

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford
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Interviewee: Vincent Biagi
Running Time: 33 minutes

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VINCENT BIAGI

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Oral History Project**

**Interview was conducted
by Mark Mefford
1995**

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The following is an unrehearsed taped interview with Vincent Biagi. The Shelbyville Main Street Oral History Project. The interview was conducted by Mark Mefford on August 3, 1995 at Biagi's Store on Washington Street in Shelbyville. (Transcribers Note: Biagi's is located on Main Street in downtown Shelbyville.)

Q. Why don't you start by telling me your name.

A. Okay, Vincent Biagi and I've lived in Shelbyville, KY all my life. I actually was born on Bland Avenue. My dad started in business that the rear is still in 1927. And it started originally as a tire store and we evolved into appliances around 1938.

Q. Tell me what date you were born?

A. I was born in 1919.

Q. What were your parents names?

A. My fathers name was Annibale Biagi and he came over from Italy to directly to Shelbyville in 1914 and lived here all his life. And my mother was Alberta Dubourg she was a Shelbyville native.

Q. Why did your father come to Shelbyville?

A. At the time on Main Street, someone had a ? colosceise confectionery located right next to the court house where the court house is located and the person who had it had come from Italy at the time, so he moved where he knew he could find work and started working in the confectionery and serving soda water as thats whats you called it at that time. And, he stayed with them for about four or five years and eventually went into business for himself. At that time when large ? ? in town, although there was a Piggly Wiggly on Main Street and he'd go to Louisville and bought all the produce back for the people and businesses and groceries in Shelbyville and took care of them. Also for Science Hill Inn which is operated then as Science Hill School, Science Hill School.

Q. What about the new one on?

A. It was, it operated until 1938 by the Pointer Sisters. Even after they went out of the produce business they had him buy all their produce for them. Are you familiar with Science Hill School?

Mark: Yes, I've heard people talk about it and the people that went there.

Vincent: So, that evolved into this type of business in '27.

Q.Q.Why did they leave Italy.. hostilities?

A.Because back at that time everyone said that America was the place to be and it mainly at that time was because of economic conditions were real bad over there and they thought America was the land of the plentiful. So, that was the main reason he moved over, came over here. He made several trips back to Italy...six, so his family always went back, wanted to get back.

Q.Have you ever been to Italy?

A.I've been a couple of...twice.

Q.To visit family or?

A.Well, yes, I have an uncle and aunt that was living there at the that I was able to see then. That was a real experience trip.

Q.Where did you go to school around here?

A.Shelbyville High School. And then attended U of L.

Q.Did you commute to U of L?

A.I lived in Shelbyville and I had a grandmother who lived in Louisville where I stayed part of the time, basically I came back to Shelbyville and got my dad out in between times visits. But originally located our store at the corner of 6th and Washington which is over there. And at that time 6th Street was one of the main streets in town with businesses galore up and down 6th Street. This parking lot now thats beside our store was a shoe shop and across the street there was a shoe shop on 6th Street and then there...

Mark: What was the name of the shoe shop do you remember?

V:One was Brown and Whitman and the other was Tischners, Curt Tischners ran it. Originally, going back when we first opened the store, the post office was located on 6th Street, see, just right out there...and the people had to come get their mail there thats where it came out, of course thats the time that the railway express office was on 6th Street, then there was a bakery on 6th Street and there was one ? sections of blocks of town at one town.

Q.Was that say in the '20's?

A.This was in the '20's and '30's, but mainly in the 30's though. Then we had this fire bout 8 or 10 years ago that destroyed the locations of the railway express there was a Doctor Porter was an optometrist office at the time of the fire and it destroyed part of 6th Street at that time, and they haven't rebuilt it back.

