

Oral History Interview

with

MR. ELIS OLSSON
Chairman, Chesapeake Corporation of Virginia

West Point, Virginia
February 18, 1959

by Elwood R. Maunder, Forest History Foundation, Inc.

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MAUNDER: Mr. Olsson, I'd like to get a little bit about your personal life, your background. Tell us first of all where you were born.

OLSSON: I was born in Sweden, in Varmland in the County of Karlskoga, where all good people come from.

MAUNDER: Where is that, up in the northern part of Sweden?

OLSSON: No, it's in the middle part of Sweden.

MAUNDER: What kind of business was your father in?

OLSSON: He was in the steel industry; he had a big foundry where blast furnaces made cast iron. He had two blast furnaces.

MAUNDER: Well, how does it happen that you didn't go into the steel business instead of coming over here?

OLSSON: Because those blast furnaces petered out before I left Sweden.

MAUNDER: When was that?

OLSSON: I left Sweden in 1906.

MAUNDER: Where did you go to school?

OLSSON: Well, we were six children so we had a governess in our home and after that I went to Kristinehamn and Orebro. I got my technical education in Orebro.

MAUNDER: And that was pointing you in what direction? Engineering?

OLSSON: Engineering.

MAUNDER: All right, then what brought you to this country?

OLSSON: I thought they needed some good engineers here!

MAUNDER: Oh! Well, what made you leave the wonderful country of Sweden from which all good people come? Were times bad or what?

OLSSON: No. I just left because I thought it would be an interesting thing for a young man.

MAUNDER: Were you married before you left?

OLSSON: No.

MAUNDER: You got married when you got over here?

OLSSON: Quite a while after.

MAUNDER: How did you come over, by steamship?

OLSSON: Yes, there was no other way then.

MAUNDER: Well, you came over in a Swedish steamer?

OLSSON: A Danish steamer.

MAUNDER: And you came to Canada or New York?

OLSSON: I came to New York.

MAUNDER: And where did you go from there?

OLSSON: I went to Mechanicville, New York.

MAUNDER: Did you get a job there?

OLSSON: I got a job there in a mill, a paper mill.

MAUNDER: Whose paper mill was that?

OLSSON: West Virginia Pulp and Paper mill.

MAUNDER: What did you do in that mill?

OLSSON: I worked as a laborer.

MAUNDER: In other words you started at the very bottom of this industry and worked your way up.

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: What kind of work did you do in that mill at Mechanicville?

OLSSON: I was in the screening department and I made some suggestions there. Then they wanted me to go into the laboratory; but I told them I would rather work in the mill even though they offered me twice the pay I was getting in the mill if I'd go to the laboratory. But I liked mill work. I had only been there probably two months when I was asked to go to another plant.

MAUNDER: And what plant was that?

OLSSON: That plant belonged to Union Bag and it was in New York State. Sandy Hill was the name of the town.

MAUNDER: How did you get on to that other job?

OLSSON: I was asked to come there; somebody thought I was bright, I guess.

MAUNDER: Oh, they did. Did you know how to speak English in those days.

OLSSON: I spoke good English when I came over here.

MAUNDER: I see. You had learned English when you were in school in Sweden.

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: So you could communicate well with your new friends in America. Did you have any relatives over here when you came?

OLSSON: No.

MAUNDER: You came here completely by yourself and it was your own operation from the very start. Now you went to this Union Bag job in Sandy Hill.

OLSSON: Yes, it was called that then. I think they have changed the name now, but I don't know what they call it.

MAUNDER: What did you do for them?

OLSSON: I worked in the sulphite mill, because they were short of pulp and I managed to increase production a little over ten per cent.

MAUNDER: Well, in what capacity did they hire you? What was your job there?

OLSSON: I don't know what capacity I had.

MAUNDER: Well, what did they call you? What was the name of your job?

OLSSON: I don't know what the job was. You see, they put me to work to see if I could improve things, and they didn't pay me any too damn much for it either.

MAUNDER: So how long did you stay with them?

OLSSON: I don't remember, probably three months.

MAUNDER: And you had been with West Virginia for only two months and then you went from Union Bag where?

OLSSON: I remember when I was in Sandy Hill, I was asked to build a mill in Sweden and went back to Sweden. But when I got there they had gotten somebody else, but I stayed in Sweden for about a year.

MAUNDER: That would have been about 1909?

OLSSON: No. It was about 1907 when I went back, and I stayed close to a year.

MAUNDER: Where did you stay, in your old home?

OLSSON: In my old home.

MAUNDER: Did you work at all during that time?

OLSSON: Only a very little.

MAUNDER: And then what did you do? You decided to come back again to this country?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: And where did you go then? Did you have a job offered you?

OLSSON: No, I never tried to get any. I think I went to Rumford Falls in Maine.

MAUNDER: And who did you work for? Oxford Paper Company?

OLSSON: Yes, Oxford Paper Company.

MAUNDER: And how did you get that job?

OLSSON: Well, that wasn't very much of a job, but I stayed there probably about six months, or a little longer. We were experimenting with a bleach process, a man by the name of Whiting and I. And from there I went to Canada.

