

A new documentary tells the stories behind the implosion of the furniture industry. They built it ...

'WITH THESE HANDS'

Halfway through Matt Barr's film comes the awkward scribble.

*Good Bye All
This Tim and Dennis
Signs Out
Over And Out
Over And Under*

Who are Tim and Dennis? It doesn't matter. The grease board fades from view, William Stanley goes on about the "dead building" and you realize you feel like a bystander at a car



JERI ROWE

Barr, a UNCG professor, was there with

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crash.

You can't take your eyes off this wreck of yet another American factory.

It could be the story of any furniture factory in any furniture town. Except this one happened just up the road in Martinsville, Va., where a family-owned furniture company 83 years old died in March 2007.

WANT TO GO?

What: "With These Hands: The Story of An American Furniture Factory"

Where: Elliott University Center auditorium, UNCG

When: 8 p.m. Jan. 30

Admission: Free

Information: 334-3887

MORE ONLINE

Visit www.youtube.com to see an eight-minute trailer of "With These Hands." Just put "barr" and "with these hands" into the search field.

Matt Barr, who teaches filmmaking at UNCG, has worked on three documentaries on working people — carnival workers, fishermen and now furniture employees — because he believes their way of life needs to be preserved. He calls it "visual anthropology."

Courtesy of Matt Barr



Rowe

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his camera.

He calls his documentary about Hooker Furniture "With These Hands: The Story of An American Furniture Factory." You can catch it next week in Greensboro, and if you do, you'll think about Obama's America.

Barr's 76-minute film gives faces and names to this lofty challenge from our new leader to be "bold and swift," to extend opportunities to "every willing heart," to "dust ourselves off and begin remaking America."

We could start in Martinsville.

Hooker started in 1924 and became part of the "Sawdust Trail," the swath of furniture companies throughout the South — from Martinsville to Mississippi.

With the help of Hooker, Martinsville became a factory town. Locals worked at Hooker for years, even decades, because it offered a good wage for honorable work with a good company.

Hooker expanded its operations in 1970, first into Kernersville, and later into Pleasant Garden and Maiden. The company had nearly 2,000 employees, five plants and a fleet of trucks with "Easy Elegance. Since 1924" across their sides.

But Hooker couldn't compete with the flood of low-cost furniture imported from overseas, and by 2003, it started to close its factories — one by one.

By March 2007, after selling off everything from a 50-ton machine to a box of wrenches, Hooker was no more. The company now markets furniture made overseas and runs two upholstery furniture plants in the South.

Barr caught all that in a film that began by chance.

In April 2006, Barr was showing "Wild Caught," his documentary on Sneads Ferry, a fishing village on the North Carolina coast.

He spent seven years looking at the village's sense of community and how globalization, rising fuel costs and pricey real estate threatened its existence.

That night, after showing the film at UNCG, a furniture industry veteran named David

Williams introduced himself to Barr and mentioned something that had worried him for years.

"Someone needs to do that with the furniture industry," Williams told Barr. "It's dying and going away, and no one has done anything about it."

That's how it began. Williams introduced Barr to the folks at Hooker, and by early 2007, at least twice a week,



Williams

Barr found himself walking the floors, filming scenes and talking to workers about the life and death of a furniture factory. And wisdom.

"I've always said this from Day One," Donnie Mattox told Barr. "I know buy-

ing furniture and everything else over there is cheaper. If nobody over here ain't working, who are they going to sell it to?"

A real question for Obama's America.

"Our heroes are not Wall Street traders, but these people," Barr says, "these fisherman who brave a storm to get us our seafood or the furniture maker who takes pride in building a piece of furniture to give to our kids.

"The very foundation of our country are people like that."

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