

# Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

*Interviewer:* Mark Mefford  
*Date:* 8-15-95

*Interviewee:* Donald Chatham  
*Running Time:* 27 minutes

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## Side One

### COUNTER

- 000 INTRODUCTION
- 010 BACKGROUND: BORN SEPTEMBER 25, 1926.
- 042 PULLING FACTORS TO SHELBYVILLE: NICE PLACE TO LIVE.
- 060 EARLY IMPRESSIONS OF SHELBYVILLE(1953): PEACEFUL.
- 080 DOWNTOWN'S CHANGING MERCHANTS.
- 085 MEDICAL PRACTICE IN SHELBYVILLE.
- 110 SHELBYVILLE DOCTORS ROTATING SHIFTS.
- 135 AMBULANCE SERVICE AND SHELBYVILLE TRANSPORTATION NETWORKS.
- 145 TWO FACTORS AFFECTING CHANGE IN THE COMMUNITY: AIR  
CONDITIONING AND TELEVISION.
- 185 TOURIST ATTRACTIONS: ANTIQUES AND HORSES.
- 220 DISCONTINUED DOWNTOWN MERCHANTS.
- 250 DOWNTOWN NEIGHBORHOODS.
- 280 CHANGES IN THE DOWNTOWN'S APPEARANCE.
- 300 SOCIAL FUNCTION OF THE DOWNTOWN AREA: CHURCHES.

- 320 THOUGHTS ON A SHELBYVILLE BY-PASS.
- 330 CHANGES IN SHELBYVILLE PUBLIC SERVICES.
- 390 SHELBYVILLE'S UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS.
- 450 END.

**Dr. Donald Chatham  
Shelbyville Main Street  
Oral History Project  
Interview conducted by  
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Meford: Why don't you start by telling me your full name?

Chatham: My name is Donald Chatham.

Meford: When were you born?

Chatham: September 25, 1926 in Louisville, Kentucky.

Meford: Did your parents live in Louisville.

Chatham: They did and my father died years ago. My mother now lives in Shelbyville.

Meford: What were your parents names?

Chatham: My father was Emmit Chatham. My mother, Thelma Whitner Chatham both came from the south. My mother from Georgia and my father from Mississippi.

Meford: What was your father's occupation?

Chatham: He was a woodworker, developer, carpenter, house builder.

Meford: Did your mother work?

Chatham: My mother is 92 years old. She had 4 children and worked during W.W.II at a defense plant making powder bags for guns, navy guns.

Meford: Where was that at?

Chatham: In Charleston, Indiana, although, she lived in Louisville, a lot of people worked at the powder plant in Charleston.

Meford: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Chatham: My brother is three years older and a Dentist in Shelbyville. Two younger sisters, one in Shelbyville and one in Louisville.

Meford: When did you move to Shelbyville?

Chatham: In the summer of 1953. I completed my education at the University of Louisville Medical School and City Hospital. It was City Hospital then, not Humana University Hospital.

Meford: Did you open a practice here in 1953?

Chatham: I did. I had a solo practice for some 30 plus years and about 15 years ago, took in a partner and the name of the practice is "Family Physicians" which is located on Hospital Drive. I believe they have 5 doctors now.

Meford: It seems like many of your family members have moved to Shelbyville. What was the drawing force?

Chatham: My brother and I moved here first with our families. He had gotten discharged from the USAF and was looking for a place to open his dental practice. Of course I had to make a living from my medical practice. We picked Shelbyville after looking at several communities. We both picked Shelbyville, unaware the other one had picked Shelbyville. He had 6 children and I had five and they are all scattered now.

Meford: Do any of them live in Shelbyville?

Chatham: I have one daughter that lives in Shelbyville, a block away. She has three children of her own. He has one daughter that lives in Shelbyville and the others are scattered.

Meford: When did you marry?

Chatham: I finished my degree at Georgetown College on the June 1, 1948 and married that afternoon.

Meford: Well, a big day!

Chatham: Yes, two degrees in the same day.

Meford: What were some of the first impressions your had of Shelbyville when you moved here in 1953?

Chatham: The nice, peaceful, slow moving, attractive community that seemed to be a place where I wanted to live and raise children. At that time, I had two children when I finished school, and it seemed like a nice place. My home being Louisville and my wife's home being in Sommerset, it was convenient being between those two places.

Meford: So you got the good end of the deal.....a little closer to Louisville than Plaski County?

Chatham: Yes.

Meford: What kind of activities went on in the downtown area in the 50's?

Chatham: It was a very busy downtown area. There were no empty store fronts. There were some very nice family businesses, banks (4), and drug stores downtown and it was a quite a nice close knit business for the family. Sadly, most of them have died off and the entrance of shopping centers, especially Wal-Mart, has affected downtown business a lot so of the family descendants chose not to continue the business of their fathers or grandfathers had begun.

Meford: You mentioned your practice, the one you worked at was located on the outside of town, is that correct?

Chatham: Yes, my first office was below a drug store, Beckley's Drug Store in the center of town, 6th Street and Main. After that I moved to Washington Street in the 600 block near Science Hill Inn. With my group expanding the Hospital developing a campus-like atmosphere, I moved up there a built a new building.

