

Film on Hooker Furniture plant closure premieres

Workers pay tribute to former CEO Clyde Hooker Jr.

Joan Gunin -- *Furniture Today*, November 19, 2008

MARTINSVILLE, Va. — A full house attended this week's premiere of the documentary film, "With These Hands: The Story of an American Furniture Factory," a portrayal of the causes and effects behind **Hooker Furniture's** shutdown of its last manufacturing plant here last year.

Some 150 former factory workers and their families in the Patrick Henry Community College theater watched themselves on screen, and once again endured the heartbreak of the March 2007 closing of the plant after 83 years of operation.

Matthew Barr, an associate professor of film production at the **University of North Carolina Greensboro**, produced the 90-minute documentary. He told the story of the factory through the words of 10 employees, and interviewed others to put the closing into historical and economic context.



Retired Hooker Furniture CEO Clyde Hooker Jr., left, and current company leader Paul Toms stand behind the brass whistle that Clyde Hooker blew as a 4-year-old to start the company's first day of operation in 1924. Hooker Furniture and its employees presented the restored whistle to Clyde Hooker at the premiere of a film documenting the closing of the company's last U.S. case goods plant.

After the screening, the evening closed poignantly with a presentation to retired CEO Clyde Hooker Jr., whose father founded Hooker Furniture. Former factory workers gathered together on stage in tribute and presented him with the original brass steam whistle used at the factory.

[Click here](#) to watch a video of the presentation.

As a young boy "just turned four years old" Hooker blew the whistle to start the plant's first day of operation in 1924. He later led the company through years of expansion.

The Martinsville plant produced case goods for Hooker until competition from imports led the company to source all of its wood furniture from overseas.

In portraying what the company meant to its many employees and how they were affected by the closing, "With These Hands" follows the last case pieces running through the production line. It shows state employment officials discussing future "options" with the plant's workers, whose faces convey their

bewilderment.

Through it all, the film shows that the workers' respect and devotion to the company and to their jobs did not falter.

At the end of the film, which ended with audible sniffles, the workers present in the audience, led by current CEO Paul Toms, presented the restored factory whistle - now set on a cherry wood base topped with an engraved plaque - to Clyde Hooker.

Hooker, 87 - visibly moved and not much for fussing - approached the podium, aided by a cane, and said he would like to make a speech, but that he was "too teary."

He said that today, he has a great grandson just about the age he was when he first blew that whistle.

A second screening for the public will be held here on Jan. 17. Information and directions are online at www.ph.vccs.edu.

Barr said his film has been accepted for next April's **RiverRun International Film Festival** in Winston-Salem, N.C., and will be submitted for a similar juried film event in Raleigh, N.C.

A trailer for the movie is available on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_qKYolUU_A.

"With These Hands" and other films by Matthew Barr also are featured on the Web site

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