

# Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

*Interviewer:* Mark Mefford

*Date:* 8-16-95

*Interviewee:* George Busey

*Running Time:* 30 minutes

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Shelbyville Main Street  
Oral History Project  
Interview conducted by  
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Meford: Let's start with you telling me your name.

Busey: George N. Busey

Meford: You were born?

Busey: The first day of December, 1923.

Meford: What are your parents names?

Busey: My father was also George N. Busey and my mother was Bess T. Busey.

Meford: What did your father do for a living?

Busey: My father was a life-long farmer.

Meford: Was your mother a housewife or did she work in town?

Busey: No, she was a housewife, as most folks in that generation were.

Meford: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Busey: No sir, I was an only child.

Meford: Do you still farm the same area your father did?

Busey: Yes. I make my living, or try to, on farmland that was bought in the fall of 1899.

Meford: Did you say that you all bought the farm in 1899?

Busey: My father bought the farm where we tried to make a living in 1899, moved there in March of 1900 and my wife and I bought this farm after W.W.II in 1950. I've lived here since that time.

Meford: Do you have any children?

Busey: Yes sir, I have two children.

Meford: Boys or girls?

Busey: One boy and one girl?

Meford: Do they still live in Shelbyville or Shelby County?

Busey: My son still lives here. My daughter lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

Meford: What do they do for a living? Are they of working age?

Busey: My son is farming with me and my daughter is a musician. She graduated from the Boston Conservatory of Music up there 20 some years ago. She has stayed there and she teaches.

Meford: When you were growing up, how much did you go to Shelbyville?

Busey: Once a week, at the most. Sometimes, not that often.

Meford: What kind of things did you go to Shelbyville for?

Busey: Well, of course, as I grew up most of our food we grew. The staples like sugar, flour and that sort of thing had to be bought at a grocery. Also items of clothing which were not purchased very often, we had to go into Shelbyville for those things. Other items related to things needed on the farm as far as harness repairs for horse drawn equipment, that was our main reason for going into Shelbyville.

Meford: Was there any special day of the week you went or just when you needed to go?

Busey: Really there wasn't any special day of the week. Maybe a time when it had rained or the weather was not suitable to be outside. We would take a day and do those things in town.

Meford: Did you all ever go on Saturdays for social reasons.

Busey: No, I don't recall. Not for social reasons at all.

Meford: What kind of social things did you all do here in the country?

Busey: About the only social life other than neighbors visiting, which a great deal of that stopped back during the 1920's and 1930's, was church along with school. Church, school and ones neighbors was your social life.

Meford: Where did you all go to church at?

Busey: I have gone most of my life to the Bagdad Baptist Church, however, my parents were Methodist. They belonged to a Methodist church that was located at one time in Pleasurville, KY which is over on US 60 and has long since been torn down. Because of convenience and because of my friends, I have been going to the Bagdad Baptist Church practically all my life.

Meford: What kind of crops did you grow?

Busey: We have always grown tobacco, of course, corn, wheat, and since 1950, grass seed (orchard grass and red clover grass seed). Principally, corn, tobacco, wheat, and hay.

Meford: Are there any crops that your father grew or livestock he kept that you don't?

Busey: No, we have not changed the format at all.

Meford: How does Shelbyville affect you now as a farmer?

Busey: Of course we are much more interested in the activities in Shelbyville. We are in Shelbyville for something 3-4-5 times a week. We have modern equipment. It seems that we have needs that arise and we have to make a trip into Shelbyville quite often.

Meford: Do you take your crops to market in Shelbyville?

Busey: Yes, we have sold our tobacco in Shelbyville all my life. It's the only place we've ever sold tobacco. Our livestock we have always sold at Louisville at the Bourbon Stockyards.

Meford: How have the tobacco warehouses changed in Shelbyville? Do you know of any changes?

Busey: Oh yes.....several changes! Not too many years ago, we had 50 people employed to unload tobacco in the warehouse and now we can do the same thing with 6 because of the way your tobacco is packaged. Bails over the hand-tied tobacco just makes the handling job so much easier, quicker, and you can just move along with it much better.

Meford: How did you hand-tie tobacco?

Busey: How did we hand-tie it? Well of course tobacco was stripped off the stock leaf by leaf and you held a certain number of leaves between your thumb and forefinger until you got about all you could hold. The you selected a leaf that was sound and look like it would be good to wrap and you wrapped that around the stems and that made what was called a "hand". Those hands were put on sticks, usually 12-14 hands on a stick and that was put in a press and pressed and then those sticks of tobacco were taken to market.

Meford: Now days, do you have bails?

Busey: I have a bailer box with three compartments, one for each grade of tobacco. The tobacco is pulled off the stock and just laid in there with some semblance of being neat and

straight and a hydraulic cylinder is used to press it and three cotton strings are tied around it and you have a bail that weights 80 pounds (the optimum weight).

Meford: What other kind of changes happened to the tobacco industry as far as Shelbyville? Is it still re-dried in Shelbyville?