Meford: When did you do that?

Chatham: About 12 years ago.

Meford: What kind of changes went on in your practice downtown? Where there any significant changes involved when you changed locations to out of town?

Chatham: There were probably 6 doctors solo at that time and I being the youngest one of that bunch, have all died off but me so I'm next. Two doctors came in with new talents and information. The hospital at that time, the first year I was here, was on Clay Street which is now a nursing home, Colonial Halls. Then they built the new Burton Hospital and it's changed hands several times but now it is owned by Jewish Hospital of Louisville. Each change has been an upgrade of equipment and services and now it is a really nice hospital. There are many services that you used to have to go to Louisville to get. One big thing is that, for many, many years the only ambulance service we had was the funeral homes taking turns going out on calls to accidents on the highways and brought them into the hospital. We now have a good EMT service with trained personnel. It makes a big difference. Also, for many years, all the doctors took rotation on emergency room call, day and night for a week at a time plus our own practice. Now we have a group that does that full time so that the family doctor does not have to go out at night to see about accidents or cuts. The industrial park has grown a lot and those companies sometimes

have injuries at night on the second shift, to employees and it's nice to have a doctor present all time to take care of those things. It gives the guys more time to rest at home.

Meford: Now, when you worked on this rotation, how many doctors were in the rotation?

Chatham: We got down to 4 at one time and usually 5 or 6. Interestingly enough, at that time, the phone book's list was maybe two columns long and now they have three pages and the pages are bigger. There is no shortage of doctors and more coming all the time.

Meford: You talked a little about the changes in the ambulance service, how did transportation changes effect the medical practice? The roads and things like that?

Chatham: Back in the 50's there was no I64. The only way to get to Louisville was US60 and the hospitals there were not that numerous either and so they've changed a great deal. The transportation was sometime difficult to refer a patient to a specialist. There is now the "sky-care" helicopter which is great for emergencies.

Meford: Does that operate from Jewish Hospital?

Chatham: Yes and I was thinking for the past couple of days, after you called, that on Saturdays, downtown Shelbyville was so flooded with people on sidewalks you had to sometime walk on the street to get around people. There was a movie theater here and people came from the country to shop on their day off. They would visit and mill around and now Saturdays are kind of dead around here. They had the "Tobacco Festival/Pageant" and that was a big day. They would close the streets off and crowds came to town. Two things have changed society a lot. The air conditioner is one and TV is the other. We used to have porches on houses and you would sit out on the porches on a hot evening and speak to the neighbors. Now we go inside our houses in the air conditioning and watch TV. Being neighborly has been altered a lot.

Meford: Did these changes occur in the 50's or 60's?

Chatham: We had a very small TV set, I guess a 7", black & white, we had in the early 50's. The reception was very poor and it was small but it was something to look at and the programs were not much either. My TV now is bigger than that. The coming of TV was very exciting.

Meford: You don't see as many neighbors. Do you think the community is separating into itself?

Chatham: I was the 3rd house to build in this block and now there is no room for any more houses. All my neighbors are passed middle age and we miss the kids on the streets and the cats and dogs. My section of town is aging and dieing off. There are many subdivisions because of all the growth. Middlin Heights over here and the one east of town, Eastview, are very small but many people have been attracted to Shelby County and it's a good place to live. Traffic on Main Street is hard to believe. There used to be an occasional car and now it is end to end and bumper to bumper.

Meford: There are a lot of store fronts that you mentioned and stores that have closed downtown. What is the traffic going downtown for?

Chatham: People are enterprising, and we are lucky that we have some that have developed the downtown into antique malls. A lot of hard work, planning and so forth, so I say downtown did becoming shopping for antique malls. Then I can't begin to tell you how important the Science Hill Inn/Wakefield Scearce Gallery has been to Shelbyville. They attract, in November, thousands and thousands of people. They come to this town

for the Christmas opening so that's the big drawing card. Now the horse business, which has always been important here I believe because this is the saddle horse center of the nation. Ms. Bennett has put on the horse show for some years now and it is very high in quality. People from California come this far to have horses in our horse show here. So I guess the horse business and the antique business are the things that attract people here.

Meford: When did these other store fronts, the more service oriented stores downtown start closing and moving from downtown?

Chatham: The big department store downtown was Lawson's and was in its 3rd generation. When Mr. Jack Lawson died his family chose not to continue that. They have put one of the antique malls there. That was a very fine department store and we bought what we needed. There was a 10 cent store down there and it wasn't continued by the family. The shoe stores downtown were not continued and two other clothing stores closed down too. Lermans and Lincoln's. The Downtown Dry Cleaners, the Ruben family had dry cleaning here for generations. They were all childless, no family to replace them. Pretty much the same for the Lawson store across the street. They had a fine men's clothing store as did Mr. Andriot. He has two boys living and they have their own business now. Time and death have changed the atmosphere of the downtown plus the economy, all over the country. I guess Wal-Mart has killed more downtowns than anything.

