



BOLING

—The Story of a Company and of a Family.

by John Harden



The cover of this brief company history shows the founder and first president of what became The Boling Co., and his grandson, who was president and chief executive officer in 1980 when the company was 75 years old.

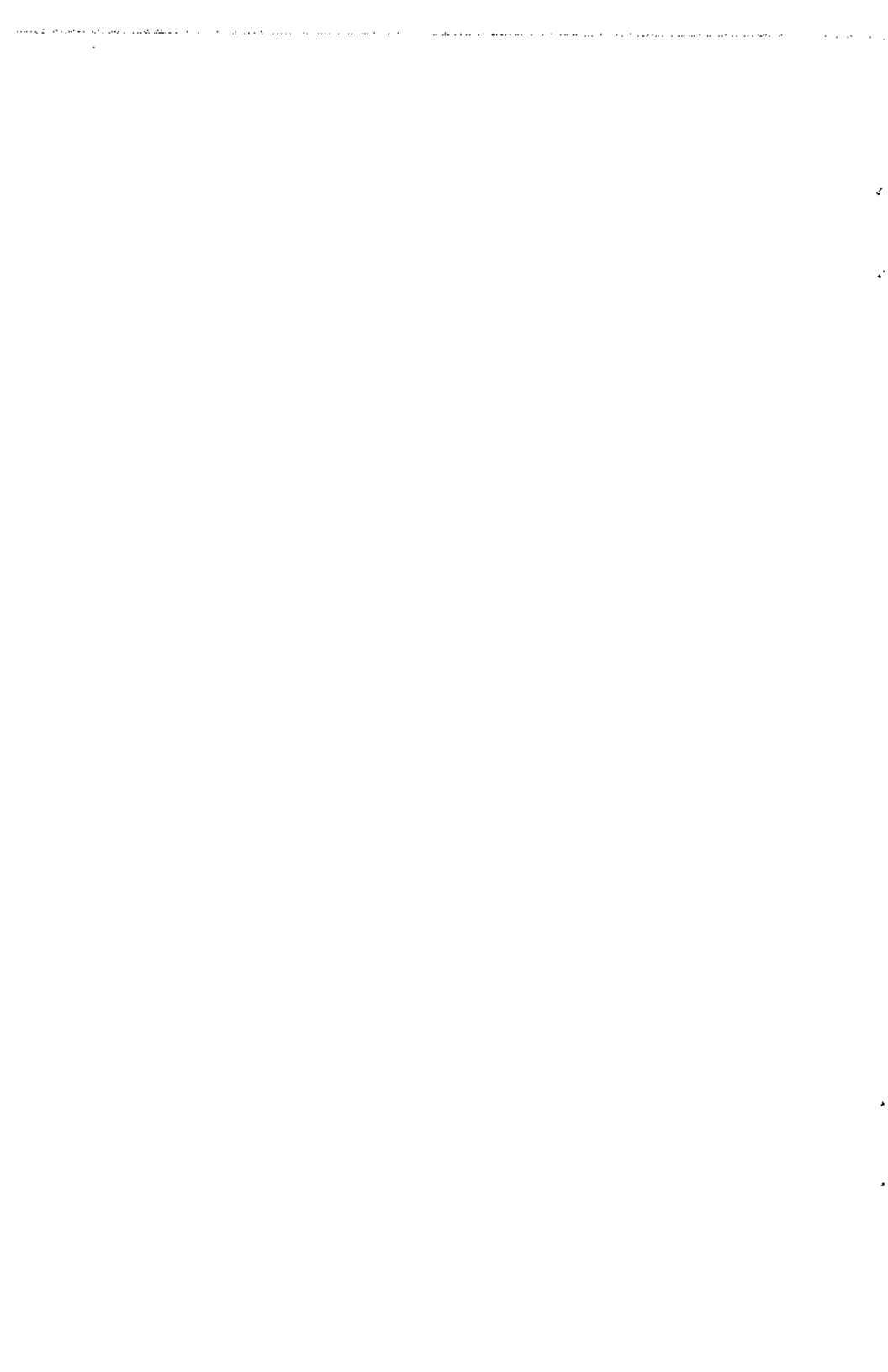
Capt. Malvola Jackson ("Mallie") Boling, on the left, is shown in a photograph made in the early 1900s, with his hand on the first Boling-made bentwood chair. In 1965 an oil portrait was made from this photograph, to hang in the reception area at Boling headquarters in Siler City.

F.J. (Jack) Boling, Jr., grandson of Captain "Mallie," in the modern color photograph on the right is shown with his hand on the special, limited edition, designer-signed anniversary chair that was created to highlight the fact that Boling had been "Makers of Fine Furniture Since 1904."

For 75 years the name Boling has meant character and leadership in North Carolina, and fine wood furniture across America and around the world.

Capt. "Mallie" Boling, the original begetter of it all, would have been pleased and proud at the harvest brought forth from seeds he planted as early as 1904.

*With the coming of 1980 Boling moved into the final quarter of a century of operation, involving a fourth generation of the founding family. The prospects are bright for continued creativity of performance and excellence of product. It seemed a proper time to stop for an interval, look back, and record something of *The Boling Story*. That's what this does.*



Introduction

America's 1,200-odd furniture manufacturing companies, spread among 5,000 plants located mostly in the South, include a generous number of family-run operations. One such firm, based near the center of the state of North Carolina at Siler City, in Chatham County, is typical of the family-oriented ventures, and at the same time unusually different.

This company is The Boling Co., which had the rare experience of celebrating a 75th anniversary in 1979. Three quarters of a century of operation is rare because family furniture manufacturing enterprises have often become tree-ripe plums for plucking by entrepreneurs and conglomerates by the time second and third generations are in charge. Resistance to technological change and modernization; the always unexpected ups and downs of the business world; and inefficient operational practices have plagued family-controlled businesses—unless professional management was brought aboard.

One of the most unusual parts of the Boling Story is that this family-oriented industry raised and trained its *own* professional management against the day when the importation of new or more modern "pros" to take the helm might have been in order. So it is, and has been, at Boling—even to the fourth generation.

A saga of always having in-family as well as in-house leaders at hand with each subsequent decade—together with the business romance of talented and dedicated men continually joining force, adding business genius and a high level of creativity—is indeed the story line at Boling.



It all began in 1904. On January 9 of that year High Point Bending and Chair Company was chartered by the State of North Carolina to operate in Siler City. The new company's name came from the heavy investment of moneys from High Point, where a southern furniture industry was then birthing.

The founder and begetter was Capt. Malvola Jackson Boling, who acquired the title of "Captain" from the fact that he had served as a railroad steam locomotive engineer. In that day anyone who rose to the point of responsibility and esteem that permitted him to control the throttle of a locomotive was automatically a captain.

Captain Boling left his railroad post around the turn of the century and from his residential base in the Chatham County village of Bonsal had been a miller, a brick manufacturer, and had built the first rural telephone system in Chatham County, at Bonsal. By 1904, looking for new worlds to conquer, he turned to Siler City where a fledgling wood bending operation had started three years before, and floundered. He was an investor in the enterprise and accepted the challenge of reviving it.

So actually what became The Boling Co. had its real beginnings in 1901 with the Siler City Bending Company, which Captain Boling reorganized and chartered as High Point Bending and Chair in 1904. Siler City Bending Company specialized in the manufacture of parts for horse-drawn vehicles, including the shaping of bowed shafts between which the horses worked; curved mud guards that covered carriage wheels and protected passengers; brake blocks; and buggy bows, the curved ribs that supported tops for buggies and carriages. Bows for early automobile tops (of fabric) were added later.

The earlier firm faltered "due to unavoidable circumstances," as one company historian put it. Captain Boling—known to family and a wide circle of friends as "Mallie" Boling—was assisted in the 1904 reorganization and launching of a new company by S.H. Tomlinson, who served as the company's first president; J. Wade Siler, secretary; W.F. Brown, treasurer; A.S. Caldwell; and C.P. Halleck. The corporation's charter permitted it "to cut, saw, bend and sell and deal in chair stock, chair timber and bent material of any kind

whatsoever." The original charter also indicated the firm would manufacture chairs "in the white," meaning of unfinished wood.

Other early products were wooden steering wheels for Model-T Fords and "goose neck" bends that served as components for chairs and swings.

W. P. Brown of Cleveland, Ohio, knowledgeable in working with wood, came to Siler City to supervise technical operation of the reorganized plant. Tomlinson had furniture manufacturing interests in High Point and his participation helped to put "High Point" in the original name of the firm. As a matter of fact the first principle office of the corporation was designed as being "on Railroad Street in High Point," although the plant and production facilities have always been at Siler City.

The furniture industry was marked from its beginning by predatory competition and sometimes confused methods of sales and distribution. Mallie Boling met these circumstances early on by specializing in quality and durability, and maintaining close personal relationships with his employees, his suppliers, and his customers. Those who succeeded him have maintained the same emphasis. This kept alive what *Fortune* magazine bemeaningly described in a 1967 article as an "earnest amateurism" pervading the southern furniture industry.

What *Fortune* was talking about could have been more accurately described as a continuing "earnest endeavor"—to do a good job, please customers, inspire loyalty from those on the payroll, and provide constant improvement in design and production. This mode of operation has also been described as "the American free enterprise system." It is the history of Boling that the company exemplifies just that—free enterprise.

Mallie Boling moved his residence from Bonsal to Siler City in February of 1907. In December of that year the plant was completely destroyed by fire. Rebuilding was started immediately, and by the following year the first complete bentwood chair was produced in the new building. Until this time production had been in bentwood parts, sold to chair companies as components for the chairs they assembled. This was the first complete bentwood chair manufactured in the south and for more than a quarter of a century the Siler

City company remained the only southern manufacturer of bentwood chairs, an item of furniture that served many generations with low-cost and general utility all-purpose seating. Peak capacity production in those early times was 50 chairs a day, in contrast to the hundreds of much more intricate chairs that came off the line each working day by 1980.

Captain Boling died June 8, 1918, and management passed to C. B. Thomas, another Chatham County native who had become associated with the business. Thomas was elected president in 1921 and that same year the company started making fiber furniture (also known as wicker or rattan) which was extremely popular for several years.

Meanwhile World War I had developed and Floyd J. Boling, Captain Boling's oldest son, was in uniform in Europe. At war's end the son returned to finish his education at Trinity College (now Duke University). He graduated in 1923, and that same year opened a manufacturing-sales-warehousing branch of the company in Atlanta, just ahead of the "big depression" of that day. By 1930 business was in such a state that the Atlanta branch was closed and High Point Bending and Chair consolidated everything back at Siler City, with F.J. Boling assuming management of both manufacturing and sales. In January, 1931, he was elected president of the company his father successfully launched and served as chief executive officer until his death December 2, 1965.