But there were two banks located up on the corner of 6th and Main, actually three banks at one time. On the other corner was Ransdall's Drug Store and we're still talking about the 30's, of course up and down Main Street there are really a lot of businesses that are about gone....(can't make out)

Well, at the court house or right next to the court house there was a Poore and ? was a hardware store, the building they're located in right now at 541 Main Street was Pool's and Company which was a terrifically large hardware store at that time. And Rothchilds Clothing store was down where Bistro's is located, thats where one of the largest clothing outfits in town. They had what they called a hitching post just a little bit further up, just a little bit further up which was a restaurant. Of course, Smith-McKinley's was located across the street from the Court House and till about twelve years ago. They were there for years and years. Then Lincoln and Lerman Department stores and of course there was Lawsons which went out of business about, located across the street it was three stories departments, department store then, they had clothing, furniture and next to that was Piggly Wiggly. So, I'm giving you all the up and down about Main Street, I think you're going to be here till ?

Mark:Can't make out his words.

V:Then Dewey's Pool Room was across the street from our location here. Then Liberty National Bank bought it out about 8 or ten years ago. Then on further down was Blakemores Grocery which was a large independent grocery and there was a drug store across the street originally, it was a Montgomery that run the drug store and I ? walk around later. Theres another hardware store ? ??? and then years ago, there was a welding shop located in the next block going down Main street which Vince Porter operated. We're going back in history! (laughing).

Q.Well, why don't we talk a little about Biagi's. You mentioned some of the things your father carried when he opened the store, tires, and things...

A.Yep, he started out with BF Goodrich tires and you know, I was seven or eight, nine years old and I'd come up and help him change tires and everything like that.

Q.Did you do automotive tires?

A.Automobile tires, most of them were automobile tires.

Voices are overshadowed here by someone else talking in the background. I may not have an accurate transcription.

Q.? tractor tires?

A.tractor trans...?....then we took on Maytag, of course back then it was wringer washers, not automatic washers and about 1934 farmers had to buy them with a gasoline engine on em, and I thought it was one of the biggest inventions that had ever been made, because everything had been on a washer board before then.

Q.So they had a gasoline powered washing machine?

A.We have a real old one in there...they had electric available too, but so many people didn't have, see it was 1938 before Shelby RECC went to through the County with all the electrical lines and

previous to that, Kentucky Utility lines just ran up and down Shelby countians main highways and people on the farms didn't have electricity. So, that made a big change and that evolved into 1938 when we started handling refrigerators, Frigidare was a big name of refrigerators. From then on, after my brother Hugh and myself took over the business, after plan partnership, then after he died, of course we carried on and now we have the third generation because Aubrey? and Steven are here, ? still in business here, so...then a lot of events occurred at that time for instance the first television...we had the very first television sets that came in to Shelbyville. RCA came out with them and had a broadcast which the first broadcast on television here was on WAVE was a Male-Manual game in 1949.

Mark:Football?

Vincent: This, yeah, okay...that used to be a real game used to be...

Mark:It's still, still carried on

Vincent: yeah, but then Male-Manual won the ? in the local and all the others and they had a crowd in here watching that then

Mark:What year was that about?

Vincent: 1949 and then when color came out made them, cause everything was black and white, well, probably the biggest screen was just about a 10 inch screen ...

Mark:So all these people crowded in to watch a ten inch screen?

Vincent: Yeah, this is one of them right here ...and so that was one of the things that came out. Now, just recently they've come out with an 18 inch satellite that picks up twenty six thousand miles (laughing). No telling how that thing will evolve.

Mark:Do ya'll sell a lot of those things?

Vincent: Yeah, quite a few, about as fast as we can get them. Theres hundreds of them now already. They really bring in a really good picture, extremely good...

Mark:Is that right? Is this one?

Vincent: This is not on it, ????

Mark:Do they have to pay a monthly fee after they buy one of those things?

Vincent: Yeah, you have to pay a program something like you would have to pay for cable in other words you can get a better picture and you can get a lot more channels than you can on cable. In other words, you can get about three ? channels for around twenty five dollars and you would have options you know like to take everything and then you get like four HBO's instead of one cause they have a set of four ?????

