where would we find one of those chairs now made out of rubberwood?

HH: Oh I don't have any chairs here, of course. We got into, really left the upholstery business more or less, we got into the little night stands and things, all wood made to nursing home specifications.

BH: Uh huh.

HH: I have one or two of those right here in the house. One of them is back in our bathroom and the other one is upstairs. So they're in great shape and work good. They had good drawer slides on them and everything. That was a lucrative business for us.

BH: If you permit maybe we'd maybe like to take a photograph of one or both of them.

HH: Oh, yeah, no problem.

BH: And to go back to when you were making the upholstered furniture . . .

HH: Yeah.

BH: What were your materials? Were you using cloth or leather or burlap, what were you using to and where did you acquire those materials? I was curious.

HH: Well, we bought lots of fabric from North Carolina, from the mills in North Carolina. They're all practically defunct now. Leather, yes we got into leather. We were never very successful with it because we were back then we were buying hides and now they have machinery that will spilt those hides, so thin its pathetic. I have a leather sofa in my den here now that's over 30 years old and its cowhide. It'll be good 30 years from now. And the hardwood frame it's on and the springs will be good thirty years from now. But that's, course virtually everything was like I say . . . [well made of lasting materials]. We had daily shipments from North Carolina coming in by truck, and fabric, lots of fabric. I mean understand I'm talking about a small, a relatively small operation but we had, we got up to 140 employees at one time and that was at Pocola.

BH: That's a good size plant.

HH: Well not...

BH: You had to meet that payroll.

HH: Not compared to at Riverside.

BH: Yeah.

HH: Herman and I used to visit a lot. Herman was getting big, big national advertising and that sort of thing you know. We were good friends.

BH: And he always wore the bowtie?

HH: Oh, I never knew him without a bowtie.

BH: They weren't the clip-on's either were they? Did he tie them?

HH: I guess he did. I think he did. It looked like he did. He always wore the bowtie. Now Bob Worley here, didn't, we went to St. Louis didn't we? Flew up there?

BW: Yeah, you went up there to a hearing regarding...

HH: A hearing, yes.

BW: Regarding railroad rates on furniture.

HH: Yes, yes. Herman was with us on that. Sure enough he was wearing his bowtie and we were in Don Flanders' twin engine beach craft, yes. When was that?

BW: That was, that was about 1970 I think, around 1968 or '70.

HH: Probably so. Don Flanders was there, who else?

BW: John Ayres was there.

HH: Oh, John Ayres, yes, yes.

BW: And...I don't remember [who else]. You and Herman and John Ayres.

HH: Yeah, that airplane would only take six.

BW: Yeah.

HH: Plus the pilot and co-pilot; I think I rode co-pilot quite a bit on that trip.

BH: Because you could make the landing.

BW: That's right.

BH: Gwen said that you could land a Beechcraft Bonanza.

HH: Oh, my. In the Air Force I got over a thousand hours in four-engine B-24's and then they sent me to the factory at Fort Worth, Texas, to do test work on the new B-32 they were building. We were right at the factory there and the airport was right there.

BW: B-32, yeah.

HH: We did right up to the time the war ended. I was flying B-32's and I'd come up here to Fort Smith now and then which I was not supposed to do and circle around here. I'd go down to Little Rock and places like that.

BH: Where were you based then?

HH: Fort Worth.

BH: Fort Worth. What...?

HH: And we had those two thousand, two hundred horsepower engines [that were] were causing fires and we were not supposed to be over 50 miles from Fort Worth. You couldn't turn that thing good in 50 miles.

BH: Who was building that aircraft?

HH: The Consolidated engineers got with Boeing engineers and put together the B-29 and the B-30, the so-called successor to the B-29, which was the B-32. But the B-32 was not a real success, it had lots of problems. Finally they were just demolished after the war.

BH: Never went past the prototype stage, huh?

HH: I think they got one to, one or two or over two, oh...

BH: Korea?

HH: Korea yes, but they still were not successful. They had 2200 horsepower engines, four of them, that's eight thousand, eight hundred horsepower. The B-29 I believe had a supercharger on each engine. The B-32 had two superchargers on each engine. It was fast.