By 1926 the company had developed a special line of office chairs that included solid wood seats. These were sold in combination with desks being made by two High Point manufacturers. In fact Boling issued a joint catalog with Myrtle Desk Company and Alma Desk Company, containing the complete lines of all three companies. There were no financial or other connections between Boling and the desk companies, other than a joint sales arrangement. The three companies also shipped together, combining deliveries in pooled railroad cars when this was an economy.

Standard School Equipment Company, a Louisville, Ky., manufacturer and jobber of school equipment, was purchased in December of 1928 and Standard's president, W.O. Jones, moved to Siler City in 1929. In January, 1931, the companies were consolidated,

with school, church, and institutional sales continuing under the Standard name.

In 1939 the owners of High Point Bending and Chair purchased the B. J. Gregson Manufacturing Company in Liberty, N.C., another chair manufacturer, to provide needed additional production in school chairs. The Liberty plant was renamed Stout Chair Company for Hernay Elton Stout, secretary of High Point Bending and Chair Company, and expanded into lines of special purpose seating.

In 1956 the corporate name of the firm was changed from High Point Bending and Chair Company to Boling Chair Company in recognition of the national impact of Boling's lines of chairs for offices, homes and institutions.

With increasing raw material requirements and a more intensive search for Appalachian hardwoods, F.J. Boling and H.E. Stout developed a dimension lumber plant at Azalea, N.C., in 1951, to provide dimension cuts from high quality mountain-grown trees. Azalea is a small community near Asheville. For a number of years this operation supplied much of the stock used in the Siler City manufacturing operation. Instead of hauling rough lumber to the chair plant, it was cut to dimension at Azalea, eliminating much of the saw waste where the lumber was first processed.

A new three-story plant addition was built at Siler City in 1960, and a new office building was completed in 1964.

An in-depth national survey of the wood office furniture market in 1967 convinced the company there was need for another good manufacturing source for wood office desks and office and library bookcases. With this information Boling decided to halt the joint selling arrangement it had with other desk companies and build its own desk, table and bookcase plant. Mount Olive, N.C., was chosen as the desk plant location; a 40-acre site was purchased; and a 168,000 square foot building was erected. First shipments were made from the new plant on November 11, 1968, and in 1978 a 35,000 square foot warehouse was added to the initial plant.

In its 75th year Boling had approximately 500 employees, 442,000 square feet of operating space, and was widely recognized as one of the major wood furniture manufacturers in the United

States. The officer-management team continued to be made up largely of members of the company's founding family: President F.J. (Jack) Boling, Jr., grandson of founder Mallie Boling; Vice President J.K. (Jim) Boling, Sr., son of the founder; Treasurer K.G. Clapp, married to the founder's only daughter, Grace; Vice President Production Byron S. Clapp, brother of the company treasurer; and Secretary Ben S. Foust. The company has 20 shareholders, 18 of which are members of the Boling family.

This is a quick factual rundown of the first 75 years of the Boling story. Company history, like all history, is an accounting of people and events—the events being mostly what the people did, on their own initiative and in reaction to happenings and trends and changes over which they have little or no control. To flesh out the story outline we gather together some of the human interest episodes and occurrences that constitute Boling lore and narrative, of how an important and unique business came into being, grew and developed, to evolve into a landmark on the business map of southeastern America.

The Boling family — four generations of it — provide the leadership vertebra for what evolved into The Boling Co. Such is generally the story with closely held family enterprises that carry on from generation to generation.

The Bolings have left individual marks of service on their community, the state, and the industry — as well as the company that bears their name. Public service is a Boling hallmark, along with characteristics that identify product flow.

Almost every civic enterprise and effort in the realm that might be called "Boling country" has found a member of the family in a frontline position. Beginning in the early 1900s the original begetter of it all — Capt. Mallie Boling — was a pioneer entrepreneur in central North Carolina, benefiting his home area with the enterprises he launched. These included the first rural telephone system in Chatham County and the organization and operation of such undertakings as brick manufacturing, lumbering, grist milling, and finally wood bending. He was always interested in education and very active in his church.

Captain Boling's oldest son, Floyd Jackson Boling, was the second Boling to head the company. The son's community services were also many and varied. He was co-originator of a movement that resulted in building the Chatham Hospital and served as president of its board of trustees and as treasurer; served on the Siler City Board of Commissioners for 16 years (with the Siler City Public Library established when he was chairman of that body); was a charter member and director of the Wood Office Furniture Institute; was a director of the Southern Furniture Manufacturers Association, The Furniture Foundation, Inc., the Siler City Development Corporation, and the Children's Home Society; served on the North Carolina Board of Conservation and Development; received the Siler City Chamber of Commerce distinguished service award in 1964; served on the United States War Production Board during World War II; and was an active Mason, Shriner, Rotarian and Baptist.

F. J. Boling, Jr., grandson of Captain Mallie, followed his father as president after Floyd Jackson Boling's death December 2, 1965. The

third Boling to be president of the company is generally known as "Jack."

He was born in Siler City August 20, 1932; attended school in Siler City through his sophomore high school year; and then went to Fishburne Military School at Waynesboro, Va., for two years. He was graduated from Duke University in 1954 with a bachelor of science degree in Mechanical Engineering. After that he spent two years in the Army, most of that time at the White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico, working in the early stages of rocketry. Like other Bolings, Jack Boling came back to the company in 1956. He had worked at the plant during summers and holidays throughout his "growing up" years, putting in "learning time" in every department.

Except for the Army, he has never worked anywhere except at Boling. "There was never a question in my mind about what I wanted to do," he said. "This has been my substantial interest all the time."

While serving as president of three family companies — The Boling Co., Stout Chair Co., and General Sales Co. — Jack Boling also served as vice president of another family company — Southeastern Equipment Co. To this responsibility he added a rather awesome list of civic, community, and other business responsibilities.

When the Boling company arrived at its 75th anniversary President Jack Boling was a member of the board of directors and past president of the Siler City Chamber of Commerce; a member and past president of the Siler City Rotary club; a member and past officer in the Siler City Volunteer Fire Department; a member of the executive committee of the board of trustees of The Chatham Hospital; and a member of the Mayor's Downtown Improvement Committee.

In other Jack Boling business activities, he was a member of the Siler City board of directors of First Union National Bank and past local chairman; a member of the board of directors of the Carolina Telephone Company; a member of the board of directors of North Carolina Citizens Association; and president of the Government in Business Council of North Carolina (an organization that monitors government competition with private enterprise).

He is a licensed pilot and at one time flew his own plane on regular visits to various plant locations. He is also a member of the First Baptist church of Siler City; a Mason and a Shriner; and was a mem-

ber of the Siler City Library board that planned and developed Wren Memorial Library in Siler City.

He was married the same year he graduated from Duke, to a Duke classmate, Joan Bolmeier, daughter of Dr. Edward C. Bolmeier, director of graduate studies at Duke University and a prolific author in the field of school law. The Jack Bolings have four children, an only son, Edward Jackson Boling, who started his career at Boling after graduation from Western Carolina University; and three daughters, Susan Boling Reece, Elizabeth Ann Boling, and Sarah Rebecca Boling.

Jack Boling has his own philosophy of management in highly "personal" companies like Boling. He summarizes this by saying subsequent generations need to "be interested in what's going on." "We have an objective that is now tradition in this company," he adds, "to turn out quality products at good prices. We know that if we can do that we will keep our market. We also keep the Golden Rule in mind in all our business dealings — with suppliers, with employees and with customers."

As part of his duty as president, Jack Boling buys all lumber and swivel chair controls for Boling products. Wood is bought from large and small sawmills and on the established hardwood market. A running inventory is kept to determine just what wood is used during a given month, what wood remains on hand, and how much will be needed in the days ahead. Some of the wood for bending must be purchased a year in advance, so it can be "seasoned" — meaning air dried. A considerable amount of the wood supply is purchased from small sawmills within a 50 mile radius of the Boling plants. This is particularly true of oak. President Boling says the wood market is controlled more by the rate of consumption than by the schedule on which lumbermen cut and process trees, although weather conditions, making it difficult to get logs out of the woods, can create a tight market.

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When The Boling Co. reached its 75th birthday, one of Captain Mallie's sons was still an officer and very active in directing company affairs. James K. Boling, who was born November 3, 1914 ("Right across the creek from what was then High Point Bending and Chair Company"), became vice president in charge of marketing for Boling in 1949. This important key position, so well directed over the years, is credited with a lion's share of Boling's phenomenal success. Direction of Boling sales made Jim Boling well known from one side of the United States to the other. Throughout the furniture industry, from designers to consumers, and to everyone else, he is Jim Boling — with emphasis on the "Jim."

Captain Mallie died when Jim was three and a half years old, so most of what the son knows about his father is based on things he heard from others as he grew up. Early pictures imprinted on a youthful mind include lasting impressions of several large mules (used to haul wood and wood products) in a fenced-in pasture along the creek that ran between the Boling plant and the Boling home.

As a small boy Jim Boling hung around the plant a lot. Things were open and casual in the early 1900s and nothing prevented a small boy from playing in and out of a manufacturing plant operated by his family. Jim's frequent presence led to his being put to work (along with some of his friends and playmates) when he was 12 years old. The boys "stacked sticks" for the yard foreman. Child labor was looked on with great favor at that time, as good training and needed discipline. The yard foreman was a black man that Jim Boling remembers being called "Uncle Charles" by everyone — the customary way of addressing respected black men in those days. More than half a century later Jim Boling recalled he was paid 10 cents an hour — but had some fringe benefits. Important among these benefits was the availability of "Johnny cakes" that Uncle Charles' wife made every day and brought to Uncle Charles on the job. The boys would use their earnings to buy "Johnny cakes" from Uncle Charles, frequently finding at the end of the week they had eaten up most of their wages and had little or no cash money to take them into the next week. "But they were the best 'Johnny cakes' I have ever eaten," Vice President Boling would recall in later years.

Among other early remembrances of the original wood bending

company, Jim Boling recalls his fascination with the construction of a three-story brick plant. The bricks for this mill were shipped in by rail and youthful Jim helped with the unloading.

By the mid 1920s High Point Bending and Chair Company was taking showroom space in the new Southern Furniture Exposition Building that had been erected at High Point to house a burgeoning new American furniture market. K. G. Clapp who had married Grace Boling, Captain Mallie's daughter, and headed up sales for the chair and bending operation in those days, would take young Jim Boling with him to the High Point market, giving him early exposure to that aspect of furniture sales. Later when the Clapps lived in Atlanta and K. G. Clapp concentrated on sales in the Deep South, Jim would visit their home and at the branch plant that had been opened in Atlanta. K. G. Clapp took his Siler City nephew on several sales trips through Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee, providing another early exposure to a sales pattern that would one day be under his direction.