Meford: It seems like it. In the 50's, did you generally know the people you were trading with personally?

Chatham: Yes. One of the joys of being here, I knew everybody. Doctors usually knew everyone by their first names and all the schools and banks. You could go down the street and they would know me and I would know them. You could go to the hospital and it was like a big family. Of course, I'm retired now, and at the hospital maybe two people would know me rather than everyone. But you do miss that family feeling about downtown. With all the people coming in, that's the way it goes. They live in the suburbs in new homes and don't have much association with my block or my neighborhood.

Meford: Do homes on this block ever go up for sale?

Chatham: Yes, there are several for sale on the street now. Nobody moves away, they die or go to a nursing home. I've been here 40 years and I have the same neighbors on all sides as when I moved here. They built after I did but they are the same people or a portion of their survivors are there.

Meford: When a house in this area goes up for sale do they have trouble finding a buyer?

Chatham: I think not.

Meford: So it's still a dynamic neighborhood?

Chatham: Well, it's settled and the trees are mature and it's a nice peaceful neighborhood. It's convenient to downtown, church and shopping centers. It's just a nice place to live.

Meford: We talked about the business changing downtown and the influence of antique malls, but besides the different stores, how has the appearance of the downtown area changed since the 50's?

Chatham: The outward appearance?

Meford: Yes

Chatham: We have storefronts decorated by the business. It's interesting to window shop. The antique malls do allow some of that but it's a different atmosphere. We do

have a couple of downtown restaurants and of course many of them have gone out of business because of age and so forth. I think things look better than they did a few years ago. An active Chamber of Commerce, active Business Association and SMART and very active people are trying to keep things going and they are succeeding.

Meford: So people around here generally want the downtown to be active?

Chatham: I think so, yes.

Meford: Now days, does it serve as any social role? You mentioned restaurants that serve as a social function but is there any other social role that is comparable to the 50s?

Chatham: Of course the movies have been closed down long ago. The drive-in movie of US55 has been closed for many years now. TV took care of that! Other than the horse show influence there are the churches downtown that are very important. The Baptist Church has moved out to the edge of town and that's a big change. The Church's roof fell in when it was downtown and that had something to do with them building on the edge of town. It's a good thing that they did because of the parking. Everyone has a car now. The traffic in Shelbyville is unbelievable compared to the 50's and 60's. I guess all small towns have the same problem.....the same change.

Meford: Well, I heard talk of a by-pass. Do you think that will help the situation?

Chatham: Well, I suspect it would. I don't know how much the traffic would come from the North to by-pass us. It's mostly East and West and I64 takes care of that.

Meford: How have the public services changed? Like the postal services, banking and police protection and fire protection?

Chatham: I think we are very fortunate to have a good police force and fire department and a good water company. KU has been a great company. I had no problems then and I have no problems now. They do have a larger reservoir at Guest Creek Lake than we used to have. The town is progressive and there is always new people coming in and some of the children of old timers are running the businesses and active with the Chamber of Commerce. It's not just new people.

Meford: Do you remember any government officials, mayors or city council people that have had a significant affect on the downtown area?

Chatham: I suppose you all have. Mr. Matthews, Sr. was the mayor when we moved here and Mr. Saunders after that. They were both mayors for a long time. Dr. Porter, my neighbor and then Jesse Puckett. Jesse was the one in charge most of the time in recent years and he is a bright, progressive fellow. His daughter, Du Anne, works for the newspaper here. You might know her. I believe the mayors did what they could.

Financing was always a problem, even now. It's true for big cities as well. But I'd say they were all progressive. There was an attitude, when I first came to town, that the business owners didn't want to have growth in town because that would mean unions, higher wages and employees problems with strikes and so forth. But we haven't seen that and the businesses have grown. Some have come in and I don't know about the unions, plus or minus, across the country they have diminished now because of different reasons.

Meford: What do you think is unique about Shelbyville?

Chatham: To answer that question I need to know compared to what? Uniqueness means being different from and I can only say that we have enjoyed being here, raising our kids here. This is home and we will be buried here and Shelbyville seems like my own home. I left Louisville at 17 to join the Navy during W.W.II and came back, went to college,



medical school and moved here. Really my childhood and youth was in Louisville but the important part of my life has been here. It's the only town I know. Many small towns in Kentucky are attractive but this is one of the better ones!

Meford: Are there any significant memories you'd like to add or anything I haven't ask you that you'd like to add?

Chatham: No, I guess not. Our school system has changed from County Schools, which were multiple and the City School to form one big High School. That's progress. I'm not sure it's good progress but it's progress. There are more problems with discipline and more problems with I guess the main thing is the lack of discipline. That goes back to the home and with kids not being disciplined at home the school does that. So much is expected of the school to do. How can the government put morals into minds of kids? The family should do this. We've had a good life here, a very pleasant life. Always some problems but our kids grew up here and the school system here was adequate for our children. We have a son that's a Doctor in Louisville and the other one has several degrees and so forth. So the school system was good to us. Do you live here?

Meford: I live in Clark County.

Chatham: You ought to move here.

Meford: Well, maybe I will.