Mark:Well, after the color tv's come out and ya'll started carrying those, what other things were ya'll carrying?

Vincent: Well, besides tv's we carried refrigerators, washers and dryers, freezers, freezers were a big thing and one time, back in the 40's we carried milk coolers cause the farmers then had coolers they had to set thirty gallons ? to keep them out. And we sold quite a few cause there were quite a few farmers at that time that were dairymen in Shelby County. That was one of the biggest

things, the fact is back in those days Shelby County was one of the largest dairy counties in the United States. Not many people knew that....???? can't make this portion out.

Mark:How much of your business went to farmers?

Vincent: Well, gradually it has changed in the last ten years since manufacturers have come in, but previous to that I'd say because the population of Shelbyville is just around four or five thousand, most of the time and Shelby County was just around 20 thousand or so, you'd almost have to say 80% was farmers at that time.

Mark:And they could get Louisville TV stations out here?

Vincent: They could get with an antenna, they could get all the Louisville stations and some of them pulled in Lexington stations depending on how they's set up.

Mark:Well, what changes happened in the 60's?

Vincent: The 60's gradually, of course color television probably made it's biggest debut in the 60's and 70's. We grew from actually from this building I mentioned now that 541 Main Street, we purchased this building in 1944. Previously, we had a smaller building over on 6th and Washington and later on we bought the next door building to give us more room. And my dad liked to be a farmer so he bought a house about a mile out. On a 180 acre farm which is about a mile and a half out of town on Smithfield road. In fact we want to keep it in the family instead of having it developed so Hugh and I bought it our from the heirs after my dad died and we still have the farm.

Mark: Do you all live on the farm?

Vincent: Not really, we have a house out there and go out there sometimes to stay in, but, I live in town and Hugh lives out on US 60.

Mark:Do you all grow any crops out there?

Vincent: Yeah, of course tobacco is the main thing so far and we grow tobacco every year. We have raised cattle, mainly beef cattle on the farm. Have a large pond to go fishing on.

Mark:In the 70s and 80's?

Vincent: In the 70's and 80's our business increased a whole lot because gradually people moved into town, really every year since we've been in business our business here has increased every year. It has a drawback, it started out in the depression, my dad did back in the 30's and gradually with hard work

Mark:Most of these businesses haven't been around this long.

Vincent: Guess it's roughly about 68 years.

Mark:How did cable TV effect your business? Did you sell more TV's?

Vincent: well, Cable TV helped out a lot in the sense that people

didn't have to put an outside antenna up for one thing. And worried that they'd get a little bit more extra programs also.

Mark:When did Shelbyville get cable?

Vincent: I'd say its' probably been around 15 years ago or longer.

Mark:Can they get it out in the county here?

Vincent: Yeah, it runs...it isn't...the whole entire county is not covered by it, but they have it in places like Simpsonville and certain towns...the main little towns instead of...I'd say it covers about 40 or 50 percent of the population, homes in Shelby County at the present time.

Mark:How has Walmart effected your business?

Vincent: Our business hasn't been effected by Walmart, it has...you see a lot of the Main Street stores, previous ones, other stores in town that have been effected, I mean I think whats that department store, Lawson's was having to go out of business was probably effected by it. And, a lot of the independent people, especially the clothing stores where there used to be 5 or 6 clothing stores, they've gone out. But, basically it hasn't effected our business because one of the things we've always been oriented to providing service with the products we sell, the factory authorized service for all the manufacturers we sell for.

We do carry all the, well 95% of the appliances made are made by either general Electric, Frigedaire, Maytag or Whirlpool and we have all those brands.

Mark:When did Walmart open up on the outside of town?

Vincent: They opened up about I'm guessing, but I guess its been about 12 years, ? I think it's been about that length of time. I see where a lot of towns and some states have even prevented, have done extreme things ????can't make out.

Mark:Was their opposition when they opened one here?