When he completed high school at Siler City, which ended with the 11th grade in those days, Jim Boling's mother and older brothers thought it would be a good idea for young Jim to go to Tennessee Military Institute at Sweetwater, Tn., for a 12th grade, to help him with an appointment to Annapolis Naval Academy, his goal.

He took a year at the military institute and received the appointment to Annapolis, but on a final physical examination was turned down because of his height. He was six feet and five inches tall and a Navy doctor told him he was "just too tall for the Navy and will never get in!" (Jim Boling has always been amused at the manner in which that doctor's judgement was altered in 1942. World War II was at hand and while being examined a Navy doctor told him he was "just exactly the right height for what we need.")

When the Naval Academy decided Jim Boling was too tall for that uniform he took his six feet five inches to Duke University, was fitted with a football uniform, and became a top flight player.

Jim Boling's college days coincided with the depression of the 1930s and each summer vacation found him back at Siler City working in the chair factory, with occasional interruptions to accompany some of his seniors to furniture shows around the country. "I liked the plant work and always enjoyed tagging along on sales trips and

market appearances," Jim Boling said. This summer work, together with money he borrowed, saw him through four years of Duke to a degree in Business Administration.

When Jim Boling finished college not much was going on in the way of business activity. "The depression had gotten very, very bad," he said. However his brother, Floyd, by then in a key role at the chair company, offered to put Jim to work traveling through a territory west of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio River. "I didn't have any money to finance myself and Floyd said he thought the company could find enough money to finance me for the first year," Jim Boling recalled. "I had never been west of the Mississippi River so I jumped at this opportunity. I caught a ride to Asheville with Elton Stout, a Boling official, and made plans to move on west from there. In studying a map I decided Pine Bluff, Ark., was a good place to start. It looked like a big town. I bought a bus ticket from Asheville to Pine Bluff.

"It was in late August when I left Memphis on the trip to Pine Bluff. The bus traveled dirt roads and sent great clouds of dust into the air. There was no air conditioning and that bus was hot and dusty. The country was flat and we passed a lot of rice fields. It was a big, new, and exciting adventure. Arriving finally in Pine Bluff I found I had selected a big sawmill town for my first base of operation. Business was slow there and things were mighty quiet but I called on a couple of dealers before moving on through Arkansas, again by bus, finally arriving in Muskogee, Okla., a western town with a lot of Indians. I called on the dealers there and got my first order from one of them — for two of our 'Stenoposture' secretarial chairs. That certainly did give me a thrill!

"Starting in Arkansas and Oklahoma I moved on up through Ohio and Michigan, finally extending my territory to include nine states. Although I was representing High Point Bending and Chair, the company had an arrangement where I also sold for Myrtle Desk Company and Alma Desk Company of High Point when I made a call.

"Continuing to travel this expansive territory I was later able to get an automobile, enjoyed the work, and made a lot of friends. But business travel in the west was really tough in the 1930s, with Kansas and Iowa the toughest of all," according to Jim Boling. "You could get public transportation going east and west but scarcely anything mov-

ed north or south. If you missed a train or bus to the north or south you just waited until the following day. I recall one time I missed a train at Waterloo, Iowa. I took my overcoat, bag, and brief case; walked to the edge of town; took my stand by the highway to thumb a ride to the next town; finally making my destination late that night."

The Boling official was reminded that the expense of travel in those days did not include the use of telephone. "You never telephoned unless it was a matter of life and death," he said. "All communication was by mail.

"That first year out west I traveled entirely by bus or train because I didn't have the money to buy a car," Jim Boling recalled. "At the end of that first year I found I had made \$87 out of 12 months of work. That was what I had left after paying my living and travel expenses. But things got better with each passing year and by 1938 I had enough money to buy a secondhand car."

World War II came along with the 1940s and Jim Boling volunteered for services in the Navy (finding he had become *exactly* the right height) to become one of the "90-day wonders" of that time. He trained at Quonset Point, in Rhode Island, for a commission that prepared him for aircraft carrier duty. But on completion of his officer training there were no carrier assignments available and he was sent to a training squadron in Corpus Christi, Tex., to function in aircraft maintenance.

As the war progressed the Navy sent its engineering officers to the Pacific. However Boling's pre-service background was in manufacturing so he was made a public works officer (the equivalent of a town manager) and kept stateside. In time he was transferred to the principal contracting office at the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station, to negotiate contracts for various base projects being handled by outside contractors. After two years of this he received orders to San Francisco, then Pearl Harbor, and wound up on the small Pacific island of Roi-Namur, at the north end of larger Kwajalein Island. On his way out the bomb was dropped on Japan and the war ended, so he spent only a few months in the Pacific.

His discharge came in early 1946 and that year he resumed traveling the west for Boling and the two other firms, with his territory increased from nine to 15 states.

This continued until 1949 when he came back to Siler City as vice president of the company.

In 1939 he married Virginia Siler with whom he had gone to school. They had a son in 1949.

From the time he was a boy and worked around the lumber yard eating "Johnny cakes" made by Uncle Charles' wife, Jim Boling never seriously departed from the idea that he would make what is now The Boling Co. his life and career. Although he toyed with the idea of a military career, looked briefly at the study of law, and considered investments and banking as a passing notion, "my interest was always in this company," he said.

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A footnote on the Boling men and their names: Almost without exception men in the Boling family have "J" as one of their initials. There is Floyd J. (for Jackson), James, Marvin J. (for Julian) and there was J.E. (where the J stood for Joseph).

It all seems to have started with Captain's Mallie's father, who was Joseph W. Boling and died in 1905, the year High Point Bending and Chair was started. Joseph W. gave his son (who became the famous Captain Mallie) the name Malvola Jackson Boling.

Then came the juniors: F. J., Jr., (currently company president); and J. K., Jr., son of the marketing vice president; and finally, Edward Jackson, son of F. J., Jr., and the fourth generation Boling at Boling.

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Ben S. Foust is secretary and a director of The Boling Co. He is the only corporate officer who is not a Boling or related to the Boling family. Several close connections with the area and the company, coupled with his business proficiency and professional skills, led to his top management relationship.

Foust was born in the Mt. Vernon Springs community five miles south of Siler City; graduated from high school at Bonlee; and first worked for Boling in 1941.

After graduating from Bonlee High School, Foust went to Louisburg College for a year and graduated in 1941 with a one-year certificate. In August of that year he went to work for the then High Point Bending and Chair Company, running the bookkeeping machine. He continued in the chair company office until he was drafted in the Army in February of 1943. After his military service ended in February of 1946, he entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, graduating there in June of 1949 with a degree in accounting. He then went to Burlington Industries; worked as an auditor four years; moved from there to a construction business in Norfolk, Va., for a short time; and rejoined Boling on January 1, 1954.

While living in Greensboro Foust met Nancy Whicker from Kernersville, a nurse at Sternberger Hospital. They were married in 1954. The Fousts moved to Mt. Vernon Springs in January of 1959 to live with his mother and father who were aging and in bad health. Following his parents' death Foust built a home in Siler City. Mrs. Foust died in January of 1964 and since then Foust has continued to live in Siler City, "raising my only child," a son.

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K.G. (Keiffer Gladstone) Clapp, treasurer of the company, is a longtime first team player at Boling. Born in Chatham County in 1899, he joined Boling in 1923 and had well over half a century of service by the time Boling reached its 75th year.

Clapp finished high school at Siler City, was in the United States Navy in 1917 and 1918, and worked for the Atlantic and Yadkin Railroad before entering the world of wood bending and chair making. Two years before joining the Boling company he joined the Boling family, by way of marriage to Grace Boling, the only daughter of M. J. Boling, company founder. Grace Boling had served as corporate secretary of High Point Bending and Chair in

the World War I period.

Boling opened a branch in Atlanta, Ga., in 1923 and K.G. Clapp's first assignment with the company was there. The Atlanta operation encompassed manufacturing, warehousing and sales. Clapp served as a salesman for Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and western Tennessee, making his headquarters at the new Atlanta plant and extensively traveling the four-state territory.

It was in this period that Boling went into what the company called a "fibre" furniture line. For a time fiber was a leading item, particularly in the southern states, and Clapp's sales were moving the pieces out of the Atlanta warehouse, to dealers, in a strong and steady flow, until:

Boling's fiber furniture became the specific target of competition from upholstered lines. This struggle became more and more desperate, and simultaneously, the "big depression" moved in on all sides. "When they started selling two complete suites of upholstered furniture for \$100 we knew they had killed fiber furniture," K. G. Clapp said. By 1930 the Atlanta extension was halted and everything there was returned home, back to Siler City. The move included a big old truck that became a traveling trademark in Chatham County as it finished out its useful days, and miles, in the chair company's service.

With no delay salesman Clapp turned his back on the Atlanta closing and faced northward to start knocking on doors there. He first worked Virginia and then moved on to New York State, and eventually was covering all of New England. He found he not only could do business successfully with the Yankees, but that he liked it. "It was entirely different from working the Deep South," he said. "You didn't have to spend so much time visiting and talking with a prospective customer—about family and fishing and whatever. I could finish my individual calls a lot quicker, get a decision, and move on to the next prospect."

Clapp was particularly successful in his calls on schools. Churches and institutions were also buying the Boling lines. In fact this market area looked so encouraging that the Bolings acquired a company specializing in institutional sales. In the depression period, 1928, High Point Bending and Chair Company bought and

consolidated a troubled company at Louisville, Ky. — the Standard School Equipment Company. W.O. Jones, Sr., president of the purchased Louisville company, was another recruit to the Boling banner destined to leave a permanent imprint on the Boling name.

While Clapp was making his way through the New England states, finding business prospects bright, he never forgot the unhappy experience of an acute depression in Georgia and the Deep South. He had left a large number of uncollected accounts when he moved back to Siler City. At regular intervals he would leave his new territory in the north to head back to the Deep South and make the rounds of those who had not paid.

"I got most of it too," he said later. "It took five years, a lot of travel, a lot of telephoning, a lot of dickering and bartering; but we finally collected almost all of what we had out down there."

K. G. Clapp also has an indelible impression on his mind of another depression era experience. It was 1930. The then High Point Bending and Chair Company was participating in a Chicago show, exhibiting its lines to buyers assembled there. Clapp was at the Palmer house, as was the show.

Word was passed one morning that President Franklin D. Roosevelt would be on a nationwide radio network with an important message. Exhibitors and buyers at the Palmer House halted all show activity and gathered in the hotel lobby to listen, along with almost everybody else in America.

