

Shelbyville Main Street Project

An Oral History Project of Shelbyville, Kentucky's Main Street

Interviewer: Mark Mefford

Date: August 10, 1995

Interviewee: Thomas Barker, Jr.

Running Time: 21 minutes

Side One

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An interview with
TOM BARKER, JR.

Interviewed by Mark Mefford on August 10, 1995

Transcription by Susan McMullan Groves on October 1, 1997

Why don't you start by telling me your full name. Thomas Barker, Jr.

When were you born? March 9, 1928.

Uh, what kind of occupations have you been involved in? Well, uh, I spent 36 years as president and general manager of Shelby Rural Electric but professionally I'm a CPA. I've worked for the Kentucky Revenue for 4 1/2 years while I was right out of college and I worked with a company called American Creosote in Louisville as their tax accountant for two years before coming to Shelbyville. Now, I've been retired... I spend about 3-4 days a month with the bank that I'm a director and part owner... Citizens Union Bank and then I belong to the Kentucky Auctioneer's Commission and that takes a couple of days a month. By the time I do my farming and my gardening and my yard the month is shot and I'm ready to start again.

Well, uh, you mentioned a little about Louisville. How long have you lived in Shelbyville? Since 1958. I moved when I left American Creosote I came to Shelbyville with the Rural Electric at that time and I've been here 30... well, I came in 1958 and that's about 37 years now.

What do you remember about the downtown Main Street area when you first moved here? Is there anything that stands out in your mind? Yes. The downtown was it. We didn't have any shopping centers out on the side. All business was conducted in downtown Shelbyville. Grocery stores were down there... there was an A&P at that time that's no longer in existence... at least in Shelbyville. You had Deiss Bookstore which carried office supplies. You had... Fred Hauck had a office supply business and now neither one of them are in existence and so downtown has changed drastically. Basically, right in downtown now seems to be more antique shops than anything. So, it's changed... I've seen a terrific change in the shopping centers, I think, is one of the things that's changed our downtown.

When did, uh, shopping centers start popping up and antique stores start coming in? That's a good question. Uh, I think the first shopping center, if I'm not mistaken, was Governor's Square. That's out close to McDonald's on the other end of town.

Frankfort end of town? Frankfort end of town and then we had the one here as you go right below the Rural Electric office... and then the one out where Wal-Mart is. Those three stayed in my mind as in that order, but, uh, they certainly changed our downtown section.

Uh, do you think these shopping centers closed a lot of the downtown businesses? I think there's no doubt about it. We used to have two or three drugstores and now we got one drugstore as far as individually owned and the Kroger has a drugstore, Winn-Dixie has a drugstore and some Wal-Marts, not this one, but some of them have drugstores. And there's a Rite Aid, I believe, out in the Governor's Square. But basically, I know of at least 3 individually owned prior to all these big organizations coming to town.

Well, so it sounds like you think the economy has shifted to shopping centers? Do you remember socially what kinds of events downtown had when you first moved here? No, I can't remember that much about socially down there. I know the country club here was not in existence as such. Its developed along the way. We didn't have Clear Creek Park golf course, we didn't have Weissinger Golf Course so, uh, but downtown there wasn't a whole lot of social other than there was a City Café...about the only restaurant, you know, down there at one time. So, as far as...now we have several restaurants, of course. A lot of fast food chains.

Well, uh, tell me a little bit about RECC? What kind of things went on there when you first came to it? Was that in '58? '58, yes. At that time we had...well, first of all, let me say, it was organized in 1937 but basically at Shelby County at the beginning, Mr. Bill Dale was the first president or manager. He died at an annual meeting in 1950 and T.C. Long, who was the office manager, took over and was there until 1962 when I became...I was office manager from 1958 to '62 and I became president and general manager in '62 up till January of '94. I saw it grow from...I know when I took over in 1962 we had 4,200 users in 4 counties and when I lived there we had over 11,000 users. All the big industries west of Kentucky 55...Budd and Beckaert, Union Camp and all those are on the Rural Electric system. I helped recruit a lot of those. But its been a boom for the rural people cause they would not have the conveniences city people had without electricity so its been quite a blessing that they have the same conveniences just as I do here in the city.

Well, uh, how wide spread was electricity in the country when you came to RECC? It was as it was here it was probably about 50% electrified and today, anyone that wants electricity can have it. So it has drastically changed.

You mentioned that it was formed in 1937. Right.

Was it, uh, did it have anything to do with the New Deal? Uh, it was during the Roosevelt era. He saw that people needed electricity and he was able to get that. But it was part of the New Deal. Roosevelt wanted responsibility for the rural electric act and getting it started so I know I was fortunate enough to have all the seven original directors that helped form it on the board when I started in 1962. So, I knew the pioneers. So, people like Alex Beach from Finchville and George Kent from Shelbyville, Guthrie Jesse from out around Waddy, Ralph Scarce from out around the Chestnut Grove area so you know...you get to know the pioneers and see what they were thinking and see how it changes when the younger ones come along.