Vincent: Not as I recall, really I don't think there was. But, they, some advantages, some disadvantages that, of course there was a fair trade law on all appliances especially I'm talking about smaller appliances, toasters, mixers and things like that...and when that fair trade law was on the manufacturer could set the price. Sunbeam was one of the largest manufacturers at that time with appliances like that, smaller appliances, and uhm Congress passed a law to take fair trade off, which was some disadvantage, that was probably caused by places like Walmart, places like that in a sense that they wanted to be able to cut prices. But, what had happened though, it really hurt their quality of all the appliances made. You go out and get a, say a Sunbeam ? or a toaster and it's around 20 or 30 dollars now, they've gone down to 9 dollars a toaster and the quality has sure gone down, so there ????both are speaking and I can't make out remaining.

Mark: Do you think if people of Shelbyville knew what they know now about Walmart, businesses closed, do you think they would oppose it being built?

Vincent: I think some of them would, of course the developers and the ? ? so, it'd be, of course your businesses that went out of business probably wasn't organized like the others and I think probably causes developers like keep things where they can make good, that's what's caused them to move into places like that. Of course I've been in business long enough to see the ? a rounds and probably see someday a Walmart go down just like you've seen some of the other companies that were in business. Because, when Sam died, somebody takes over and eventually it gets out of the family and eventually it's they get somebody in there that messes things up, I mean big companies, some of the biggest companies have gone out of business that you would have never guessed.

Mark: Well, I've heard they're thinking of building a super Walmart out here, have you heard anything about that?

Vincent: I haven't heard anything about that.

Mark: With a grocery store and everything.

Vincent: Drug Store, you'll see the first little Krogers put in a drug store, that hurts the drug store businesses and then you don't have but I guess there's just one independent, Smith-McKinneys which was on Main Street up here and they've been in business I guess as long as we have. Started back, fellow named Pop Smith started it and now it was bought out by Hickman, I mean Hickman, Bill Borders owns it.

Mark: Talked a lot about your business, how have other businesses changed in the downtown area since the great depression, how's the downtown area in general?

Vincent: Of course when they put the Shelbyville Historic District in, I talked to a places in other towns where they had put it in and says it kills the downtown area which maybe it did.

Where it used to be on a Saturday night you couldn't walk cause there was such a crowd up and down Main Street, you couldn't hardly walk down the streets. So, when they put the historic district in, they put a lot of restrictions on, on the type of businesses that could be in there. For instance, if they wanted to make a parking lots, why they couldn't take the buildings down to obtain parking and that's been sort of a problem. But, like I say, of course it eventually evolved down to where the clothing stores that were on Main Street eventually went out on account, Walmart had some part to do with it and the drug store that was located downtown had to move out to shopping center, Smith-McKinney's went out to a shopping center, that effected it some so...the basic thing, I mean, mainly what mainly helped downtown, was nice though when they located the new post office, probably again was about 12 or 15 years ago, but they did locate it in the downtown area. So, that managed to keep downtown alive and but the parking problem we had to buy this smaller parking lot on the side so it does help our customers a whole lot. But, now, we're talking about the 10 inch television screen when we have television screens that are 52

inches so there's been a big change in that over the years where for instance where just the 10s.

Mark: Hows the appearance of downtown changed since the early years, has it changed?

Vincent: Well, basically, it looks very much the same they have, it hasn't changed much, actually the buildings and everything like that are still some of the lower part of town hasn't changed ??? of course we don't have the inner-urban trolley car running up and down Main Street like we did back in the 30's, maybe the 40's but it came from Louisville to Shelbyville, it'd go down to First Street and turn around point they had a station down there and then get to Louisville in about 45 minutes.

Mark: Not too bad, take US 60?

Vincent: It used to follow US 60 on the, it almost ran somewhat parallel to US 60, but it didn't go down, it had separate tracks it wasn't on the road.

Mark: Well, I meant the general course. Did it go to downtown Louisville?