BH: So, in the skies over Fort Smith there has been a B-32?

HH: Absolutely. (Laughter) I went down to Little Rock one day and I didn't want to get too close. They had a tower down there, you know. In those days even Fort Smith did not have a tower. I tuned in the tower. I kept hearing them calling: "The unidentified aircraft south of Adams Field, please give us a call." I kept quiet and I'm circling around there. I knew they had binoculars on me and they'd keep calling. Finally there was not any traffic and I called them back and I told them my number. "What aircraft is this?" I told them this is the new B-32 out of Fort Worth, Texas. I thought then they'd start punching buttons. But anyway, one day I mean nothing happened, but one day I was up here circling and I was not suppose to be here and I wanted to go up around Chester, Mountainburg, in that area, you know. I'd buzzed the railroad track, three miles of track

there at Chester. One day up here my radio operator, course I was out of contact on my command transmitter, and my radio operator came at the flight deck and he said "Sir, Fort Worth is trying to contact us" and I said tell them were practicing instruments on the range out here. "Well, they want that airplane, it's due an inspection and they want it back on the ground." Forty-two minutes later I was sitting on the ground at Fort Worth, Texas. (Laughs)

BH: What was the cruise altitude? Could you go to 20,000?

HH: Oh, my goodness yes; Thirty thousand, no problem! With those two superchargers on each engine.

BH: Wow, that's quite a performance.

HH: Yeah. Oh, and it was fast. It'd get up and go.

BH: Three fifty knots?

HH: I've got all the specs on it here.

BH: Well I can probably look that up. I'm interested in the C-124. You remember that one?

HH: Oh yes. Boy that moved.

BH: That had the engines even bigger than this. Of course it was supposed to pick up a lot of weight.

HH: Yeah.

BH: Not supercharged though.

HH: No, no they weren't unh uh.

BH: You never did fly in one of those did you?

HH: No, no.

BW: He was a bomber guy.

BH: Yeah. But those multi-engines, those kind of pilots you know, they can go back and forth between those kind and it's all in the landing with that many engines going.

BW: Billy was in the Air Force and flew those.

HH: Oh, you were Air Force.

BH: Navigator.

HH: Navigator, yeah, oh yeah.

BH: Well, that's great and I'd like to talk more about those things too but back to . . . if we can, if you could talk about the latter years of the furniture industry and including this picture and your arrangements for the transportation of furniture out of Fort Smith and what happened to the furniture industry in Fort Smith.

HH: Well, of course [this] happened in North Carolina too. Fort Smith at one time was the largest furniture manufacturing let's see, yes, they were the largest in the Southwest at one time. I don't know really what happened unless it was imports that finally closed out Fort Smith I guess, I'm not sure. You want to talk about hardwoods. I bought truckloads of pecan. Pecan is real hard, works well. Of course, we used lots of oak. The pecan had to come out of Louisiana, I believe, for any quantity. Then, we got out oak in the immediate area here and bought a few carloads. Railcars were great but they did not have loading access for many of the [local] mills. That was basically what we used, oak and pecan.

BH: You had rail service over at Pocola at the plant there?

HH: Oh yes, great rail service, yes, and great truck service. Large overhead doors, it was a nice plant. It's still there.

BW: Did he sell it or did he close it, what?

BH: Yes, the building is still there but what about Southland Furniture Company?

HH: Oh Southland Furniture? Let's see Don Flanders bought me out in the 1970's. Oh, . . . how long have I been retired?

LH: I think you were 75 when you retired so that would be . . . .

HH: 1975 or 7196.

LH: Yeah it's been 16 or 17 years.

HH: Don bought the, not Don...

LH: Mom, what's the name of the guy that bought Southland?

Gwen Hammersley: That'd be Dude Crane.

HH: Dude Crane, yeah. Dude and I were good friends, yeah. He, you know, got into the foam rubber business and we bought lots of foam rubber from him. Dude Crane, I knew him as a little boy when his father would bring him up from Little Rock. They lived in Little Rock then, Homer, Homer Crane.

BH: Yeah, yeah.

HH: Dude was just a little kid, boy he's just a scooting around you know, like he was a going thing. Then, they moved to Fort Smith.

