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At Fairfield — the “Quiet Giant” of Lenoir —
furniture is a family tradition.

written by LORI K. TATE

When Anne-Lindsay Beall (opposite) began working as the lead director of Fairfield’s Board of Directors in 2022, following a 22-year career at SAS in Cary, she says it felt like a homecoming.



The white tulip table where Anne-Lindsay Beall eats lunch has an iconic profile with a touch of whimsy, blending the past with the present in elegant style.

She's sitting in the boardroom of Fairfield, the 104-year-old furniture company her great-grandfather started in Lenoir, but this isn't a typical corporate setting. Instead of overlooking a factory or towering in a high-rise, this boardroom is a former apartment in the historic Fairfield House, finished in 1829 by Anne-Lindsay's great-great-great-grandfather James Harper. It's the same house where, growing up, she spent Friday nights with her grandparents, and the same room where she used to sneak chocolate chip cookies from her great-aunt Mary-Lindsay, her namesake.

"We had all of our July Fourth picnics at this house under the walnut tree," Anne-Lindsay

recalls. "The kids would pick up those nasty green walnuts and throw them at each other. I was in and out of this house my whole childhood."

Now she's in and out of the house as the fourth generation of leadership for Fairfield, a company that employs some 500 people in Lenoir. In its two plants — including a 1912 factory building located just a block from Fairfield House — it produces an average of 2,000 unique pieces of upholstered furniture a week. Quite an accomplishment considering that between 1999 and 2009, North Carolina's furniture industry lost more than half its jobs, and competitors like Bernhardt and Broyhill stopped manufacturing or closed their Lenoir plants.

With its enduring commitment to Caldwell County, Fairfield stayed afloat and continues to make 80 percent of its products domestically. Even during the pandemic, employees produced



**As the family put down roots,
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reputation for making furniture.**

masks and gowns in order to keep the doors open. The black walnut tree, estimated to be more than 250 years old, still stands tall outside the home, and the Beall (pronounced Bell) family still keeps its delivery trucks filled as it supports the community it loves.



One of the oldest homes in Caldwell County, Fairfield House is like a living showroom for the company's furniture. John Beall (above), chairman of the board at Fairfield, lived in the house as a boy and serves as the unofficial docent.

ANNE-LINDSAY'S FAMILY HAS BEEN INVESTING IN Lenoir since before the town's inception. It was James Harper who donated 30 acres to the group that established Lenoir in 1841. Originally from Fairfield, Pennsylvania, he'd moved to the area for health reasons and opened J. Harper & Son, a general store.

As the family put down roots, the region was steadily building a reputation for making furniture thanks to its abundance of hardwoods, local craftsmanship, and low-cost labor. Many Foothills residents made the switch from farming to earning steady wages offered by factory jobs, and by 1900, 44 furniture factories were operating in High Point and surrounding towns.

One of those factories, the Ethel Chair Company, went bankrupt in 1921, and James Harper Beall Sr., Anne-Lindsay's great-grandfather, saw an opportunity. As president of Bank of Lenoir, he bought the company. He recapitalized, renamed, and relaunched it, with his main impetus being to keep jobs in Lenoir.

James Harper Beall II ran the company after



Fairfield employs some 500 people in Lenoir, including Greg Van Dyke, who operates a computerized lathe in Plant 1, and Sylvia Roark (below right), who leads the cutting department in Plant 2.

that, priming his son James “Harper” Beall III, Anne-Lindsay’s father, to be president. Harper got his start at age 16, sweeping the floors, loading lumber, and cleaning out the boiler, one of the oldest in the state. He worked his way up and spent more than 40 years at Fairfield before his death in 2019.



JAMES HARPER
BEALL III

Just like his father, Harper knew his employees by name, and when he asked how they were doing, he stuck around to hear the answer. Cleta Bennett pauses in reverence before sharing the kind things he did for her. An employee for nearly 30 years, some of those as Harper’s executive assistant, Bennett remembers how he paid for her family to fly to Colorado to attend her father’s memorial service.

Then there’s the story of an employee who’d recently been diagnosed with diabetes and needed to see a doctor. Harper, also a diabetic, gave up his own appointment with a specialist in Hickory because his employee needed the medical attention more.

“That’s how Harper was. He would do things so wonderful for people and didn’t want any recognition for it,” says Lisa Thomson, who’s worked at Fairfield for 22 years.