MAUNDER: And who did you work for up in Canada?

OLSSON: I worked for this man, Martinson. He left the company to go to Canada to run a sulphate mill.¹

MAUNDER: Did Martinson start a new company up there?

OLSSON: No, the company was there but the men had remodeled the old mill. The manager had left and gone to Wisconsin and built a sulphate mill there.

MAUNDER: Who was that?

OLSSON: His name was Bache-wiig.²

MAUNDER: And he went out to Mosinee, Wisconsin, and built a sulphate mill?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: Was he one of the first men to build such mills in that area?

OLSSON: That was the first sulphate mill on this continent.

MAUNDER: And it was built by this man . . . ?

OLSSON: No, it was not built, it was an old soda mill which was remodeled to a sulphate mill.

MAUNDER: But this man who went out to Wisconsin was the man who had remodeled it?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: Do you know any of the particulars how it happened to be built here? Why did this man do it, had he been to Germany or Sweden or something and seen . . .

OLSSON: He came from Norway. He was an engineer and knew something about the sulphate business.

1. Brompton Pulp and Paper Company, East Angus, Quebec.
2. Olai Bache-wiig, Mosinee Paper Mills Company, built in 1910.

MAUNDER: Why did he go out to Wisconsin?

OLSSON: To build a new mill.

MAUNDER: He was building mills?

OLSSON: No, but he built that one in Wisconsin, and he stayed there. He was killed falling from a horse when he was riding.

MAUNDER: Well, now, you came up to Canada then and worked in this sulphate mill. What was your job in the mill?

OLSSON: I was superintendent.

MAUNDER: You moved up the line fast and you built the production of this mill up?

OLSSON: Yes. When I came there they made thirty tons a day and when I left we made a little over ninety.

MAUNDER: You tripled the capacity of the mill.

OLSSON: Yes, approximately.

MAUNDER: How had you done this? Was this a matter of just using methods that you knew about from the old country?

OLSSON: Well, I developed the mill to that extent to make that amount.

MAUNDER: Well, how did you develop this mill? Did you have to get more capital to build it up?

OLSSON: No, they had the capital, the company that owned the mill.

MAUNDER: And they were willing to spend money?

OLSSON: Yes. And we made it for them.

MAUNDER: And how long were you with them?

OLSSON: I think I was there nine or ten years. I left in 1918.

MAUNDER: That was during World War I. Tell me, did the war have anything to do with the growth of the paper business?

OLSSON: I don't think so.

MAUNDER: There was no big demand for paper because of the war?

OLSSON: No.

MAUNDER: What got you to leave Canada?

OLSSON: This mill¹ at West Point had been built and I was offered the opportunity to buy part of it with Christopher Hannevig, who had been told about it by the sales manager from the Brompton Pulp and Paper Company.

MAUNDER: That was Mr. Boyd.

OLSSON: Walter Scott Boyd. Well, Boyd had got interested in buying this plant and saw great opportunities. I was supposed to get one-third of the plant for making a job of it and Hannevig was supposed to furnish the money. At the time he was a very wealthy man. He was supposed to be worth \$40,000,000 when I first heard about him, and he went broke in two years.

MAUNDER: But in the meantime. . .

OLSSON: He was in the shipping business and he borrowed so much money, on every boat that he bought in order to be able to buy another boat, and when the war was over and the boats were worth nothing, he just went broke. He had his own bank in New York City, he owned a bank on lower Broadway, and opposite the bank he had his shipping outfit. It was two floors in an office building.

MAUNDER: But you got him to put some money into the purchase of this property here?

OLSSON: Well, he put in a little. If I had seen the plant here before I came, I would never have come, because it was the nearest to nothing that could be and claim to be a plant.

MAUNDER: But you came down here sight unseen and took over the management of this plant?

OLSSON: Yes. I was lucky that I hadn't seen it, because if I had seen it I wouldn't have come down.

MAUNDER: Had you made any investigations beforehand to find out if you could make pulp by the sulphate method here?

OLSSON: I used the sulphate method up in East Angus.

MAUNDER: But you were going to use it down here, too, weren't you?

OLSSON: Yes. I had wood shipped up to me from the South to Canada. I made pulp in the laboratory. And there were only two mills in the South when I came here, neither of them any good.

1. Chesapeake Pulp and Paper Company.

MAUNDER: Where were they?

OLSSON: One was in Halifax, in Roanoke Rapids¹, the Halifax Paper Company. One was in Orange, Texas. I've forgotten the name of the plant.

MAUNDER: But there were two sulphate mills down here at that time?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: Now, when did you have southern pine shipped up to you in Canada for a test cook?

OLSSON: Probably a few months before I came down.

MAUNDER: This wasn't something that you had been working on and planning to do for any length of time?

OLSSON: No.

MAUNDER: In other words, when you got a notion that you might come down and operate here in the south, you sent down for some southern pine and had it shipped up there for you to test out in your laboratory?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: And what you found out made you think that you could do well with the use of southern pine so you came down here?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: When you came down you found that the plant wasn't anywhere near what it ought to be?