Busey: No, a few year ago, each tobacco company (there were several of them) had processing warehouse and shipping facilities in Shelbyville and now all the tobacco that is sold in Shelbyville is loaded on tractors, trailers and taken to either someplace in North Carolina, Lexington or Maysville to be processed, re-dried, packaging and put into storage.

Meford: Are there any other changes in the tobacco market that you can think of?

Busey: Well, the price. I can recall being at the tobacco market many years ago with my father when tobacco sold for \$ 3.25 per hundred pounds or \$32.50 a thousand pounds or a big crop was about ten thousand pounds was \$325.00. Now we think in terms of \$1.84 a pound

Meford: Has the price of tobacco kept up with the increase in the cost of living?

Busey: No sir. I don't know the numbers but I suspect if tobacco had kept up with the cost of living it would be bringing at least \$5.00 a pound

Meford: Has the increase in production help off-set the difference?

Busey: Well of course the situation now is the tendency for tobacco to be grown by fewer and fewer people which means they grow larger allotments which translates into more pounds and more money. I think that has been the trend and probably will continue to be the trend particularly when some engineer comes up with the mechanism to harvest tobacco without some much hand labor. The small grower just will not be able to compete in that arena.

Meford: Are there fewer people involved in tobacco as far as your concerned as when you were growing up and your father was farming?

Busey: Well, when I was growing up we had labor available, of course, labor didn't make anything. Nobody had very much money. When I came along, I worked in tobacco as a teenager for \$1.00 per day and very happy to get a job. We always had plenty of labor. No labor problem whatsoever until after W.W.II and people began to get jobs in factories and plants. They would drive to Louisville and various other places then the labor situation became a real problem, it got worse, and now it's nearly impossible.

Meford: Where do you find the labor that you do have?

Busey: It has almost come down to a "do-it-yourself" proposition, however, we have been fortunate enough, as I told you earlier, on occasion, to get some extra labor. Many of the tobacco producers as, as you know, are bringing in Mexicans or migrant labor force and were it not for that labor force coming in I doubt all the tobacco would get harvested.

Meford: Do migrant workers get paid the same?

Busey: Do migrant workers? I'm not familiar with that. There are things to be considered. Most of them are being furnished living quarters and when you add the amount they are being paid plus the value of their living quarters I suspect they're getting about the same as local folks that just work for a straight amount of money..... so much per hour.

Meford: Do they stay in this area year round?

Busey: Most of them do not. They will stay, of course, until the tobacco is harvest is over and many of them stay until tobacco is prepared for market and then the weather gets cold, they don't like the cold weather and the people that have them employed don't have any work for them. Many of them will go home back to Guatemala or Mexico or somewhere in South America, where ever they came from. Those folks, most of them, are very family oriented and they get paid for a weeks work here, they want to go into Shelbyville and send a money order home. They send a big part of the money they made back to their family or families.

Meford: Tobacco these days, seems to be threatened to some people. When do you think tobacco first became threatened like it is today?

Busey: Well, of course, with the Surgeon General's action several years ago when the manufacturer was forced to put the warning on the package that tobacco could cause disease, that opened the door for many things to come. I don't think that anyone would argue the point, tobacco is certainly not good for your health. The questions seems to arise in what degree it is bad for ones health. We have, within the past 5 years seen a move, a very intense group of people that want to do away with the tobacco business using the philosophy that it is so damaging to your health. I never really thought that it would get to this point. I thought that after a period of time, several months, your know these things kinda go in cycles and I thought they'd get off the tobacco business and take up something else, but the crusade continues and it's just a vicious now as it was 2-3 years ago.

Meford: Do you think tobacco will be around or your son to grow as long as you have?

Busey: Yes, I do. My reason for thinking so, about a year ago I saw a leaflet of a Louisville newspaper and the headline said "TOBACCO IS ON THE WAY OUT" and the date was 1919.

Meford: Are you a Democrat or Republican?

Busey: I'm a Democrat.

Meford: What do you think of a Democrat President's actions against tobacco.

Busey: I think he is very ill advised. I think he is doing exactly what his political advisors have suggested that he do. Perhaps it is good politics. The tobacco block in congress, when you get away from the 8 state burley belt, we have no friends and I think if tobacco was put to a public vote, it would be defeated at this particular time.

Meford: Will that affect your vote in the Governor's election?

Busey: No.....no.....no.....no. No it will not. The two major candidates that are running for Governor now, can't control the action one way or another. I don't think it would be treating either of those fellows fairly to determine whether you vote for or against them based on recent action of President Clifton.

Meford: Tell me about some of your earlier memories of Shelbyville.

Busey: My early memories of Shelbyville, of course, are the movies that you could go to for about 10 cents or 15 cents. Going to the barber shop in Shelbyville, Pigg's Barber Shop. I just happened to see Ben Chandler, who is running for Attorney General this year, and was talking to him and I recalled something about his grandfather "Happy Chandler". I remember as a youngster sitting in a barber chair in Pigg's Barber shop in Shelbyville and Happy Chandler came in and shook hands with and called just about every

person in there by their first name and in many cases ask about their families. He had a remarkable memory and it stayed with him all of his life and that really impressed me.