The President's message was the declaration of a nationwide "bank holiday." No bank was to be allowed to open for business that day and all would remain closed until they could individually demonstrate sufficient capacity and liquidity to resume business. Clapp had \$8.50 in his pocket and a company check that he was to use in settling up Chicago bills and for travel back to North Carolina. Of course the check was useless. He moved out of the Palmer House, where he was a well-known customer, with the friendly understanding that the bill would be paid — "when."

Picking a highway path back to North Carolina he stopped at places he had patronized before, and where he had put up, eaten, and was known. At each place he told the same story most other people on the move were telling. No cash money. In all instances he

was recognized as an old friend and patron and was allowed to eat and sleep, on the cuff. The blanket shutdown of banks was a nightmare experienced by everybody. Like all the rest, K. G. Clapp will never forget it.

In due course of time this bad dream lifted and the No. 1 salesman at Boling resumed his travels through New England. He said: "I had a thousand friends up there, and I went up and sold a thousand dozen chairs!"

* * * *

Byron S. Clapp, born in Siler City July 19, 1914, is a key individual in maintaining the continuous flow of popular Boling furniture—in keeping with the standards established by three generations of Bolings. His career with Boling, which began in the late 1930s, has included designing, training employees, and responsibility for plant operation, which gave him the title of vice president production.

Byron Clapp graduated from then N.C. State College at Raleigh with the class of 1938. He had gone there with the desire to become a furniture designer and did so well that he also served as an instructor in furniture design and woodwork while still a student.

F. J. Boling was so enthusiastic about the contribution Clapp was making to design, and his potential, that he encouraged further study in the design field. As a result Byron Clapp went to Columbia University in New York City for a period of summer study under Frederick Kiesler, a German architect who had been expelled from his native country by Hitler.

From Kiesler, a controversial figure but a master at basic design, Clapp learned much about using design knowledge to provide additional degrees of comfort in chairs, make them more functional, and provide an appearance that would better sell the finished product. Clapp says Kiesler taught him that true design is a matter of problem-solving; and also taught him that "we" is the strongest word in any language because no one ever accomplishes a real "breakthrough" alone.

Columbia and Kiesler helped Byron Clapp further develop an already firmly established concept that the best realization from design comes with taking what you have and rearranging it to provide practical solution and application. As an example, many of the Boling office chairs today include a unique back support that come out of the Clapp philosophy of design. In a design process the designer can also simplify and economize by eliminating anything that is expendable. He has done this too.

Teaching and training people, always one of his strong talents, surfaced again when he went into military service in the World War II period. He was in uniform from 1940 until 1943 and—in keeping with his ROTC background at N.C. State—was quickly flagged for teaching and spent his entire World War II army career as an infantry instructor.

After the war years Clapp returned to the Boling company, still operating as High Point Bending and Chair; and married Alene Hester, a Siler City school teacher. They have a son and a daughter.

When business people began showing an interest in office chairs with more comfort and beauty—perhaps as a reaction to stern World War II years—Siler City was the scene of some early experiments utilizing upholstery on traditional all-wood Boling chairs. In this connection Byron Clapp demonstrated again that he was a teacher as well as a designer and production man. With everything indicating the word would be “go” with upholstery, he put Boling in that business by experimenting with fabric cutting, sewing, gluing, filling, covering and tacking (stapling). Fabrics moved from grim mohair and rigid chintz to rainbows of luxurious and durable constructions. In one development exposed decorative nails were replaced with new and previously untried methods of fastening.

In the late 1940s the company had two employees in this area—an upholsterer and a woman who sewed. Later the upholsterer became foreman of that department and functioned in that role for years. The department had its most intense growth following the war. Veterans were returning home, looking for employment, and Boling took in dozens who had never before seen an upholstery operation and trained them under the GI Bill of Rights.

Clapp had obtained all the published books he could find on upholstery, studied them, devised his own plan of experimentation and training and eventually provided competent workers, trained on the job. Trial and error extended to new methods and new materials that again gave Boling its own distinctive style.

Wade Barber, prominent attorney, state legislator, confidant of Governors, and state political figure, served as counsel for the Bolings for many years. The association started out prior to World War I when Barber was a young attorney. He was fresh out of law school and had moved to Siler City to become associated with Judge Walter D. Siler.

Barber tells an interesting story of his first contact with Captain Mallie Boling. "It was just before World War I and I was so little and scrawny at the time that Uncle Sam would not accept me in the service," Wade Barber was to say in 1979. "Shortly after I moved to Siler City in the spring of 1915 I met M. J. Boling, one of the more prominent men of Siler City. Mr. Boling was the owner and operator of High Point Bending and Chair Company, one of Siler City's leading industries. He was very reserved in his conversation. A large man, he frequently described himself as being 'five feet and 19 inches tall.'

"My first real contact with Captain Boling was in February, 1918. I recall he gave me a telephone call that morning rather early, saying that *if I had time* he would like for me to come to his office that morning to advise with him about a matter. Of course I was highly pleased, very excited, and welcomed the opportunity to meet with and advise Mr. Boling. So I hastened up to his office.

"Well, you should have seen that office building. It set off to itself about 30 or 40 feet east from where the present office building stands. It was about 10 feet wide and about 20 feet long. You entered the end of the small building occupied by Miss Clata Andrew, Mr. Boling's secretary, bookkeeper and what-have-you. The south end of the building was partitioned off to provide a space 6 feet by 8 feet which was Mr. Boling's private office. Although a chair manufacturer, there was not a decent piece of furniture in the little building, which was in every respect in keeping with the old frame building that housed the production machinery. The factory was located immediately east of the railroad right-of-way.

"When I arrived at Mr. Boling's office on that February morning, he was working on his corporate tax return. His desk, which

was in fact a table, was covered with tax forms, inventories, account books and other spread out papers. Mr. Boling said he wanted me to go over his tax return with him to see if there was some way to save him some tax payment.

"I soon learned that he knew a great deal more about making up corporate tax returns than I did. But for the remainder of the morning I had sufficient sense to keep my mouth shut and let him do the talking. When the 12 o'clock whistle blew we adjourned for lunch.

"I met him again after lunch and suggested then that he let me have the tax return he had worked on, take it to my office, work on it there, and come back the next day. He agreed to this. As soon as I got to my office I called Henry London, one of my older lawyer friends who at that time was the deputy U.S. Revenue Commissioner of North Carolina. As such he was assistant to Josiah W. Bailey who was the U.S. Commissioner of Revenue for the State of North Carolina, with offices located in the Federal Building at Raleigh. I explained my predicament to Mr. London, who was certainly very accommodating, agreed to get off some help to me on that afternoon's mail. I was at the Siler City Post Office at 9 p.m. that night when the mail arrived (In those days there was efficiency in our U.S. mail system), and literally grabbed my package, took it to my office, and went to work, pouring over the material most of the night. Mr. London had sent me a great deal of literature, and three corporate returns that had been filed with him, but with the names blanked out of course.

"The next morning I returned to Mr. Boling's office feeling right well versed in the matter of preparing corporate income tax returns. And I really was. But I was not able to make any changes in the Boling return. I still recall that during that particular year Captain Boling had torn out and discarded a lot of old machinery and put in new machinery, to the extent of several thousand dollars. Instead of capitalizing these figures he had deducted the cost as being for "repairs." After a lot of discussion we decided to forward the return as he had prepared it, and this we did. And there never was a comeback on it.

"Let me hasten to add that, in my opinion, Mr. Boling was a conscientious, honorable gentleman. Any errors he may have made

were errors of the head and not of the heart. Mr. Boling was a businessman of the old school.

"Just a few years before he had quit his job as a railroad locomotive engineer to come to Siler City and invest his life savings—some \$8,000 to \$10,000—in purchasing additional interest in a wood bending company where he already had an investment. At that time the capital stock of the corporation was \$8,000 and it was faltering. Under his management and direction of the reorganized enterprise, the surplus and retained earnings rose to a figure of \$100,000—most of this in cash.

"At the time of my association with Captain Boling he knew that he was suffering with a non-curable malignancy, and that his remaining days on this earth were short. Indeed he did not live to be bothered with any more income tax returns after the one I helped him with.

"Mr. Boling was a dedicated Christian gentleman; had a very high sense of honor; used no profanity; and if someone did use profanity in his presence he was likely to censure them."

Many innovations at Boling have been successful; some were discarded after experimentation; and a few brought unusual and unexpected results. One surprising outcome had to do with the trial run of a chair design that was intended for use as seating in executive conference rooms or board rooms. This chair came into being as a means of utilizing waste material resulting from the cutting of bentwood parts for a traditional "Bank of England" chair. Cutting dimension pieces for the "Bank of England" chair back left what appeared to be sound and useful lengths—if some utilization could be found for them. A new design was created to make use of these leavings. A sample was built and 50 experimental chairs manufactured.

When they were seen in their intended setting, as a group, everybody at Boling agreed the effort had produced a "turkey" and quickly called it quits on the item. The 50 completed chairs, now considered culls, were given to a dealer in Washington, D.C., to dispose of as best he could through retail stores in the District of Columbia. Everybody in Siler City quickly forgot what they considered to be an unhappy experience.

But not for long. The next thing Siler City heard about this chair was a call from the Washington dealer who said the Secretary of the Navy wanted 42 of these particular chairs to furnish a new conference room in his department. The chair was quickly placed back in production and for the next several years the plant couldn't keep up with the demand and the increasing popularity of what had first been considered a complete lemon. The chair had sold itself to people who saw it and its popularity spread by word of mouth. Boling had more or less lucked into an item and soon saw it being extensively copied. This chair, first created to utilize waste wood, became a popular number in company catalogs.

Company legend includes numerous individuals who moved in and out of the Siler City-based enterprise, each leaving his own particular mark.

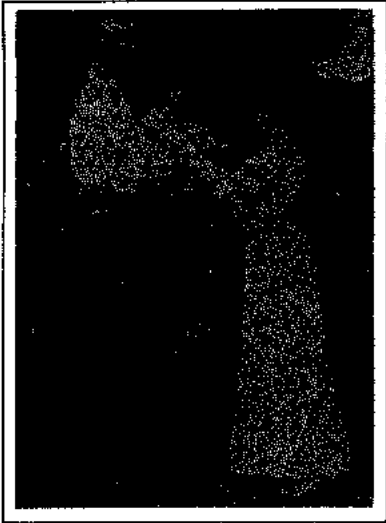
One such was J. J. "Jack" Croft who became an important corporate wheel during the 1920s. Croft was born and raised in Perrysburg, Ohio, graduated from the Colorado School of Mines, and with three cronies, went to Texas to prospect for oil. After meeting with spotted success in Texas, Croft moved to Waukesha, Wis., to run the Red Bank Wagon Works for a time. He also managed a plant for Ford Motor Company.