BH: Did he continue to operate it as Southland Manufacturing or Southland Furniture or did he consolidate it?

HH: He continued to operate it. It didn't really just . . . went out of manufacturing in a hurry, within two years. They weren't just going ahead with the import program.

BH: I see.

HH: Then that fell by the wayside. Then the building is sitting over here on Kelley Highway, now in just disrepair and I don't know if it'd be fit for anything anymore. I guess it would be if it was fixed up. I have no idea what Dude's plans are for it. I guess he'd like to sell it.

BH: Well Mr. Hammersley...

HH: I have a nickname, Blackie. I'm sorry.

BH: (Laughs) I didn't know I was in that circle. I knew that my colleague here was.

HH: Well, you're more than in that circle.

BH: But we won't just completely exhaust you today. We've taken interviews of Randy Cutting and Preston Swafford and Don Flanders and Dick Udouj and yours is very...

BW: Bill Kropp.

BH: And Bill Kropp. And others are planned but in trying to preserve the history through these oral interviews of the furniture industry...

HH: Oh yes.

BH: In Fort Smith...

HH: I know Dick Udouj.

BH: We're very appreciative of Dick Udouj.

HH: Dick's a fine fella. I've always liked him. Of course, he's much younger.

BH: He's, he's on our board of directors and we get exposed to him about every month. He's quite full of energy still.

HH: Yeah he's really a nice fella, Dick is. Randy Cutting is . . . I knew Randy well yes. He had Rim and Bow out here.

BH: Unh huh.

HH: Who else?

BH: Oh, we interviewed Gene Rapley.

HH: Oh yeah, Gene Rapley.

BH: And we've got Okla Ben Smith on our list and a guy by the name of Jim Ray who worked for the Smith's over there as their superintendent.

HH: I did not know him.

BH: Did you have a superintendent who is with you for a lot of years that you would like to mention? Any of those guys whose names you might remember?

HH: There's not a superintendent per se. I was general manager and president of Southland. Don Fletcher operated the woodworking in the mill and Brown Sullivan handled the upholstery, but we didn't have a superintendent per se other than myself and I was not a very good one. But that's the way we operated.

LH Dad, excuse me . . . sorry. You think maybe they should talk to Bruce Fletcher? Bruce is ill but . . .

HH: Yeah but he was never in a managerial . . .

LH: No, he wasn't.

HH: . . . capacity. I hired Bruce yes, and I still have contact with him and he was here just a few weeks ago. He came by, we visited a little. He handled the office and we planned our trucks. See we had our own trucks to deliver our furniture.

BH: Oh.

HH: He planned. He took that job over for me as we expanded and put the trucks together to get 'em shipped out.

BH: Did your label include Fort Smith's name on it? Did you, Southland?

HH: No, it did not, just Southland. In fact, I've got some labels around.

BH: Things like that as well as those tables and any photographs, we would appreciate at some point scanning or copying those for the museum once it . . .

HH: I have numerous pictures of when we'd have meetings and the salesmen would all come in to the Fort Smith Furniture Manufacturers Association, which as I said before was down on Ninth and B.

BH: We're most appreciative of your time and memories.

HH: I don't see how it could, my input be of any help because I was really one of the smaller ones compared to Ballman-Cummings and Fort Smith Chair and all that. They were all nice to me.

BH: It took 'em all to make up an industry I know.

BW: That was such a great market with the nursing homes.

HH: Oh, that was wonderful.

BW: And what caused that to cease, was it the imports?

HH: Yes, that was a big help. Yeah, any upholstered stuff that went on these imports, of course we did that and as I said before we had several of the hardwood frames. But it was a good business and I never got rich at it but it was a good business, pretty free of worries.

BW: Right.

LH: What...excuse me, sorry. I was just gonna ask what he was wondering what happened that the nursing home business, furniture business seem to kind of petered out apparently?

HH: Oh, I think everyone got into imports. We were the first ones to be in imports.

BW: Right.

HH: And I don't know that I should be proud of that but it was going that way and I could see it was going that way.

BW: It was inevitable wasn't it?

HH: Oh yeah.