Meford: He's not from Shelbyville, is he?

Busey: No, he came from Western Kentucky. He certainly never forgot a face and never forgot a name.

Meford: Well, what are some of the other things you remember about Shelbyville?

Busey: Well, as a youngster in school, basketball tournaments that were held in Shelbyville. Certainly I remember those things very well. I remember visiting friends who happen to live in Shelbyville and to me at that time Shelbyville was just like New York City is now. It was some place that was just a utopia to live in. It had a lot of nice homes, large houses. The standard of living was so much better in Shelbyville than it was out in the country because we didn't have electricity until about 1937.

Meford: What are some of the changes you've seen in Shelbyville?

Busey: Shelbyville didn't really start to change until the industrial foundation came into being, which was a good thing. People were unable to find decent jobs and when some of the factories moved into Shelbyville, then the employment opened up for these folks to have a job, to make a decent wage, to make a good living. A lot of that money, naturally, has spilled over into the local economy. On the other hand, Main Street in Shelbyville in certainly nothing that it was 40 years ago. There are large super markets and a Big Wal-Mart that has put some many of the local folks out of business because they can not compete.

Meford: Do you know of any stores that closed or stand out in your mind?

Busey: Well of course we used to have Lerman's and Lincoln which sold really economical clothing. They went out of business. We had a jewelry store on Main Street that went out of business. We had two or three hardware stores that after the owners got older and retired, the business was sold and no one bought it to keep it continuous operations. We had a furniture store that went out of business. This is not just something that has happened in Shelbyville. This has happened all over the country. I certainly am not condemning the Wal-Marts and K-Marts and the large Kroger and Winn Dixies and so on because they offer service. They offer good products at a reasonable price.

Meford: Do you think you still have the same service that you had with a sole proprietor stores?

Busey: I suspect the service is about as good but certainly they do not have the personal touch or at least the customer does not feel like that he is being cared for as much now as he did.

Meford: What kind of changes have gone on in the transportation to and from Shelbyville?

Busey: Well, I came along when the horse and buggy was a regular way to travel. It beat walking. The first car that my family had was a Model T-Ford, canvas top, four door and I recall standing up in the back riding in that Model T which was good transportation at that time. We graduated to some little better automobile, we thought, as we went along in the late 1920's. The 1928 Chevrolet was really a good car and people thought there would never be one build any better than that.

Meford: I've had a lot of people tell me about early memories of the horse and buggy. Was there anyone that just rode a horse in town?



Busey: On yes, yes indeed! We rode horseback. People used to ride horses in along Jail Hill where Hansboro had livery stables. You rode your horse to town and for a very small fee they would hitch him in the livery stable, feed him, have him out of the weather, leave him there until you got ready to come home.

Meford: When did they start to pave the roads around town?

Busey: The road in front of my house was paved in 1953, if I recall. Up until that time it was rock and dust and more dust. Many a rock were not laid down flat but set up what we called curb fashion, which is on the edge. Some of them would ware more than others and they just reeked havoc to automobile tires. You just couldn't drive to fast or you'd blow out a tire or have a puncture and have to do something.

Meford: How do you think the appearance of Shelbyville has changed besides, we talked about the store fronts or the stores, obviously the store fronts would be different, but how has the overall appearance changed?

Busey: Well, of course, the city limits has moved in all directions...out. We have numerous subdivisions, many, very, very nice houses. Houses in the 3-4 hundred thousand dollar range. In some of the subdivisions the houses are not that elaborate or large but certainly very livable. You can go on any side of Shelbyville, I would thing, and find housing that when I was a youngster, was not there at all. Nearly all that land, I can remember, was farm land and was being cultivated or pasture. The outer perimeter of Shelbyville has made big changes.

Meford: You've lived here most of your life. Is there anything that makes you think of Shelbyville as being unique? I don't know what you have to compare it to, do you know of any unique features?

Busey: Well, I should have to say that, I think Shelbyville certainly is a unique town. We have a community theater now which has been here several years. We have good schools. We have several very vibrant churches that are active and I think folks come here, particularly with some of the companies that have located factories here, and executives have moved in, have been so pleased and surprised at how likable and livable Shelbyville is. I'm friends with several of those people. The first thing that happened to them when they came here was that they could buy a nice home for about half the price that they paid for one in Detroit. The next thing, when they got their tax bill, it was about a fourth of what their previous tax bill had been. When they went to the grocery, the prices were not nearly as high in many cases. So, this is a good place to live.

Meford: Well that's about all the questions I have. Is there any special things you want to talk about that I didn't ask you?

Busey: You've pretty well covered it. I certainly want to say that I've been around the world some, abroad several times, several places that are supposedly "the utopia", but I've never found any place I'd rather live than right here. I've enjoyed my life here and what ever length of time I have left, I fully intend to spend it here.

Meford: Sounds good!