Out of this varied experience he gained considerable reputation as a "doctor" for sick or failing companies. He sought out operations that were faltering in performance and offered to put up funds needed to get things back on an even keel—with the agreement that he would have a good salary and be repaid the money he advanced from the first profits. He did this in several instances, always moving on after two or three years, taking his invested money and salary gain with him. He didn't want an assignment longer than two or three years and began looking for another challenge when things were straightened out.

It was in this role that he arrived in Atlanta around 1920, with the challenge of rescuing Capital City Chair Company from impending bankruptcy. He put up \$20,000, set his salary at \$20,000 a year, and was to have the first \$20,000 in clear profits—substantial figures for that day. His Atlanta tenure coincided with the establishment there by the Boling family of a combined manufacturing, warehousing, and sales branch. Croft became acquainted with F. J. Boling, Sr., who opened and ran the Atlanta branch.

While Capital City Chair Company was regaining its footing under Croft's leadership, the depression was fast pushing Boling's Atlanta operation against the wall. Croft became interested in Boling. He visited Siler City and studied the growing problems there. When the Bolings decided to consolidate the Atlanta branch with Siler City, Croft signed on as plant superintendent. But, quite contrary to his previous pattern of operation, he continued in this

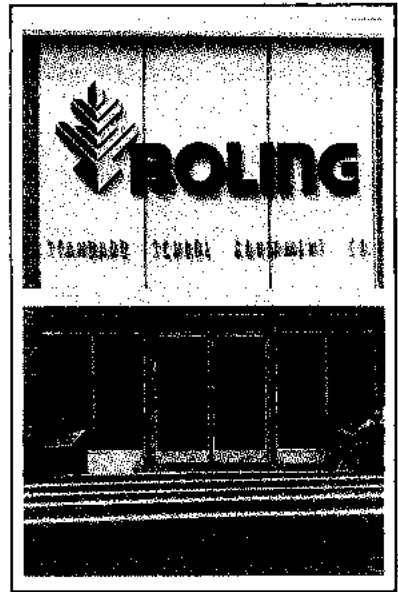
A Boling Album



Captain "Mallie" Boling, founder of a wood bending operation that was to become The Boling Co. is shown here with his wife and one of their children. The rare old snapshot was made in the early 1900s. Descendants of Captain "Mallie" surmised the baby was James K. (Jim) Boling.



Here Captain and Mrs. Boling are shown with an automobile Captain Boling purchased in 1909, the first automobile owned by a resident of Chatham County.



Sign construction workers removed the old Boling Chair Company sign (left) in 1979 to erect a new sign (right) and provide simplified "Boling" identity.

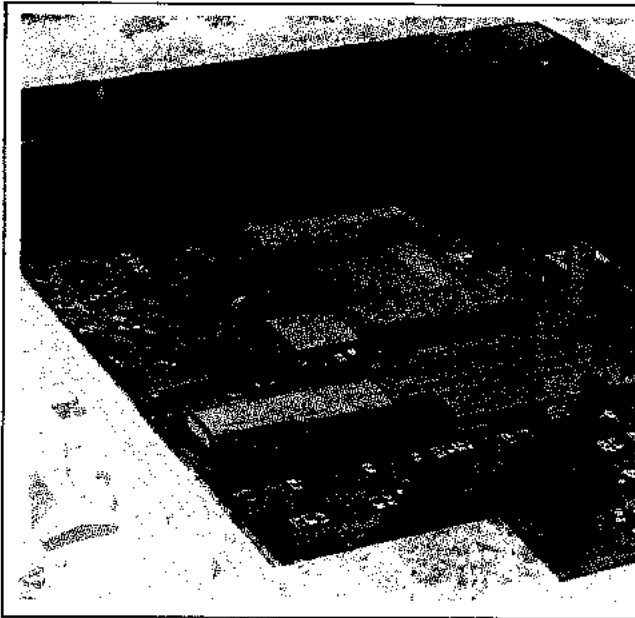


F.J. Boling, Sr., directed Boling operations as president from 1931 until his death in 1965.

This aerial photograph isolates and identifies the Boling manufacturing complex and headquarters offices in Siler City. >



Boling merged a Louisville, Ky., furniture company in 1928 and brought W.O. Jones, to Siler City.



Byron S. Clapp, Boling Vice President Production.



K.G. Clapp, Treasurer of The Boling Co.

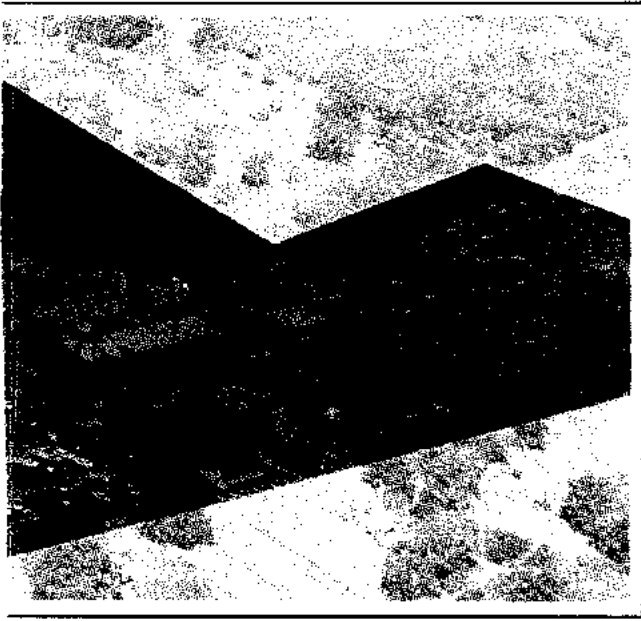
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Col. H.E. Stout, a Boling corporate officer, was a key force in the growth and development of Boling. Stout Chair Co. at Liberty, a Boling company, was named for Colonel Stout.



An early photograph of Capt. M.J. Boling, company founder.



A photo of World War II vintage showing James K. Boling as a young Navy lieutenant.



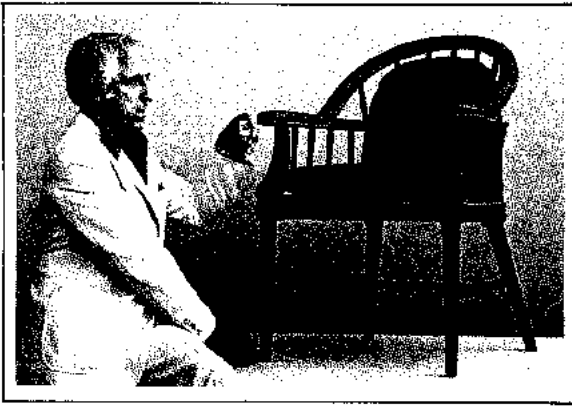
F.J. (Jack) Boling, Jr., was president when the company was 75 years old, and the third generation Boling to hold that post in line of succession.



Ben S. Foust, Secretary of The Boling Co.



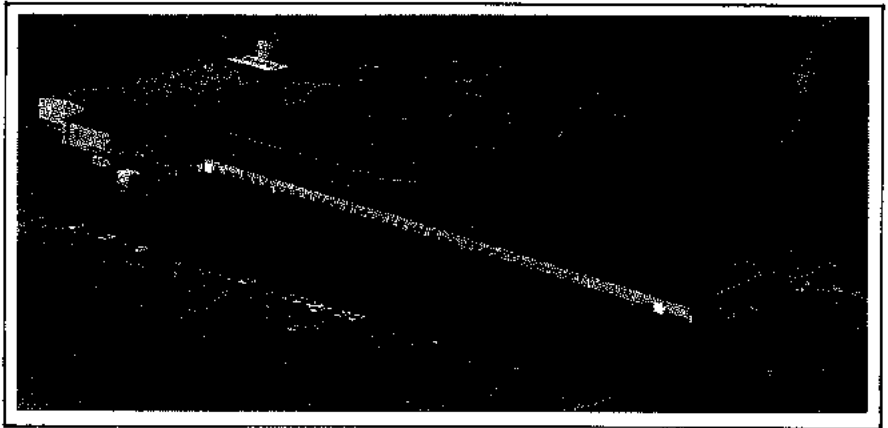
J.K. (Jim) Boling, Vice President Sales.



Spanish designer Carlos L. Lopez-Benitez measures the "limited edition" chair he created for Boling, to commemorate the company's 75th anniversary and three quarters of a century of chair making.



This photo shows, in contrast, one of the first bentwood chairs made by Boling in the early 1900s.



An aerial view of the Boling plant at Mt. Olive, constructed in 1968 to manufacture desks, bookcases and tables. A warehouse section was added in 1978.



This picture was made at Azalea, near Asheville, where for years Boling had a wood dimension operation. Shown is a section of rough lumber storage with the Blue Ridge Mountains in the background.



This old church structure, built by the Siler City First Baptist Church in 1890 and abandoned in 1928, was sold to the Bolings, whose property it joined. This building was the scene of a World War II "Jot Em Down" mercantile operation of storied fame.

role for almost 30 years, until Byron Clapp took over in the 1950s.

Today there are Boling oldtimers who say such things about Jack Croft as "He saved this company" and "He made this company."

Along with his expertise as a manager, Croft was a great practical joker and the source of continuous entertainment in plant and office. One typical instance is cited. Croft frequently referred to himself as a "blue bellied Yankee." The girls in the office protested that he was not, that he was a confirmed southerner. One day he took coloring material and dyed the skin over his midriff a pronounced blue. Walking into the office he parted his shirt to demonstrate once and for all that he was a "blue bellied Yankee."

Croft made a career of shop direction and craft leadership. He was the first man to build a device that would propel bore bits to simultaneously cut several holes going at compound angles. This idea, which Croft developed into a workable operation, has subsequently been utilized at Boling on many different machines, including one that produces a compound bevel joint. Boling holds patents on these Croft developments.

The "Great Depression" of the late 1920s and 1930s delivered to the Boling family a fortunate milestone occurrence, along with the business misfortunes of the time. The good thing from that dark period was acquisition of the Standard School and Equipment Company of Louisville, Ky.

These circumstances coincided with the economic climate of that time: K. G. Clapp was doing an outstanding job of developing a market for institutional chairs, primarily in the New England tier of states. He was selling specialized lines to schools, churches, hospitals and other institutional customers, frequently in large orders. It was one area of plant production that was humming.