OLSSON: That's right, it was the nearest to nothing.

MAUNDER: Who was running the plant when you got here, who had set it up?

OLSSON: I really don't know who **had** been there. And if I knew I wouldn't tell you because I would hate for anybody to read about such a damn job and outfit.

MAUNDER: You had to redesign and rebuild the whole plant?

OLSSON: Yes. I had an engineer² with me that used to work in engineering up in the Brompton Pulp and Paper Company. I got him to come down here, so he made all the drawings of what we have done here. He was a very good engineer.

1. Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina.
2. John Paul Ekberg, also Swedish born.

MAUNDER: What was his name?

OLSSON: Ekberg.

MAUNDER: He's the fellow who is now living in Connecticut, right?

OLSSON: He's living in Riverside, Connecticut, yes.

MAUNDER: And he helped you redesign and rebuild the mill?

OLSSON: Yes, he made the drawings and . . .

MAUNDER: Have you got any of the old records of the company that go back to those early days?

OLSSON: No, I suppose they have been destroyed.

MAUNDER: What about your own letters and things that you wrote back and forth in the early days, do you still have them?

OLSSON: No. I threw them away.

MAUNDER: What a silly thing to do! I didn't think a smart Swede would do a thing like that.

OLSSON: Well, it probably was foolish. There were things that maybe I should not have thrown away.

MAUNDER: Since 1918 you have carried out a steady process of expanding and modernizing this plant here, but your predecessors from Cincinnati came in in 1914.

OLSSON: Yes, the one that owned the plant at that time, Mr. Nichols.¹

MAUNDER: And you came in 1918?

OLSSON: We bought the plant from Nichols then.

MAUNDER: What has been your policy over the years in regard to expanding and developing the plant?

OLSSON: The same policy as everybody has, they wanted to grow, and be as prosperous as possible. The only policy that I can say which probably is a little different than at the present -- I never liked to be in debt, although I have been. It had to pay out only what it could get out.

1. Harold W. Nichols, president, Fox Paper Company, Cincinnati, Ohio.

MAUNDER: In other words you would go ahead only as you saw the opportunity very soon to pay off what it cost?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: Where did you get the men to run the plant here when you came? I suppose there were some already on the job, but did you bring anybody else down from Canada with you?

OLSSON: No.

MAUNDER: You recruited your help right here in West Point?

OLSSON: Right in West Point.

MAUNDER: Where did you get your wood for the plant? Did you get it off your own lands or did you buy it?

OLSSON: No, we didn't have any land. We bought it. There were no roads here then. The only way to get to West Point was by train.

MAUNDER: Were you bringing any wood in by barge in those days?

OLSSON: Every bit of it came in by barge. There was a little local wood, but there were no roads, so we had to get it by barge.

MAUNDER: You got it by barge and some by train?

OLSSON: No, not by train, that came later.

MAUNDER: And you didn't own any timber lands of your own?

OLSSON: Very little, probably a couple thousand acres.

MAUNDER: When did you start buying timber lands?

OLSSON: As soon as we could afford it. I would say probably five or six years. I have always been interested in forestry. People used to laugh at me because they thought it was too much work, it would grow enough without any work.

MAUNDER: When did you start developing a forestry program in this company?

OLSSON: I don't remember. The first time I got a forester was probably around 1934 or '35, something like that.

MAUNDER: Then you started a forestry operation on your own woodlands?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: What has been your policy in regard to wages and labor relations in this company over the years?

OLSSON: Well, we have had labor unions in for quite a few years and the policy is the same as every mill with the labor unions.

MAUNDER: You had a non-union situation for most of the early period. When did the union come in?

OLSSON: I don't quite remember.

MAUNDER: Last year, for example, you paid out forty-two cents of every dollar you had in income for buying wood from people who would sell it to you and you had twenty cents of your dollar that went to your employees, and sixteen cents went to taxes, and nine cents went to reinvestment in the company, and eight cents went for depreciation on the plant, and five cents went to dividends. Now have you maintained a record of about that average over the years, of about five per cent going to the stockholders, or is that just a recent trend?

OLSSON: I don't like to express myself on this. It can be found in the records, but I don't think you are interested in that.

MAUNDER: Well, that's part of the story of your company and we are not just interested in you and the sulphate process and a few historical dates, we are interested in the whole story of the paper industry -- how it developed, how it prospered, and that's a side of it that the records would show. Now you kept your records that would show this information so that if you ever do a company history it could be gathered, I take it, from those records?

OLSSON: Oh yes.

MAUNDER: I don't suppose you have any old records around here that go back to the Fox Paper Company days, the people that were here before you?

OLSSON: No, we don't have any of that.

MAUNDER: Do you suppose they have such records in Cincinnati?

OLSSON: I doubt it.

MAUNDER: Where did you get together the capital that you needed to redesign and re-open the operation here? I know you went to this Norwegian ship owner in New York and got some.