Well, you also mentioned that it served 4 counties? What are the counties that it served? Shelby, Henry, Trimble and Carroll counties and part of... a little bit of Owen, Franklin, Spencer, Jefferson and Oldham. Just 8 or 10 consumers in every one of them. But Shelby, Henry, Trimble and Carroll are the big ones but the most users in Shelby and then Henry, Trimble and Carroll would be the fourth one.

Was the office run out of the downtown Shelbyville area? Yes. It started in downtown Shelbyville where a auto parts place is now right across from Shelby County Trust Bank. And then it went to 2nd and Main... 2nd and Clay, I'm sorry... and then when I came they were building a new office out where it's located today. I was in the old office at 2nd and Clay for 3 months before we moved into the new one on January 1, 1959 out on Old Finchville Road. Before I left the Rural Electric Program, we started a sub-office in Bedford so those people won't have to drive 50 some miles to get to us. So, it has a lot of business. People come in and do a lot of business. It's a full service office just like this one.

What kind of changes occurred in the little more than 30 years that you were there? Well, uh, the biggest thing was the... there was two things. Of course the number of consumers... we kept adding them and the usage... we went from ... if I can remember correctly, in the first year we went from the average usage was 41 kilowatt hours a month. Basically that was a light bulb and then it got to be refrigerators and when I left there, the usage is around, average, better than 1200 kilowatt hours a month. They've gone from 41 to 1,200. And that's not counting... that's just residential and not counting some of these industries which use 2 or 300,000 kilowatt hours a month like the Budd Company. But the usage has certainly gone up as new things came along that they wanted to use it for. Just like, uh, I don't have any gas in this house. It's on what's called geothermal heating and cooling. And it's one of the most efficient out. I, being with the electric company, at that time I built it I installed meters on the unit and my first years cost for heating and cooling... that's not the rest of the house, just heating and cooling ran \$487 or \$40 a month average for heating and cooling. That's heating and cooling 4,700 square feet which 1500 is in the basement. So it's pretty efficient.

Sounds like it. What other kinds of changes have there been in, uh, efficiency like the geothermal heating and cooling? Well, of course, we went from just space heaters and a lot of people using their ovens and things like that to heat and then we came up to the, uh, heat pump and then that series of thing and it was... it has its problems, and then we went on into geothermal. I expect they're probably 500 geothermal units on the Rural Electric system. But, the secret to any heating and cooling system is insulation. You need to put adequate insulation and it pays dividends from then on.

So, did the RECC, uh, perpetuate the use of insulation in homes and everything else? Yes, we have people that will figure what you should have in your home... what size heating unit and storm windows and things. We figure heat loss at the windows and it's... in my instance, they recommended an R30 in the ceiling and I've got an R50 in mine

and all my outside walls I put in 2x6 studding instead of 2x4 and that holds good insulation.

Have a little wider insulation? Right. That's one of the reasons the heating is so efficient.

Uh, what kind of programs did you all do? I understand, you know, people would come in and ask for this information, did you all have any programs for outreach to do or did you all just have it on a... when people asked you for stuff you gave it to them? We had a little publication called "Kentucky Living" magazine that's printed for the state association but each coop has its own insert in that magazine. We put all the stuff that we offer in there. We figure lighting for homes so it will be adequate lighting, uh, we work with youth groups a lot and, uh, we had a tour to Washington each year and three winners get to go with a statewide group to Washington and most of them, it's the first time to ever be there. And of course, we advise people on what size entrances to put in and then, uh, almost any electrical question they can answer. And we have a marketing division, a public relations division and an engineering division so we, uh, and of course an office services division.

How did RECC adapt to meet greater needs for electricity? Well, one of the things we had to do is build more generating plants. And, uh, some of those year during the oil embargo we had to ask people to conserve if they would. Or if a real cold time comes by and we're low in the units we ask people to conserve but, uh, basically we have to have heavier lines than we used to. Bigger transformers, bigger substations, bigger transmission lines bringing it in from the power plant so you have to keep doing engineering studies to project. We used to project 20 years into the future and, uh, so we could keep ahead of the pace. It's a full-time job just trying to figure out what to do for the future as well as what's happened in the past.

How many people were employed by the RECC when you started and how did it change? It was 28 when I started there. There were 51 when I left and, uh, I hired all but 3 of those. In other words, everyone else was retired. So now there's only 1 still there that I didn't hire.

Is that right? We had, uh, the old timers that came there right after the war and they're basically all retired and then we had the newer group come on as linesman...it takes young people to be linesman. Heat, all kinds of weather.

Well, uh, what kinds of things did you do as a CPA in town? I have never... I passed the exam after I came with the Cooperative in 1959 and so I've never actually practiced as such. I worked for a CPA firm in Louisville for about a year before I came here but I wasn't a CPA at the time, so basically all I do right now is do tax work and I do some of that...not a whole lot since I'm retired I don't want to get too tied down. I might want to go to Florida in the middle of winter.

