



University of Arkansas Fort Smith Oral History Program



Interviewee: Don Flanders
Date of Interview: December 14, 2009
(1st 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

BH: I am here today with Mr. Don Hargis Flanders in his office on Wheeler Ave. I'm Billy Higgins from the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith, and also from the Hardwood Tree Museum Association, and Mr. Flanders has graciously agreed to an interview today on his life and experiences in the furniture industry.

BH: Mr. Flanders can you talk about your early introduction to wood working and how that was involved with your father?

DF: Yes, I'd be glad to. My father sold wood working machinery, and it was heavy machinery like molders and planers and that sort of thing. His territory covered Arkansas, southern Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas and Louisiana. He lived in Little Rock, and I lived in Little Rock; I grew up there. I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, and dad at that time was superintendent of Nicky Brothers Company in Memphis. And then he decided to go on the road; in order to go on the road he had to move into his territory and so they moved into Little Rock after I was born.

BH: What was the name of that company?

DF: He was with Yates American, and later it was S. A. Woods - the company that he represented. As I was growing up, I would do anything to drive the automobile out of the driveway or in the garage or whatever. But he let me go with him on his travels and got to stay in hotels and got to meet the various people around that he called on. That was my summer time experience, and so I learned to drive with him.

BH: Do you remember about the year of that summer?

DF: It would have been—I was born in '24, so this would have been about '36. I graduated high school in '41, so it'd be somewhere from '36 and '41. And then we went out several summers, eating in cafes and everything, it was a real treat for me

too. But we called on mills that handled timber, and planing mills. Then he also called on the furniture trade, and that brought him to Fort Smith and brought me to Fort Smith several times with him. So, I had an agreement, I could go in with him while he talked to the man in the plant, but I had to keep my mouth shut and not say a single word unless I was addressed too, and then always speak up and say Sir. I got to know him, and know various people at the furniture plant. I went to Baylor to college. And, went in the Navy, the Navy set me to TCU for the V-12 program, which was a pre-midshipman program. Then they sent me to—

BH: That was the—excuse me sir, that was - what kind of program?

DF: V-12, pre-midshipman, a naval officer program and I had taken exams with the Navy to qualify for that, so I was at TCU for one semester. That's where I met my wife, as a matter of fact. She was a freshman, and by that time I was a first term senior. But, we went from there to Asbury Park, New Jersey, for six weeks for pre-midshipman school and then into Columbia University in New York where I went to midshipman school there. That was a tough grind, but we made it. The funny thing when we first went into Columbia we sat in a room, they had a four-stripe Captain who was head of the college. He looked out over and said I want each of you to look your left, and look to your right. I want to advise you that one of the three of you will not be here to graduate, and if you don't graduate you will go to boot-camp and you will become an enlisted man. So we gulped and went to it. But I did quite well; as a matter of fact I had been in the band. I had grown up playing the coronet and the trumpet and the bugle. As an aside, from when I was nine or ten years old, I was in *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*.

BH: Oh, really.

DF: For playing two bugles at the same time.

BH: (Laughs)

DF: Later I played two coronets at the same time, and I won a national contest, a solo contest, and got a scholarship to Baylor. I went to Baylor on my musical scholarship. I really wanted to be a musician. My dad asked me what I wanted to do and I told him that I wanted to be a musician. I wanted to play with Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians.

BH: Yes.

DF: And he said before you could ever get there you would be playing every road house on the edge of town. And you'd have dope, drinking, and all that. He said you don't really want to do that? So I changed my major at Baylor to business. And he said go to Baylor for two years and then if I can afford it I'll send you to Wharton, University of Pennsylvania, for graduate school and you can get an MBA up there.

BH: Mmmmm.

DF: Then he wrote me and said that John L. McClellan, who—my father was a good friend of his, they had known each other in Malvern, Arkansas, before McClellan went into the Senate.

BH: I'm not sure we got your father's complete name.

DF: Henry Jackson Flanders.

BH: OK. He was a friend of McClellan's?

DF: Yes, and he wrote me and told me that the Senator had called him and said that if I wanted to go to Annapolis he'd give me an appointment. I'd have to pass a test and that sort of thing, but he was sure that I could do that and so I wrestled with that for awhile. My father only had a second or third grade education. He had to quit and run the farm after his father got ill, but he educated himself. He used good grammar, he was great at math and he could do math in his head better than I could. He was a smart man, but he didn't have any college education. Or any high school either, for that matter. We sat down to talk about going to Annapolis and I was real flattered. It was real flattering to get the appointment.

BH: Sure.

DF: He said, now Don what do you want to do when you graduate? I said well I don't know. I want to go into business. He said, you don't want to be an engineer? I said no, not really, math's not my strongest suit either for that matter. And he said well, if you don't want to be an engineer you don't have any business going to Annapolis. He said, now you'll get a commission and the war will come on, but you'll come out as an engineer. So, if you want to be in a business you better go ahead and get yourself a regular BA degree, and that was good advice.

BH: It was.

DF: And so I turned it down.

BH: He knew how things worked, didn't he.

DF: And he said, now if the war comes on. He says, I think they're going to have a war; you'll get a commission if you're in college anyhow, probably. As it turned out that's the way it worked out, I was a senior at-- I started college in September 1941, and of course December 7, 1941 Pearl Harbor was attacked.

BH: You had graduated from high school in—

DF: I had graduated from high school when I was barely seventeen.

BH: Which high school was that?

DF: Little Rock High School.

BH: Little Rock Central, huh?

DF: Finest school in the country I believe.

BH: That was a brand new building in—

DF: It was beautiful, just beautiful. I had courses in Little Rock High School and my first year at Baylor was a breeze. My friends there were just struggling and having all fits trying to make their grades and everything, and I'd already had it. So, I was well prepared to go to Baylor. The second year I had to go to work. Anyhow, I took the exam for the V-12 program and got my commission at Columbia and went aboard ship, a destroyer escort in Portland, Maine. We made the convoy duty between Portland, Maine, and Londonderry, Northern Ireland. The seas were taller than the masts and we were never able to eat in the ward room on the table; you couldn't sit down. We ate sitting down on the deck with our feet on the bulkhead on the other side; they'd pass food up to us and we'd eat setting on the deck. We had to wear masks with button up things over our mouths.

- More from the Don Flanders interview will be posted on this site -