OLSSON: We formed the company, and then he got broke. If he hadn't gone broke I would have had nothing to worry about, but he had to step out because he had borrowed money from an insurance company and gave this company as security. So the insurance company, as I remember, sold it to a broker in New York.

MAUNDER: What did he do with it?

OLSSON: He kept it for a while. Then we managed to get people together in Richmond.

MAUNDER: I see, local capital?

OLSSON: Local capital, local people, and they stepped in and from that time on we had no worry. We had to expand slowly because we didn't know how good it was or what was going to happen, so we just stepped ahead slowly, until we got . . .

MAUNDER: How did you -- did you personally go out and sell these Richmond people on coming into this proposition?

OLSSON: Yes. There was a man named **Watt Ellerson**¹, who was president of ~~Albe~~marle Paper Manufacturing Company and at that time we were making pulp here and board, and I thought that would be an excellent chance for us to share that pulp for him to make kraft paper out of. So we managed to sell him on that idea and he sold his stockholders and his board of directors on the idea. So that was what made the capital.

MAUNDER: I see. So in a sense you sold one of your own customers . . .

OLSSON: No, he wasn't a customer then. He hadn't bought the pulp.

MAUNDER: He hadn't bought anything here up until that time?

OLSSON: Probably he was buying a little pulp, but he was not our customer. But then we sold him on the idea. Of course, before we managed to sell him, I imagine he had run some of the pulp and used it.

1. H. W. Ellerson.

MAUNDER: Now about this time Mr. Hannevig's association with you was lost -- what happened to your associate from up in Canada by the name of Boyd?

OLSSON: He left us during the period when we didn't know if we were going to get any money or not. He went to California.

MAUNDER: In the paper business?

OLSSON: I don't know. I never heard from him.

MAUNDER: But he dropped out of the company?

OLSSON: Not entirely, he had some stock in it, but got somebody to buy it.

MAUNDER: So under the new reorganization your position in the company was manager of the mill and part owner, is that right?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: What percentage of the stock did you own at that time?

OLSSON: I had thirty per cent.

MAUNDER: The other seventy per cent was held by this group of business men in the Albemarle Paper Company or in Richmond.

OLSSON: Yes. They were on the board of directors, I think all of them, at that time. After that for a period everything paid a dividend. There was one man on the board of directors that, after he had progressed, borrowed money on the common stock, a little more than he should have done. So when the depression of 1930-1931 came, the stock went down. And the bank sold that stock to another stockholder, and that stockholder today is one of the men that really did more work for the company than . . . well, of course, it should be told he is treasurer of the company now, and vice president, O. D. Dennis, Sr.

MAUNDER: Now tell me, the paper and pulp industry in the South had tremendous growth during the depression years, right?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: In other words, while most of the rest of the economy was sick your industry was beginning to really grow.

OLSSON: Yes, it grew, but it was sick, too, I think we were the only ones in the South, because there was work those two years, that paid taxes.

MAUNDER: The rest of them were not paying taxes.

OLSSON: They didn't make enough to pay taxes.

MAUNDER: Well, Champion¹ must have been paying taxes in that period.

OLSSON: I don't think Champion was much then. But I think we were the only ones that had to pay taxes. I might be wrong in that, though.

MAUNDER: But you showed a profit all through the depression years?

OLSSON: Yes. Not enough to pay dividends, but we were even, we were in the black.

MAUNDER: Now Mr. W. Clyde Gouldman² played an important role in the company . . .

OLSSON: He was sales manager.

MAUNDER: And what would you have to say about the job that he did for the company?

OLSSON: He did a very good job. Of course, he was a shrewd man and he was a great help to me because he was a good salesman and did what he should do to promote the product to his customers.

MAUNDER: Now, in the beginning, your company's market for its product was rather limited, wasn't it?

OLSSON: Well, in the beginning we had only liner board from a cylinder machine. When we put the big paper machine in we had to form a new company, where we owned half of it and Albemarle Paper Manufacturing Company owned the other half. We called it The Albemarle-Chesapeake Company, Inc.

1. Champion Pulp and Fibre Company.
2. W. Clyde Gouldman was vice president and general sales manager and secretary of the corporation, as well as a director, at the time of his death in West Point in 1953.

MAUNDER: So in one company you were producing only pulp and in the other company you were producing paper.

OLSSON: Yes. Paper and board, mostly board.

MAUNDER: Now you gradually expanded your market outwards and you began to sell a lot more in the foreign market, didn't you?

OLSSON: Yes. That's in very recent years that we have been selling, especially pulp, in the foreign market.

MAUNDER: In the early years not much at all?

OLSSON: None at all.

MAUNDER: What brought about the development of sales abroad? Did you make an all-out effort to get into that market?

OLSSON: Well, we did it just to keep the mill running. We were not protected by duties, and they imported so much of the foreign pulp and board, that we had to find a market ourselves.

MAUNDER: How did you go about selling your product in the foreign market? What means did you use to get foreign buyers?

OLSSON: We had pulp buyers and sellers in New York City looking after most of that.

MAUNDER: In other words you had a sales office up there?