Simultaneously the Standard company at Louisville, Ky., specializing in institutional chair sales, wasn't doing so well. In contrast to the successes of the Siler City company in this field, Standard's fortunes were poor. In December, 1928, High Point Bending and Chair Company purchased the troubled company, paying for Standard with stock in the Siler City company. In January, 1931, the companies were consolidated at Siler City. W. O. Jones, Sr., president of the Louisville company, came with the purchase and moved to Siler City in 1929, ahead of the inventory and equipment. This merger marked the beginning of a long and fruitful connection. Mr. Jones' talents were in marketing rather than manufacturing and he made considerable contribution in developing and serving the institutional field for the Bolings.

With the move to Siler City Mr. Jones and his company maintained a separate corporate identity, including a Standard sign over the main office entrance, along with Boling identification. Standard has operated since as Boling's school, church and institutional division. In addition to selling production from the Boling plant, Standard purchases some styles and lines, applicable to schools and churches, for resale. These purchases, all appearing in the Standard catalog, include such things as teachers' desks and tables.

Upon his retirement from administrative responsibility some years later, Jones moved to Lawrenceville, Va., where he re-entered the chair business with Brunswick Seating Company, manufac-

turing folding chairs this time. This firm was also eventually acquired by the Bolings.

Company history credits K. G. Clapp and W. O. Jones, Sr., with putting Boling in the school and institutional furniture business, an area that has provided enormous business volume over the years. Clapp did the selling and Jones was coordinator. After Jones' retirement Clapp became both president and general manager of Standard.

Plastic and metal eventually came on as strong competition with wood in the institutional business, but the Standard company continued to do well with its wood constructions by Boling and the sign that had been put up across the front of the main office at Siler City continued to proclaim that this was also the home of Standard School Equipment Company.

"Fibre" furniture—as sales promotion material billed it—was very important to the company in the 1920s.

The use of fiber was a notable example of how the Bolings experimented with a variety of products made from wood or wood-related raw materials. Most of these forays had a highly successful run. The fiber product lines, supplementing standard bentwood chairs, included porch and yard swings as well as chairs, tables, settees, rockers, bird cages, fern stands, bedsteads and a "kindergarten" line of furniture in sizes for small children. Complete suites were offered for porches, indoor and outdoor living areas, and bedrooms. Old catalogs show rockers that were intended to retail at \$6 to \$35.

In 1920, just ahead of *the* depression, Boling launched this highly successful "Fibre" line, also known to consumers as "wicker" or "rattan." The "rattan" name came from a type of climbing palm that had tough stems, used in some cultures to cane chairs. The trade name "Cableweave" was selected by Boling for the fiber-covered furniture, and all catalogs and merchandising material faithfully identified the product line with the "fibre" spelling. It was advertised as handwoven and had the reputation of being almost indestructable.

Strands or cords of fiber were woven into patterns and braids that covered frames of steambent oak.

The original High Point Bending and Chair Company sold its first order of fiber furniture to Marley Furniture Co. in Siler City on March 28, 1921. At that time one man and one girl were employed in fiber furniture production. But the style really "hit" and for the next eight years the company had great difficulty in providing enough production. The work force on fiber items was vastly increased at Siler City and a unit was started in Atlanta to supplement the Siler City output. For a rather brief lifetime this type of furniture was all the rage. The Florida boom of that day greatly augmented its popularity for living rooms, solariums, porches, and outdoor use.

As is frequently the case with consumer fancy, the quick accept-

ance of fiber furniture was followed by an equally rapid decline in interest. After a few years of riding a style crest, fiber, or wicker, furniture began to disappear into attics or was disposed of.

But taste changes, in a rotating pattern, and this particular furniture found itself "in" again by the 1970s, 50 years after its first popularity. Long absent from the floors of retail stores, it became a much sought-after item in antique shops. Pieces taken out of dusty storage, cleaned up, and offered to a new generation of collectors brought many times the tagged price when the items were new and first offered for sale.

So valuable did this now antique furniture become that Siler City people who had held on to their wicker began to tell stories of having to move these items from their porches to the protection of inside rooms, to prevent thieves from hauling them off in the night.

One memorable Boling operation under the General Sales banner was a general store that functioned during the World War II years of shortages — in just about everything consumers needed.

The store served as a commissary for employees; was known as the Jot Em Down Store; operated in an old frame building that had housed Sunday School activities for the First Baptist Church of Siler City; and was managed by a transplanted New Yorker who became one of the most beloved citizens of Siler City.

Siler City's original Baptist Church operated for many years in a small pioneer-type wooden structure that had been built in 1890 of "framing and logs" (according to the church's history). In 1907 the church added an annex for Sunday School and related activities. The Bolings were a Baptist family and many of the plant's employees were also of that faith. The chair company owned several blocks of city property—the location of its principal plant and operation—adjacent to the church.

By 1928 the First Baptist Church had outgrown its original home and moved across the street to build a large brick edifice. The Bolings purchased the property abandoned by the church. During the first years of Boling ownership, and until World War II, the old church building that had been used for Sunday School activities was used for storage.

One of the many things that happened in the world of business in those war years had a direct bearing on Boling getting into the general store business. The company had a line of folding chairs, made primarily for churches, schools and funeral homes, that had been largely eliminated by the mass production of a much cheaper all-metal folding chair. This led to a decision to get out of the folding chair business. Heading the folding chair sales office in New York (known as Adirondack Chair Company) was a man by the name of Tommy Friedman. With the folding chair operation being abandoned, Friedman was moved to Siler City and given the assignment to open and operate a general store.

With the war at hand and consumer items getting tighter and tighter, the company decided it had to make a move to help em-

ployees get the things they and their families needed. Friedman was a good trader and he scoured the countryside locating consumer items. He looked for and bought anything, because there was a need for everything. The old church building was cleaned out and the goods stocked there.

Nobody ever knew how or where Tommy Friedman got all the things he assembled in the old church building—named by now the Jot Em Down Store, after a popular radio program of that time. Staple foods, canned goods, fresh produce, meats, nails, dress cloth—all sorts of things began to appear in the store under Friedman's operation. Boling employees were allowed to buy on credit, after the manner of company stores of the early industrialized South. What they bought was literally "jotted down," at the time of purchase, together with what they owed for it. On payday everybody went to the store and settled accounts.

Friedman's foraging covered wider circles and longer distances, taking him from the New England states to Texas. He purchased entire bankrupt stocks when he found them, took over the "surplus properties" of that day—in any size or amount. He looked for bargains but he bought anything he could find. As a result of his efforts a great variety of items appeared in the old church building, and were in turn snapped up by eager buyers who were finding less and less in variety and quantity in the traditional retail stores.

The Jot Em Down operated for eight years, until the late 1940s when it closed. During its existence, and under the genius of a transplanted New Yorker, it was of substantial assistance to company employees (and to friends of the company who were also invited to use the store).

The old church building was finally torn down in the late 1950s to provide expanded parking space for plant employees. Friedman was transferred to High Point for chair company responsibilities there, but not before he had become an institution in Siler City, where he is still remembered with great affection. Years later old-timers at Boling described him as a "wonderful guy."

* * * *

General Sales is a Boling company, one of several the family has operated over the years. General Sales has always been a sort of catch-all for varied enterprises that needed a corporate home. It has sold folding chairs, been in the chair rental business, operated a general retail store, owned and managed real estate and business buildings, held farm property and timberlands, and engaged in all sorts of trading.

A professional forester directs the activities of General Sales on some 1,100 acres of Chatham County land where trees are planted, managed, and cut for timber. At maturity the trees are generally sold to saw mills and lumber plants, although some of it — mostly oak — is retained by Boling for consumption in furniture manufacturing. In this connection Boling has seriously considered returning to a Captain Mallie Boling practice and become loggers again. Captain Mallie started the wood bending process three quarters of century ago by going directly to the forest for his trees. Some of his descendents think it would be a good idea to return to that practice, in part, by establishing a modern-day "bolter mill" on Boling timberland.

* * * *

Southeastern Equipment Co. was another Boling development. Members of the Boling family met with other interested business people during the 1930s and discussed the possibility of forming a company to resell products in the rapidly expanding school, church, and institutional field. These discussions led to formation of the Southeastern company, which was chartered January 25, 1939, with headquarters in Siler City.

K.G. Clapp of the Boling operations was elected president of Southeastern and immediately started contacting institutional equipment manufacturers across the country, setting up distributor relationships to resell their products — along with the products of High Point Bending and Chair Co. (later to be renamed Boling Chair Co. and The Boling Co.).

Among the primary lines obtained were:

Draper Shade & Screen Co., Spiceland, Ind.;

Irving Seating Co. (auditorium seating and school desks), Grand Rapids, Mich.;

National Store Fixture Co. (folding chairs and tables), Bethesda, Md.;

Mercor Mfg. Co. (metal school desks and chairs), Greenway, Wisc.;

Chamberlin Metal School (desks and chairs), Conway, Ark.;

Myrtle Desk Co., High Point, N.C.; and

Alma Desk Co., High Point, N.C.

The owners of High Point Bending and Chair purchased the B. J. Gregson Manufacturing Company at Liberty, N.C., in 1939. Gregson manufactured chairs and was acquired to provide additional production needed by the Boling company in school chairs. The Liberty plant, operated as a separate company was renamed on purchase as the Stout Chair Company, for Hernay Elton Stout, secretary of High Point Bending and Chair Company. Many years later J. K. Boling, Sr., vice president, explained: "We thought the use of Elton Stout's name for the new Liberty plant was a happy choice. 'Stout' suggested strength and endurance for the product and at the same time honored one of our officials."

Stout was another Chatham County native. He was born in 1900 at Mount Vernon Springs, graduated from N.C. State College with a B.S. degree in industrial engineering, and later studied wood utilization at Syracuse University, Syracuse, N.Y. He married Dorcas Elizabeth McKinne of Louisburg, N.C., and they had three daughters. Beginning in 1923 Mr. Stout was in the sales department of the National Cash Register Company for three years and in 1926 joined the Boling company where he served in an executive capacity until his death on December 15, 1961. In addition to being secretary and a director of the Boling company he held those same offices in Stout Chair Company. He acquired stock in the Boling company in the 1930s.

Mr. Stout served as a private in World War I and was on active duty with the U.S. Army's Corps of Engineers in World War II, as a lieutenant colonel. In Siler City he was a bank director and officer and prominent in church and civic affairs.

Stout was another Boling official with a background and heritage in lumber. His father, who died when H.E. Stout was nine years old, operated Stout Lumber Company and two of his brothers were associated with their father in that firm.

An interesting personal and sentimental note—and these appear frequently in the Boling story—is to be found in the fact that an ancient steam whistle that had served the Stout Lumber Company before the turn of the century was reinstalled at Stout Chair Com-

pany under H. E. Stout's direction. It still gives time and work signals to employees and the community.