Harper’s imprint remains indelible throughout

When Harper asked how his employees were doing, he stuck around to hear the answer.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JON ECKARD. PORTRAIT COURTESY OF FAIRFIELD

On the wall is Harper's mantra: "Make every chair as though you were going to own it yourself."

the company. Along one wall of Plant 2, just above workers trimming chairs and sofas with individually hammered nails, is his mantra: "Make every chair as though you were going to own it yourself."

Anne-Lindsay says her father cared deeply about the furniture Fairfield created because he knew it was going into people's businesses and homes to provide comfort, ease, and beauty in their lives. "My dad listened more than he talked, treated everyone with respect, and quietly helped others," she says. "He was a brilliant businessman who made bold moves that grew the company, but he was humble and quiet about his success."

That approach to business earned the company the moniker "Quiet Giant." In the Foothills, where the furniture industry thrived throughout most of the 20th century, Fairfield flew under the radar. Some of the locals who work at Fairfield didn't know about the company until they applied for a job there. But even as the industry faltered in the early 2000s,



DIXON MITCHELL

the Bealls stayed true to the family tradition: keeping furniture in Lenoir.

AS DIXON MITCHELL, THE PRESIDENT AND CEO OF Fairfield, walks through the finishing department in Plant 2, skeletons of chairs dangle on a line like Christmas lights as workers spray them with the precision that only years of practice can render.

"I'm not an ivory tower guy in my office," he says. "I'm managing by walking around, talking to the people, finding out the problems and good things."

A native of Hickory, Mitchell has spent 35 years in the furniture industry. He's seen companies come and go in the region, along with the devastating effects major closings have had on the community. To combat that, he has reinvigorated Fairfield during his eight years there by launching a rebranding campaign, implementing a strategic plan, and upgrading equipment to state-of-the-art robotic machinery.

He refers to Fairfield's business components as a three-legged stool. There's private label (making furniture for other companies that do the marketing), the commercial sector (country clubs, funeral homes, hospitality, and senior living), and conventional retail.

While chairs with clean lines, rich upholstery, and meticulous finishes are still a big part of the business, Fairfield has evolved from its roots as a chair manufacturer: Today, it makes furniture for every room of the home, offering collections with mid-century influences, as well as traditional pieces with modern flair.



Employees like Lisa Thompson, who's been with Fairfield for 22 years, have helped the company grow far beyond its roots as a chair manufacturer.



INSIDE PLANT 1, OLD LINEBERRY CARTS LOADED WITH freshly cut pieces of solid wood stand next to million-dollar machines. Twenty-seven people touch each piece of furniture before it leaves the plants. This mix of old and new — modern machinery combined with expert craftsmanship — demonstrates Fairfield's respect for the past and its anticipation for the future.

"I have the philosophy that we need to work really hard, so we need to laugh; we need to enjoy each other," Mitchell says.

He recalls the fun that coworkers have together while competing in Halloween contests, breaking bread during the annual Thanksgiving barbecue dinner, and building floats for Lenoir's Starry Night Christmas Parade. Creating this kind of atmosphere builds trust, and Mitchell and Anne-Lindsay both say that Fairfield's people are its greatest asset. In return, its employees are loyal to the company: Many of them say it's where they want to retire.

"Everybody just helps everybody," says Sylvia Roark, who leads the cutting department in Plant 2 and has worked for Fairfield for 46 years. Roark takes her job seriously — she always wants



Anne-Lindsay remembers how her father, Harper, happily set aside his work to spend time with her.

to know which furniture her cut pieces are going to — but she also appreciates the fact that she can celebrate birthdays with coworkers. "They've been good to me, so I can't complain about working here whatsoever," she says. "I'm glad it's still going strong."

That's the goal of Fairfield's leadership team, to keep everything going strong — in Lenoir.

Back at Fairfield House, there's a photo that Anne-Lindsay cherishes. It's Halloween, and she's 5 years old, wearing a furry gray mouse costume and snuggled up on her father's lap. Her father is dressed for the office in his pressed white shirt. His files and reports are put to the side as he sits on a circa-1970s couch — made by Fairfield, of course — playing with his daughter. One of the things she loved most about him was that he always made time for her.

"My dad was a great leader, and I want so much to be like him. There are not that many great leaders in this world, and he just set such a beautiful example," she says. "That's what I want to follow."

She's determined to carry on his legacy, to keep up the tradition of making furniture in Lenoir. She knows he'd be proud. **Os**

Lori K. Tate is a writer, editor, and blogger who lives in Cornelius.