OLSSON: No, we didn't have any office. There are organizations that do nothing else but sell pulp and paper, and we used them, as our agents.

MAUNDER: Did you do any amount of advertising at all?

OLSSON: No. Just a very little in a few magazines.

MAUNDER: The association with Albemarle, has that continued right down to the present time?

OLSSON: No. Not so long ago -- I don't remember what year¹-- we bought Albemarle's interest in the Albermarle-Chesapeake company and then formed this. Before that the name of it was The Chesapeake Corporation. When we bought this we made one company of it and put it on the stock exchange and we had to name it The Chesapeake Corporation of Virginia.

1. 1938.

We couldn't use just the name "Chesapeake Corporation" because there was a railroad that called itself the Chesapeake Corporation.

MAUNDER: Now going back just a little bit, you built a new mill here in 1928 to 1930, right?

OLSSON: Yes, that is the one we were talking about.

MAUNDER: You started it just before the depression hit the country.

OLSSON: Yes, I think that's right.

MAUNDER: The coming of the depression didn't seem to stop you from going ahead with the finishing of that mill or putting it into production.

OLSSON: No, nobody knew that it was going to be a long depression. And I'm damn glad we didn't because we always made a little money on that mill, even during the depression.

MAUNDER: In other words you just weren't convinced that the depression was going to last very long so you went right ahead.

OLSSON: Didn't know anything about it. Not any more than the brokers or the bankers.

MAUNDER: Then along about 1936 there was a tie-up with the Camps¹ over in Franklin. And you got into the pulp and paper business down there in Franklin for a while.

OLSSON: Well, we wanted to build a pulp and paper mill there and we had an offer for half interest in it if we would look after the building part of it, see that it was built right. We hired an engineer that had never built a pulp and paper mill before, so all we got through them was draftsmen, so they could do the drafting for us. But they didn't know a dang thing about a pulp and paper mill.

MAUNDER: And they wanted you to supervise that?

OLSSON: The company here supervised. I used to drive down there two or three times a week when we were building, and there was no road in those days; oh, there was a road but very poor.

MAUNDER: Now a little about that mill . . .

OLSSON: Frankly, it was quite successful. Later on they bought us out.

1. Camp Manufacturing Company, Inc.

MAUNDER: Why did you get out of that operation?

OLSSON: They wanted to buy us out, so that's why we got out. We would have been very happy to be with them. The Camp people are very nice people, good people to work with.

MAUNDER: Now for a time M. C. McDonald was a part of the organization?

OLSSON: He was president here. I hired him when he was in Monroe, Louisiana. He came here from Monroe, from the Brown Paper Mills down there, and I hired him as president here because I was getting to be sixty-five, time for me to retire. So he was the first president after me.

MAUNDER: Now you did a good bit of travelling around the country and looking at other paper mills and you were active, I assume, in trade association work?

OLSSON: No, I never was, and I never looked at other paper mills very much. I didn't travel much.

MAUNDER: You were down in Monroe, Louisiana . . .

OLSSON: I was down there because at that time they wanted to sell the mill. I had met McDonald in New York, so I knew him, and I thought about it a little and . . .

MAUNDER: But how did you come to meet McDonald in New York? Were you going to a pulp and paper industry meeting?

OLSSON: That's right. It was through making board, I imagine. McDonald was a pretty good engineer. There weren't very many that were available that I would have cared to have. And he came here and was here for about six years. And then Great Northern¹ hired him.

MAUNDER: Great Northern Paper hired him away from you?

OLSSON: Yes. Then I had to step in for a while myself, but then after that we got the best president this company ever had, when I stepped down.

MAUNDER: You stepped out and your son² came in?

OLSSON: Yes. He's the best president this company ever had.

MAUNDER: That's including the first one?

1. Great Northern Paper Company, Bangor, Maine.
2. Sture G. Olsson.

OLSSON: Including the first one! I'm not lying, I'm telling the truth.

MAUNDER: I know you are, but not everybody is as eager to tell that kind of truth.

OLSSON: Of course, everybody knows it that knows him.

MAUNDER: You introduced some new kinds of equipment and new processes in your operation here at West Point, and I believe one of the things you introduced here was a new pulp drier from Sweden.¹ Was that the first time that equipment was used in this country to your knowledge?

OLSSON: I think it was. I am pretty sure it was.

MAUNDER: How did you keep in touch with developments in the industry in the old country: Did you go back to Sweden quite often?

OLSSON: Not back in those days because I was too busy and the earnings weren't so high.

MAUNDER: But you used to keep up with what was new developing in the industry over there?

OLSSON: Yes. I knew the people where the pulp drier was built, and I knew when they had anything like that that there would be no humbug about it. I knew they would not sell something that was not what they said it was.

MAUNDER: Tell me, did the salesman of Swedish equipment used to come here to the company?

OLSSON: No. I haven't seen a Swedish salesman for I don't know how many years, except one a couple weeks ago.

MAUNDER: But they didn't used to come here?

OLSSON: No.

MAUNDER: How did you know about this equipment then? By just reading about it?