The owners and managers of The Boling Co. attribute a great deal of the company's success to the character and nature of the Chatham County people who have manned the machines, staffed the administrative jobs, and sold the product. The company operation, has, since its origin, been largely a family matter. It has always been a "plant family" operation in that production employees came from the towns, villages and farms of the region.

Wood bending and chair making, developed from scratch by men who had been saw mill operators, blacksmiths, mechanics and lumbermen, required the invention and development of both special machinery and unique skills. Much of the the bending equipment was devised and came into being at Siler City. Each piece of equipment and its subsequent improvement and perfection, appeared as needed to fill a specific requirement or solve a problem. As a result Boling has owned many patents on original methods of shaping, joining, bracing and finishing chairs.

Furniture making requires many different types of machinery and when wood bending is added the complexities increase. Because of this, the Boling work force has always been, of necessity, a versatile group of utility people, each able to do many jobs rather than just one. Each change in chair style calls for a different combination of machines and operators and their capabilities.

The Boling practice and philosophy provides an amusing story of how one valued employee joined Boling in the mid 1940s. Superintendent (at that time) J. J. ("Jack") Croft had perfected a jig to drive several screws into a wood block (chair component) at one and the same time. But the machine provided a problem. None of the available employees had sufficient body weight or physical strength to push down a lever pedal that activated the drive screws. At the height of this dilemma Lucille Glover appeared on the scene as a job applicant. She was large of stature and carried considerable weight.

"Do you think you can push that lever pedal down?" Jack Croft asked the job applicant, looking over her robust physique.

Lucille Glover thought she could trip the lever and would like

to try. With her weight and physical strength she performed the operation handily, was promptly signed on, and 40 years later was still at Boling, helping the company celebrate its 75th birthday.

Mrs. Glover (who retired in 1979 as the first black woman to have a lifetime career at Boling) became expert at a number of different jobs, and was joined at the plant by several relatives—one of the successful ways the company recruited to keep a full-force production team.

At intervals Boling ventured afield from basic wooden chairs, in keeping with fluctuating market trends and the appearance of business opportunities. One of these speculative undertakings was in metal furniture.

In the early 1950s metal furniture, made of tubular material, began to cut in on wood chair sales, particularly with schools and institutions, and in some areas of office use. The traditional wood-working Bolings took note, decided to meet that competition on its own field, and on September 5, 1953, purchased a small metalworking firm at Winston-Salem: Harveen Metal Products, Inc. Harveen had been advertising itself as "manufacturers of metal step-chairs."

The firm had 25 employees when Boling took over and this number ranged as high as 35 employees under Boling's five years of operation. (The business was sold to Butler Enterprises of Winston-Salem on September 2, 1958).

While in the metal furniture business Boling made step chairs, bar stools, youth chairs, hat and coat racks, baby high chairs, juvenile tables and chairs, and serving carts. The operation did exceptionally well with metal wall racks for hats and coats that were being universally installed in motel rooms at the time. Luggage racks and tables, also for motels, followed in the line. Sears Roebuck contracted for substantial quantities of baby high chairs and step stools. Moving from tubular metal constructions to sheet metal, lines of metal storage cabinets were added. Metal braces for wood furniture were made for other furniture companies, under contract.

After five years of supplementing its wood furniture lines with metal fabrications, the Boling management found itself at a cross-roads decision of having to either expand the metal business and deal with a greater volume, or get out and confine itself to wood lines only. The decision was to sell when the Butler company appeared as a buyer.

One of the most successful alumni of the Boling organization is Thomas Jefferson Dark of Fort Lauderdale, Fla. A Chatham County native, he graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1925. While in school there he roomed for a time with Joe Boling, one of the sons of founder M. J. Boling. Upon graduation he joined High Point Bending and Chair Company where he worked in various junior management positions through 1927. Although he moved on to other interests in other states he never forgot Chatham County and the chair company.

He recalls with pleasure the atmosphere at High Point Bending and Chair Company in the 1920s. "C. B. Thomas was running the business then, assisted by his brothers Jake and Billy Thomas," he said. "Production was sold through jobbers—I remember that Landers and Company of Philadelphia was one of the most prominent and active—and chairs brought \$14 to \$16 per dozen. These chairs didn't compare favorably with later production. The rounds were bored and glued and chairs were finished by tank-dipping with a coat of varnish added. Employees were paid 30 cents an hour.

"On the west side of the railroad Billy Thomas operated a 'peckerwood' sawmill for the sole purpose of quarter-sawing white-oak logs for chair stock."

After a beginning at the chair company, Dark's business path took him first to the Collins & Aikman textile company where he sold fabric to automobile manufacturers for use in upholstery and inside lining. This led to several years of being sales manager for Ford automobile dealers and finally to settling down in Long Island City, N.Y., as president of a metal working firm, the Buckman Sparkwheel Company (of German origin and ownership). The company made such items as sparkwheels for cigarette lighters. When World War II came on he purchased the company from its European ownership.

By the time he was ready to retire in 1958 Buckman Sparkwheel had 250 employees and was making precision metal components for every type of industry in the world.

When he was 84 years old and retired (in 1979) and at Chapel

Hill to be honored for long and generous help he had given the University's School of Medicine, he also visited a sister, Mrs. Lillie D. Sharp, and other relatives in Siler City, including H. Thomas Andrews, a Boling sales manager. In connection with that visit he recalled the first head of the chair company, Mallie Boling, as "a high class gentleman." "He was always a good citizen," he added. "I recall when he would do such things as take his horse and buggy and drive seven miles into the country to appear in a rural church at a Children's Day Sunday School program, talking to a group of six-year-olds."

Tom Dark, relaxing at the place of his birth—and near the scene of his first job—said Boling got its firmest foothold to move ahead when the Siler City factory separated from its High Point ownership connections.

"That's when they really started to fly," he said. He also made the observation that he had always thought the Atlanta operation (a combination of manufacturing and sales) was launched to give the company's younger generation an opportunity to go it on their own, develop new ideas and products, and break out of any confining influences they might feel in Siler City.

B. P. S.
(Boling Post Scripts)

The Boling narrative is more an informal story than straight-laced *history*, telling of the beginning, development, and present standing of a family-oriented industrial enterprise that has taken a position of extraordinary importance on the southern business horizon. A human interest rather than actuarial approach to the chronicle tends to bring many quick, short episodes to the surface—commentaries that have no specific place in an historical enumeration. So we have leftover cameos on men and manners that are being added—as post scripts.

*

When the High Point Bending and Chair Company name, long known in the furniture industry, was changed many furniture retailers, secretaries, and postal clerks breathed a sigh of relief.

Introduction of the name “Boling” into the corporate name of the firm did not bring in something entirely new. “Boling” had been used for a long time, in connection with the firm’s office chair line, as a trade mark or brand name. “Boling Chairs” had already been established nationally as a *product* of High Point Bending and Chair Company—mostly by word of mouth.

*

In Boling’s headquarters at Siler City six executive offices are walled with a special solid wood paneling, designed to display each of the five different woods and finishes that are most often used in the manufacture of Boling furniture.

The lobby and conference room are finished out in solid walnut. Vice President J. K. Boling’s adjacent office is in cherry, and Secretary Ben S. Foust has pecan wood on his walls. President Jack Boling is surrounded by hard maple. The office of Treasurer K. G. Clapp is in pecan, and oak provides the paneled walls where Gregg

Phillips, regional sales manager, assistant to J. K. Boling and also a company stockholder, holds forth.

The wall panels of wood used in the manufacture of chairs and desks was the idea of F. J. (Jack) Boling, Sr. All the panels were given a furniture finish which means that in their Boling workplace Boling principals are surrounded by elaborate displays of exactly what the various woods look like when fabricated into furniture. These ever-present samples offer constant assistance to discussions with customer visitors.

*

All manufacturing enterprises have their share of mishaps. Things go wrong; less than first quality products show up at the end of the line; and items sometimes do not perform as they were intended. The oldtimers at Boling recall such an instance in the early "bending company" days.

A railroad carload of bent bows, designed for captain's chairs, was shipped to a New England company for assembly. Something went wrong and when the car was opened for unloading at the end of its trip north all the bows had to some extent straightened out. They were no longer pieces of wood engineered for a round chair back. Of course they were rejected, shipped back to Siler City, and replaced by a second cargo with a truly permanent bend.

Meanwhile the ingenious Boling craftsmen were asked to find some use for the expensive wood that had made the trip to New England and back. It was reworked to another use, helping create a new chair style that used bentwood parts needing less of a bend.

*

During the period of time bracketed by the 1920s and the 1960s the card game of bridge rode a crest of popularity. Bridge clubs and bridge parties were everywhere. Daily newspapers carried bridge columns. Classes were organized to teach the game. Experts lectured to groups interested in improving their game. Players travelled great distances to shuffle cards for days, playing out tournaments to

determine champions.

This trend did not go unnoticed by Boling leaders who kept an eye on furniture needs as they fluctuated with kaleidoscopic lifestyle changes. The company added another item to its varied list of experimental products and came out with a patented card table.

As a matter of tradition bridge tables were made with collapsible legs so they could be stored in closets and corners when not in use. The Boling bridge table was so designed that—when it was turned with table surface up—the four legs automatically fell down and locked in position, ready for the card players.

*

Plants and offices at Siler City occupy seven city blocks near the heart of the largest municipality in Chatham County. Five principal buildings provide 250,000 square feet of operational space.

The Factory "A" building complex houses the machine, assembly, and finishing departments. Connecting buildings house the dry kilns and dry lumber storage areas. Adjacent to this building are the lumber yard and the storage and receiving building.

South of Factory "A" another complex houses the upholstering department, shipping department, corporate offices, Southeastern Equipment Co. office and corporate showroom.

Factory "B" building houses machine, assembly, and finishing departments. The sample and jig departments, along with the machine shop and maintenance department for both plants, are also in the Factory "B" building.

The fifth building is a catch-all warehouse for finished goods waiting to be shipped.

*

The most common piece of furniture — and the most used and useful — is the chair. When did people stop sitting on the ground, or floor, and move to something a little more elevated; and how did it come to be called a "chair"?

The English word "chair" is derived from the French "chaire,"

meaning a pulpit, and modified in modern French to "chaise." The French derived "chaire" from the Latin, and the Latins got their word from the Greek "kathedra," meaning seat.

Greek chairs were artistic in design and made of bentwood, frequently with sloping backs. The spread of Greek and Roman culture westward introduced the chair to less advanced European nations.

From the 16th to 18th century various types of chairs were introduced into France, the earliest types being rudely carved out of wood. Later they were upholstered. From the heavy types of the 16th century, chairs gradually evolved to light and elegant forms with cane-bottoms or upholstery.