Vincent: Yeah, went down to the center of Louisville.

Mark: Did that thing effect your alls business in any way?

Vincent: Well, not basically, I'd say the buses greyhound came along with, buses took over was one of the ? eventually stopped being the, although they did run freight cars, not freight cars, but cars with ? on for different type things for groceries and things back and forth.

Mark: You mentioned you grow tobacco a little while ago. Do you all bring your tobacco into town here, where do you sell?

Vincent: We sell it to the Shelby market. Shelbyville is approximately the third largest tobacco market in the state of course Kentucky is the largest burley market in the country.

Mark: Has there always been plenty of tobacco warehouses in the downtown area?

Vincent: Yeah, there's been about maybe, there's three or four tobacco warehouses very close to downtown, not in the exact downtown area, four or five blocks from downtown and they're still in operation. They have sales every year... Shelby County counts a whole lot on the tobacco, just probably like most of all of Kentucky.

Mark: What kind of changes, do people still support tobacco in Shelby County mostly?

Vincent: I think the majority of the people in Shelby County do. Yeah, because they realize even the bankers realize that a lot of income comes in from it and people, you hear of people like folks the mall smoking, some people I've heard say they wouldn't go back in there for that reason. So I guess when all you hear basically, people do support tobacco. Because they know it'll be imported if

they don't make it here, ???? mumbles.

But, the streets have even changed. Sixth street out here on, used to be brick all the way through and now they've got it paved. And, Washington was a sort of a dusty, dirty street. Didn't have, wasn't paved at that time, so thats another, a lot of improvements have been made, but basically the shapes of the buildings and things like that, there hasn't been any drastic change.

Mark: Do you see a future commerce in towards Louisville, do you think thats where all the businesses are going to start coming up?

Vincent: Personally I don't think so. I think the Shelby County, the funny part is that Shelby Countys population hasn't grown as much as you would expect to have seen with new housing and housing around because evidently because its losing so much farm population, the manufacturing is just about eating up what there losing in farm population. But, I think Shelbyville will stay a real viable business town.

Mark:I just wanted to ask you lastly about the antique malls and antique stores, when did, have there always been antique stores of any kind in Shelbyville?

Vincent: Basically theres been much more, there hasn't been near as many as there as been in the last 10 or 15 years. Quite a few of them down Main Street now. Previous to that there wasn't really any, far as number as antique store, I think they are advantage to Shelbyville as far as that goes.

Mark:Do you think they get local business or mostly people coming through?

Vincent: They probably get more business from people going through than they do local business. Although of course they do get quite a bit from local. But as far as a great majority, probably, of course Wakefield Searce Gallery which is basically a high class antique place that's what they call it, has been in operation, I know Mark Searce died just a couple of years ago, he lived across the street from me. He started it with Jimmy ? Wakefield and they bought out Science Hill Schools section from Mrs. Pointer and they have definitely get their business from all over the United States, I mean, they get more business from out of town than they would probably in Shelbyville.

Mark:What do you think is unique about Shelbyville's Main Street and downtown area?

Vincent: Well, it is different from most towns. Its a real cooperative businesses are working together a whole lot in different things. One of the biggest advantages, almost all of the branch headquarters, bank headquarters are located in downtown Shelbyville. Theres five banks located right now in probably a block and a half of each other, so that helps with the draw, thats their main offices, not their branches. And, like I was saying, the post office is located downtown and of course you have the Court House which is in downtown Shelbyville, so, you have a lot

of things, advantages in the downtown. Another advantage of downtown I think is its the one place where you have to go by going 60 on one side and 60 on the other side, down Main Street and back up, so it gets a lot of exposure in that sense, of course our building is right on the way through from Main to Washington Street, so we have, and then you go out on 6th Street so we have three entrances for you to come in.

Downtowns doing real well.

Mark: Well, thats about the questions I have, is there anything you'd like to add?

Vincent: Not that I can think of.