OLSSON: I don't remember just how we did. We have another piece of Swedish equipment here that people have copied for a method of bark storage and burning bark. Very clever arrangement.

MAUNDER: Do you think the Swedes have made a big contribution to the whole development of this industry -- especially through their mechanical processes?

1. Kamyra pulp drier.

OLSSON: Well, the sulphate pulp industry was invented in Germany, but first used in Sweden, I think, and then in Finland. Very little was made in Norway. But Sweden and Finland have been making sulphate pulp for a long time. It helped in a way because in the **sulphite** process, they could not use pine, they had to use spruce only. That's why they were glad when they could use the sulphate process to make paper.

MAUNDER: And they have had, probably, more experience in sulphate paper making than any one else?

OLSSON: Yes. I had one friend when I went to college who was a very good engineer, and he did more for the old original sulphate paper than any man in the world.

MAUNDER: Sixten Sandberg?

OLSSON: He was an outstanding man in that business.

MAUNDER: He died in 1948, I see.

MAUNDER: Well, it's obvious you have had some good connections with the old country all through the years.

OLSSON: Well, I had some connections, but never in industry. Never interested more than about the equipment.

MAUNDER: What about your efforts to develop and use high-pressure steam boilers here?

OLSSON: Well, people thought I was crazy, of course. We put in the first high-pressure steam boiler plants in the United States. Not only in pulp and paper, but in industry, as a whole. The only high-pressure boilers found then were in power plants. We put it in here because we had to do something to make money -- that's why I put them in here. I had trouble then with getting the equipment to use the high-pressure steam, and relieve it so I could use the exhaust. I thought I would have to go to Germany and buy steam engines, because I knew they had done that in Sweden. But then Westinghouse and General Electric finally came across. General Electric offered me a turbine then, with an efficiency, I'm ashamed to tell you, of thirty-two per cent. And Westinghouse, very shortly after, came out with an efficiency of sixty per cent, so I naturally bought Westinghouse. And Westinghouse first sent me a turbine that I wouldn't accept, so they had to take it out. Then they sent me the second turbine, which is still in there.

MAUNDER: Still in the plant! And other industry has followed in the wake of that and used it widely everywhere?

OLSSON: Yes. Now they got around 900 pounds and we have bought 900 pound pressure ourselves.

MAUNDER: What about your pioneering with things like the back-pressure turbine generators?

OLSSON: That's the same story. That's the Westinghouse machine.

MAUNDER: That you just told about. And the new recovery boilers, is that part of it, too?

OLSSON: Yes. There was one kind of recovery boiler that. . . A man in Combustion¹ and ourselves worked it out and we bought the first boiler and put it in here. It was absolutely outstanding compared with anything in the United States before. So we very quickly ordered a second one, a little bigger, and then we ordered a third one which is practically twice as big.

MAUNDER: That's where you are expanding your power plant right now?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: Well, then you also had quite a lot to do with the new utilization of bark as a fuel?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: Can you tell us a little bit about how you got into that?

OLSSON: Because we had to burn the bark and wanted to get as efficient as we could. Then what really made it as good as it is, was the storage system for bark, which I bought from Sweden, but which was built here. A college mate of mine had designed it. It proved to be very good and the stokers to that burning system were made by Combustion and proved very efficient.

MAUNDER: Well now . . .

OLSSON: Combustion and myself. The president of Combustion -- I don't think he is president now because he is older than I am -- his name is Joe Santry.² We became very good friends in a very peculiar way. Would you like to have me tell you about it?

1. Combustion Engineering, Inc., of New York.

2. Joseph V. Santry is now chairman of Combustion Engineering, Inc.

MAUNDER: Yes, go ahead.

OLSSON: Well, I was in Canada. We had a friend of Joe Santry's that worked at the Brompton Pulp and Paper Company and he quit, I think. But he came to me one day and said that Joe Santry wanted to build a pulp mill in Canada; no, in the upper part of Maine. He said, "I have recommended you. I wish you would go up and look and see what you think of it because I want you to build it if we build it."

I said I'd be glad to go up and look at it. So I went up to Van Buren, Maine, way up in northern Maine. There was a river running by there and a fairly big sawmill. I studied the timber around there and saw what one could get from the sawmill. I stayed there three or four days and went back and gave a report to Joe Santry and told him, "I will be very glad to build a mill for you, but you are going to lose every damn cent you put in it if you build one up there." And he was just as surprised as heck. He naturally didn't build a mill.

One year afterwards a company built a mill on exactly that place, exactly that place! And the man that was the head of the building business was an engineer, Ekberg, from Brompton Pulp and Paper Company, who had built mills. This Ekberg was the draftsman, who looked after the building. I think the mill ran two years and has never run since. Now it has fallen down, a complete loss. It's just what I told Joe Santry would happen, so when Joe Santry found out what had happened he thought it was a dang nice thing of me to hold him off. And we became very fast friends. Joe Santry was a very unusual man. His parents died when he was young. He was the first young man I knew that had a quarter of a million.