By 1980 chairs — such as those found in the Boling catalog — had little resemblance to "sitting furniture" of earlier centuries. Contoured for body fit, styled for eye appeal, upholstered for comfort, and finished to become part of any decorator's dream, the chairs of 1980 do something for everybody and everything for some bodies.

*

Carlos L. Lopez-Benitez, a native of Spain, who came to America by way of Cuba and a career in furniture manufacturing there before the days of Castro, designed the special "limited edition" chair that marked the Boling Co.'s 75th anniversary in 1980. Mr. Lopez-Benitez is chief designer for The Boling Co.

The special chair was signed and numbered by the designer for the 159 collectors who received the anniversary chairs.

With the "limited edition" designer Lopez-Benitez created a chair equally useful and adaptable for either home living room or office surroundings. It is of oak and has upholstery and cushions of top grain leather in a tangerine color. One knife-edge cushion is attached to the seat and another, which is removable, serves as a back pillow. Decorative brass nails are hand driven, head to head, in a continuous line around the arms, back, and seat frame.

The special chairs were crafted at the company's Siler City plant and on their completion, Boling destroyed the patterns, to never again turn out that particular chair.

Senor Lopez-Benitez has been designing for Boling since the early 1970's. He has, in his words, "embraced the image of Boling and retained the personality of a company that has been highly successful at making and marketing chairs."

Carlos L. Lopez-Benitez started designing for Boling in 1974. Prior to that Luther Draper and Henry Glass were Boling designers, along with Byron S. Clapp, Boling's production vice president.

*

With World War II the United States moved quickly to conserve the use of all metals in industrial circles, to assure availability for armaments and general wartime use. These restrictions caught up with Boling wood chair production at Siler City. This wartime ruling included: No metal parts for swivel mechanisms on office chairs.

The Bolings moved rapidly to find a metal substitute and keep up with the increasing need for chairs for expanding government, military, and war production offices. Experimentation quickly settled on wood as a replacement of metal for standard chairs. It was a tough assignment, but customers were assured that the Bolings would, somehow, make an all-wood swivel contraption that would substitute for the traditional metal part. Siler City craftsmen started their experimentation with a wooden spring, using flat pieces of tough wood to permit a chair to flex backward under the sitter, then return to a fixed position. Everything tried produced a noisy squeak with the spring-back.

Experimentation moved on to a substitute wooden part that would permit movement of the chair from left to right. The steel ball bearing that could have supported this swinging motion was no longer to be had. The inventors looked at the glass marble ("a little ball of agate for use in children's games") and a test chair was rigged to turn for hundreds of cycles (with a sandbag in the chair instead of a human body). The glass marble didn't crush as had been feared and that aspect of the new device became "go" — if enough marbles could be found. After a fruitless search through toy suppliers and the usual sources of such items, chair company representatives started canvass-

ing "five-and-ten-cent" stores. There, now ignored by war-conscious young people, they found an ample supply of the glass substitute for steel ball bearings.

Ability to adjust the height of the chair was next. This had always been accomplished with a threaded metal staff that was no longer to be had. A wooden dowel pin, with a choice of settings, became the answer, and production of office chairs was moving again.

The Boling operation was the only chair maker to work out a wartime substitute for metal swivel devices. A requested U.S. patent protected the wooden mechanism and the Siler City company became the envy of all other chair makers.

And as a post script to this post script: During its diamond anniversary year Boling found one of these chairs with the wooden apparatus still in use in the office of the Siler City Baptist Church, traded a 1980 model for it, and became the proud possessor of the unique antique.

*

Boling, the largest firm of its type in the world, still managed by its founding family, sells ultimately to offices, institutions, and homes all over the world. From utility stools to handsome executive chairs with leather upholstery; from baby high chairs to porch swings; from hand-painted chairs with floral designs to the company's "workhorse" design — steady and reliable ole No. 150; the principal Boling objective for three quarters of a century has been to design and style beautiful and dependable all-purpose seating.

That tried and true Style No. 150, continuously in demand, is perhaps the all-time star of the Boling chair show. It was first made at Boling in 1920 and with all its improvements through 50 years of production, still looks much the same as when first marketed as the "Douglas Arm Chair" and "Captain's Chair."

No. 150 has collected a dozen different names. It is standard equipment for fire departments where firemen lean back in what they know as the "Firehouse Chair." Railroad circles know it as the "Caboose Chair" because of its original popularity in the cabooses of

trains pulled by steam locomotives. The trade has also known No. 150 as a "Barroom Chair," "Barbershop Chair," "Cracker Barrel Chair," "Livery Stable Chair," and "Post Office Chair" — because of the frequency with which it was bought for these locations and uses. Colleges bought so many that it was called the "Dormitory Chair."

Chair history indicates that a rugged version of what became Boling No. 150 was being made in America prior to 1900 and was widely used by pioneers who opened up the western part of America — because it was durable enough to withstand the extremely hard usage to which it was subjected on long wagon train trips west. Boling has a recorded history of two such chairs that went west in covered wagons and ultimately turned up in Honolulu.

In addition to all this, No. 150 early on became very popular as an "Office Chair" and is still bought for that usage. As a matter of fact No. 150 produced its own progeny, providing a handsome spin-off known as the "Bank of England Chair," widely used by institutions, in board rooms, and around business establishments generally.

*

All photographs of Captain Mallie Boling made after he reached full maturity show him wearing a hat. Members of his family recall that he wore a hat almost all the time, indoors and out. The reason: He lost his hair and was sensitive about his bald state.

*

Jim Boling, who is responsible for sales, points out that Boling is a dealer-oriented company. "Our dealers have made us what we are and we are careful to always work through them," he says.

And there are 3,000 of these dealers across the United States, selling goods that are delivered from Siler City and 11 warehouses scattered from Boston to Seattle. Sales in Alaska and Hawaii are handled from Seattle and San Francisco, and international sales are handled from New York City.

The first two automobiles in Chatham County were owned by officials of the wood bending operation that became The Boling Co. Both were "garaged" in Siler City.

On September 1, 1909, M.J. Boling purchased a new two-cylinder, 22-horsepower Reo. It was the talk of the town, subject to curious stares from everybody, and brought people from great distances just to see what this new "horseless carriage" looked like.

A short while later, W.P. Brown — who had come to Siler City from Cleveland, Ohio to serve as "mill manager" of a firm M.J. Boling had reorganized to change from the production of wagon and buggy rims to the bending of "goosenecks" and other parts for chairs — purchased a "runabout." The make and manufacturer of Mr. Brown's car has been lost in the fadings to which such bits of history are subjected.

The first automobile ever to enter Chatham County had appeared in Pittsboro two years before — on March 25, 1907. It stopped on Main Street for a time and immediately attracted a large and curious crowd that came running from all directions as word spread through town that an *automobile* had stopped (not "parked," yet) near the county courthouse.

The first car in the county was on its way from Danville, Va., to Horry County, S.C., traversing the dirt roads of that time.

*

It's a fact of business life that manufacturing plants of all kinds sometimes get amusing telephone calls, mixed in with the ebb and flow of the communications tide. Some of these become a part of company legend. Two such calls are remembered at Boling.

In the early days of film making a call came from the Walt Disney organization in Hollywood, looking for chairs that would break up easily. Disney was shooting a movie that involved a bar room brawl. A number of Boling (then High Point Bending) chairs had been purchased for the set and were supposed to break up when used as weapons in the melee. The trouble, the caller said, was that brawling actors and stand-ins couldn't break the chairs. "Can't you provide us with something that can easily be broken?" the caller asked. "We

don't care anything about the color or style, we just need 150 chairs that can be easily splintered."

The Bolings couldn't fill that order.

*

And then there was the call to Siler City from a long-time Boling supplier.

Over the years the Bolings had a number of subsidiaries and operated related businesses under various names. Such a situation brought a telephone call to Siler City from a supply house in the north that had long served the Bolings.

"I've just had one hell of an order for swivel control parts from a Siler City firm I never heard of," the caller said. "What's going on down there?"

*

Some stray bits and pieces of information on wood and chairs and people:

Traditionally the finest chairs are made of wood. This is true because wooden chairs enhance their charm and value with passing years. Wood has distinction, a warmth of tone and feel, and the wood itself provides an endless variety of patterns not found in any other material. Wood laughs at rust, provides beauty and decoration in its own grain and texture, and radiates an atmosphere of worth and achievement.

Boling rocking chairs have rockers of *bent* wood in contrast to an industry-wide practice of *sawing* rockers from a wood dimension, and no rocker buyer needs an explanation of the advantages of a bent rocker over a sawed rocker.

The folks who keep up with production figures at Boling estimate that — if a running record had been kept on chairs that went from Boling to the consuming public in the first 75 years of operation — the total number of chairs would provide a chair of some sort for every person in the western hemisphere.

Conclusion

The 75th anniversary of any person or thing marks a venerable age. Such a milestone heralds experience gained and knowledge acquired; it proclaims an accumulation of wisdom that can be turned to ripe advantage. A 75th birthday communicates that here is an "elder statesman."

The combination of continued existence and extraordinary growth means that experience has been put to good advantage. At age 75 Boling is in its prime — stronger than ever, wiser than ever, more determined than ever to use three quarters of a century of accumulated skill and talent to make and deliver a better product in every respect.

In 1924, when Boling was 20 years old, the Chatham News issued a special "Greater Chatham County Edition" of that newspaper. The Boling company — High Point Bending and Chair Company at that time — had an advertisement in that special issue of the county newspaper. The advertisement was used to say some things that can well be repeated more than half a century later. From the fragile, crumbling, yellowed newsprint of 56 years before, the Boling leadership said (and continues to say) to Chatham County and the world:

"We are a Siler City institution that stands for the moral and material welfare and progress of Siler City and Chatham County. We believe in our community and its people. We believe that progress can come only from concerted effort, hearty co-operation and service rendered.

"It is our Creed to: At all times make the very best products ... Value the good will and confidence of those who use our goods above any monetary value ... Produce high quality at all times ... And render a service to our clientele and our community."

Because furniture manufacturing is, and always has been, a labor intensive business, with a great deal of hand work necessary, *people* are heavily involved. This means that craftsmanship and worker loyalty rank high in an industry that is tightly bound by tradition and pride. In this prevailing atmosphere the Boling reputation is, and has been, protected with extensive quality control measures — because the Bolings have always said, with emphasis, that *"reputation is*

everything."

This look back at the past, with some analysis of the present, demonstrates that here is a business institution at full stature, with satisfaction in its past, strength in its present, and ample challenge in its future.



Written in 1979
Published in 1980



BOLING

THE BOLING CO./P.O. BOX 409/SILER CITY, N.C. 27344
MAKERS OF FINE WOOD FURNITURE SINCE 1904