What did you do for the bank? You said you worked for Citizens Union Bank? I'm a director and one of the owners of Citizens Union Bank. We have a board meeting once a month and we formed a holding company and bought the bank and we bought the bank here called Farmers & Traders and merged it into our bank. And not too long ago, about 18 months ago we bought one of the banks in Owenton, First Farmers at Owenton. It was owned by Kentucky Central and...insurance company...and you know what happened to it, it went kaplooney. So, we bought that in...we have a...once a month we have a collection committee meeting. Every Wednesday there's a loan committee and approve the new loans people want. It keeps me pretty busy. Seminars...I just got back from one couple of weeks ago and lasted three days. So there's plenty to do.

How long have you been involved with the bank? Since 1974. It was a \$17 million dollar bank when I joined it as a director and now it's a \$190 million bank. From '74 to '94, that's 21 years it's grown from \$17 million to \$190 million.

Do you do your auctioning work in connection with the bank? No, I am not an auctioneer. I am on the Auctioneer's Commission and four of them have to be auctioneers and one does not.

Oh. Sort of a consumer advocate. I'm presently chairman of the Commission and it's down in Louisville off Hurstbourne Lane.

And you say you farm a little bit? Yeh, I raise a little hay on it. Used to raise tobacco but I finally got too old for that.

Yeh. You can farm a whole lot and go bankrupt.

Uh, well, how much tobacco did you use to raise? Most I've ever raised out there was 6,000 pounds and that's what I was working years ago. I didn't have any cuts...set, cut and stripped...everybody got money out of it except me. By the time I paid everybody off...

Well, at least you helped the economy a little bit. Right.

Uh, well, how has the appearance of the downtown area changed since you moved here in the late 50's? Right downtown in the, what I call the downtown block, there haven't been a lot of change other than sprucing up buildings to save buildings. Buildings are still there but they've had to repaint and really sharp 'em up.

So, it generally looks a lot the same? Yeh the building themselves are basically the same.

Do you go to church around here? Yes, I do, I go to First Christian Church down on Main Street. I've been going there since '58.

Is that right? Uh huh.

Is it in the same location? Same location. It hasn't changed.

Uh, how has the role of religion changed in the last thirty years in your church? As much a part of people's lives as it was? It seems to be in our church. Different churches are different but, uh, we have an active membership of 200 people. Membership is five or six hundred but only about a third of them are active.

Uh, does the church have a social role in the community as well as a religious...? Oh, yes, it definitely has a social role. In looking after ill members or families that have problems and so it has a quite active role in the community as does the other churches in town.

Well, what do you think makes Shelbyville a unique town? You've lived some other places so you can compare a little bit. Uh, well, the friendliness of it was one thing you find in a rural community where in a big city you can live in an apartment house and never know who your neighbors that live next door are. But everybody here seems to know what's going on and, uh, sometimes it may be a little too... may know a little too much of what's going on because it could be a little more nosy in a small community... as people can. But, overall, it's the friendliness of the people that makes the community unique.

Do you think that the deterioration of the downtown economic base kind of spread people further apart? Having to shop Wal-Mart and not going downtown too much? It hasn't helped any... let's put it that way. It, uh, as you say, well one person at one end of town will be shopping in one shopping center or another person here where before you all had to come downtown and you would meet that way.

Yeh. But not anymore with the shopping centers. And we're close to Louisville and Frankfort... a lot of people maybe do shopping there.

Yeh. I like to shop at home as much as I can.

Well, do you think people went to Louisville and Frankfort when there were still a lot of downtown merchants open? Oh, yes, but probably more today than they did then.

Well, with the shopping centers moving out to the edge of town, you have less of a service oriented atmosphere? Uh, you know you buy things... do you go to Louisville to get more of a service, you know, smaller... more attention... things like that? I don't know if you get more attention. The merchants here are willing to help and to order stuff if they don't have it. But, I don't know, I think sometimes it may just be a social thing. A lot of people go to big malls in Louisville...

Just to get away for a little while? I know one of my friends said that, uh, he wanted to, uh, when he did he wanted his ashes thrown on Oxmoor so he'd be close to his wife. Cause she was always there shopping.

Well, do you have any such memories of the downtown area or Main Street that I haven't asked you about? No, I think you pretty well covered them. One of the pretty fairly stable places has, of course, been the Science Hill Inn and the, uh, Wakefield Scarce Galleries. That's always been there ever since I've been here and, I think, most of the restaurants other than that one changed. Uh, but basically, as I say, the buildings are still about the same, it's just the businesses are in them are more antiques than anything else today.

Well, that's about all the questions I have. Is there anything you'd like to add? No, I think you've pretty much covered the water front here. You've done a good job.