MAUNDER: The first young man you knew who had a quarter of a million?

OLSSON: Cash! I knew men worth that much, but he had cash in the bank, a quarter of a million.

MAUNDER: You were going to tell me another story about this friend of yours.

OLSSON: When we got that furnace of his running here, I met him in New York about a year later and I said, "Can you do anything with that new recovery unit? Are you selling any or not?"

"I won't tell you how much, but it's millions," he said. So he did a damn good business. Every mill bought them.

MAUNDER: Every mill in the business wanted one?

OLSSON: Yes, because we couldn't use the old ones.

MAUNDER: Well, Mr. Olsson, you have had and lived through a most interesting period in the history of American business development, and particularly the development of the pulp and paper industry.

OLSSON: Just the kraft pulp and paper. I have taken very little interest in any other papermaking here.

MAUNDER: But in that particular area of pulp and paper history, you have lived through practically the whole history because you go back to the very beginnings of it in this country.

OLSSON: Yes. It naturally has been very interesting and it hasn't been without headaches either.

MAUNDER: I'd like you to just think back over these years and tell me who you think of as being the men who have done the most to develop the kraft industry -- here in the South and elsewhere.

OLSSON: You mean quantity-wise?

MAUNDER: Not just necessarily quantity-wise, but new ideas, new developments, and that sort of thing.

OLSSON: I don't want to brag, but I know who it is! But quantity wise, International Paper Company has built many mills, and good mills. Union Bag is building good mills now, too.

MAUNDER: Were there any other engineers along with yourself who did a lot along this line?

OLSSON: Well, I don't remember. International Paper Company has an engineer, who may be on pension, (by the way, he tried to get a job as draftsman here) who built every good mill that International Paper Company ever owned. He is vice-president of International and he's a very good man. Excellent man.

MAUNDER: How about the development of the industry in Canada?

OLSSON: Well, I really haven't followed it. I don't think they've done so much, oh, they have, but they go in for newsprint there a lot. And most of those mills are owned by International Paper in the United States.

MAUNDER: Well, tell me a little bit about your family now. When were you married?

OLSSON: I was married in 1909¹, I believe it was.

MAUNDER: Where did you meet your wife?

OLSSON: In Sweden. She was the prettiest girl in Sweden.

MAUNDER: You met her when you went back in 1908?

OLSSON: Before I left at all.

MAUNDER: You left her behind and came here?

OLSSON: Well, I had to earn a living, didn't I?

MAUNDER: Oh, you had to earn some money before you could afford to marry her?

OLSSON: Of course, I had to!

MAUNDER: I'll bet that's really the reason you went back, isn't it?

OLSSON: No. No.

MAUNDER: Are you sure?

OLSSON: Yes, I'm sure. No, I was anxious to get ahead. I was supposed to build a mill over there.

MAUNDER: And then you got married over there and you brought her back here with you?

OLSSON: No. She came on the boat and I met her in New York.

MAUNDER: She came after you did?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: You didn't marry her until you came back the second time?

1. December 19, 1911, Elis Olsson married Signe Maria Granberg in New York.

OLSSON: No. I had no job when I came back then, you know.
I had to get one.

MAUNDER: You had to come and find a job before you could bring her over here.

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: Did you know your bride when she was just a girl growing up over there?

OLSSON: I've known her since she was 16 years old and I was 17.

MAUNDER: How did you happen to meet her?

OLSSON: I met her in the county where I lived. She had a sister living there and she visited her sister.

MAUNDER: And you have how many children?

OLSSON: Three.

MAUNDER: And one of them is now the president of the company.

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: What are the other two doing?

OLSSON: The girl¹ is married to the Swedish ambassador and Carl² is running the forestry department of this company.

MAUNDER: Well, now tell me a little bit about your interests apart from your business. Have you any special interests in life apart from your business?

OLSSON: Well, when I was younger I was very much interested in opera. But when I got old and lame -- when you can't do -- you see, I had a stroke at one time and that put me back a lot. And now I'm losing my memory.

MAUNDER: Tell me a little bit about this interest in opera.

OLSSON: Well, I always loved opera. I lived in Stockholm for quite a while and I used to go to opera a lot. While other people saved their money to go to the theater, I saved mine to go the opera. I was crazy about opera.

1. Mrs. Lennart Nylander, wife of the Swedish ambassador to the Central American Republics.
2. Carl A. Olsson, vice president and woodlands manager.

MAUNDER: Were you ever a singer yourself?

OLSSON: No. I could sing, but I was not a good singer.

MAUNDER: Did you have any hobbies, any special interests?
Boating, hunting, anything like that?

OLSSON: I used to love to play tennis. I loved that, and sailing, just plain sailing. You can afford to do that without having much money. Two or three of us got together and bought a sailboat and I used to love to sail. I never sailed over here.

MAUNDER: You never sailed in this country, but in the old country you used to do it a lot?

OLSSON: My first school was beside the biggest lake in Sweden, a wonderful lake to sail on.

MAUNDER: What hobbies did you have here?

OLSSON: Do you know what my hobby was. . .

MAUNDER: Business?

OLSSON: Yes, I had to work. Do you think there was an eight-hour day, or seven-hour day? As soon as anything happened in the mill -- it could be any time -- I had to be in the mill. Nobody knew a damn thing.

MAUNDER: It was an around-the-clock job then.

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: No time to develop any hobbies. Did you ever play golf?

OLSSON: No, I never played golf. I wish I had. West Point community has a golf club here. This company got it for them. If it hadn't been for us they never would have had it. A real nice little club, too.

MAUNDER: How about fishing and hunting?

OLSSON: I've hunted in both Canada and here, and in Sweden, too. Loved to hunt.

MAUNDER: You used to do a lot of hunting up in Canada?

OLSSON: Not so much, there was too much work there. I hunted some, but had to stick too close . . .

MAUNDER: When did you start getting out and doing a little hunting down here? When you came down to Virginia?

OLSSON: When I came to Virginia, yes.

MAUNDER: What kind of hunting did you do?

OLSSON: Quail and ducks. And deer. Of course, I probably had more deer on my farm than on any piece of property in Virginia. You know, one night -- there were so many deer they were doing damage to the farm -- one night my wife and myself were driving home. I said, "Let us stop now when we come to where the deer are and see how many we see." Do you know how many we counted? Fifty-four.

MAUNDER: You have a regular deer park out there, haven't you? Now you live in a very interesting home. Can you tell me a little bit about Romancoke? This is an historic house itself. . . .

OLSSON: No, not the house. That isn't historic, my wife built the house, incorporated, foolishly enough, the old Lee house in it, because it would have been a lot easier if she hadn't taken that in but had torn it down instead. Because the Lee house was not an old house. The regular Lee house burned down during the Civil War.

MAUNDER: So she took over re-designing and re-building that whole house.

OLSSON: Yes. She hired a draftsman from Richmond.

MAUNDER: I take it that you didn't have very much to do with this.

OLSSON: With the house, no. It was all my wife's idea. She designed it.

MAUNDER: Tell me something about the early days here in West Point, the family, and your going on with the business here. Can you tell me any of the interesting anecdotes about that time?

OLSSON: Well, they didn't have any paved streets, you know, there were just mud roads. And on the main street they put some oyster shells on the road to make it so one could get along. There were no bridges here anywhere, so if you wanted to go to Richmond you had to plan to go by rail. You could go farther up and take a ferry and get to where there was a road.

MAUNDER: But things were pretty primitive back there in those days?

OLSSON: Unbelievably so. And the railroad stations coming down here were unpainted shacks that needed repairing, so of course the railroad couldn't make any money when nothing happened, or very little money. But there were Baltimore boats coming here every day. I mean regular steam boats and passenger boats that took people from the train to go on the boats to Baltimore. Lots of Richmond people used to take the trip to Baltimore because there were nice boats and very good meals.

MAUNDER: The people from Richmond would come over here to catch the boat?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: This was the stopping point for the people, for the boat picking up passengers from Richmond.

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: Isn't it rather strange that here in probably the oldest part of the United States, the development had been so slow after the Revolutionary times?

OLSSON: Well, it isn't so strange because in the war between the states they didn't have anything left. The homes had been burned up by the northerners and they were poor as could be.

MAUNDER: No industry really, to speak of.

OLSSON: No industry. They were dependent, more or less, on the tobacco industry. Do you realize that not so dang long ago, people, some of them owners of big factories now, went out and bought tobacco in a bag and made their own cigarettes and sold them. Had probably a couple of girls helping make cigarettes and pipe tobacco. And Richmond now is the biggest cigarette capital in the world. That's a tremendous proposition now in Richmond, the tobacco industry.

MAUNDER: But this country over here was very poor.

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: Then the coming in of new industry like this company, put new life back into this community.

OLSSON: Yes. Well, of course, West Point can't grow very much because it's between the two rivers, but it's a nice little town on that side of the bridge, you probably drove through it.

MAUNDER: Yes. I came through it.

OLSSON: And another little one on the other side of the other bridge. That little town is quite cute and they look after their homes and look after their gardens.

MAUNDER: Do you get -- do a lot of your people live over there?

OLSSON: A good deal of them.

MAUNDER: Well, I imagine you can take a good deal of pride in looking at this community and seeing what has developed since you came here back in 1918.

OLSSON: Well, West Point itself has not developed an awful lot because there are the same old houses there. But, of course, they have paved streets and sidewalks and so on. The best development in West Point is the community house that my wife built. It's beautiful and it's just as nice as can be.

MAUNDER: You say your wife built it?

OLSSON: Yes.

MAUNDER: Was this a gift that she gave?

OLSSON: No, she tried to get people interested in it with her, but she had to furnish the money.

MAUNDER: Have there been any other things that you and your wife have built here in the city?

OLSSON: I don't think so. My wife built that home over there that belongs to the company. Sture lives there now. My son is an outstanding man, not only as a pulp and paper man, but he is very well thought of. He is on all kinds of committees, both in business and all around.

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