

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford
Date: 8-24-95

Interviewee: Bill & Ruby Cohn
Running Time: 36 minutes

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RUBY AND BILL COHN

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**Interview was conducted
by Mark Mefford
1995**

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The following is an unrehearsed taped interview with Ruby Cohn. The Shelbyville Main Street Oral History Project. The interview is conducted by Mark Medford at 1:00 on March 24, 1995.

- Q. Okay. Why don't you start by telling me your full name?
A. Ruby Lee Stivers Cohn
- Q. When were you born?
A. When, May the 15th, 1925.
- Q. What were you parents names?
A. Tipton Stivers and Lydia Truman Stivers
- Q. Did they live in Shelby County area?
A. Yes, most of the time. They did live in Shelby County-Shelbyville most of the time.
- Q. What did they do for a living?
A. My dad worked at Reynolds Metal Company.
- Q. Do you have any brothers or sisters?
A. They're both deceased. I had a sister and a brother.
- Q. Did they live in Shelby County?
A. Yes. NO, I take that back, my sister moved to Louisville later years.
- Q. What's your full name?
A. William A. Cohn.
- Q. When were you born?
A. 1923.
- Q. Were you born in Shelbyville?
A. Yes.
- Q. What were your parents names?
A. Leonard and Ethel Cohn.
- Q. What did they do for a living?
A. He was a welder and she was a housewife.
- Q. Did you have any brothers or sisters?
A. Yes I have two brothers and a sister. One lives in Shelby County, one in Louisville and one in Georgia.
- Q. Did you all have any children?
A. We have a boy. He's forty eight years old tomorrow.

Q. Does he live...

A. He lives in Lexington.

Q. What does he do for a living?

A. He's a pharmacist.

Q. How long have you lived in the Shelby County area?

A. Uhm, 60 years. Before that I lived at Cropper which is a small town.

Mark: Yeah, it's still in Shelby County

Ruby: Yes.

Q. Well, growing up in Cropper, did you grow up in Cropper, is that what you're saying?

A. Till I was about eleven years old.

Q. How did Shelbyville influence your life? Did you all come here to trade or did you get most of your stuff in Cropper? Did you ever come to Shelbyville?

A. Oh yes, we used to come in particularly on Saturday night, that was a big time in Shelbyville. But, by the time I was eleven, we moved to town, so I really remember more about that than I do the Cropper area. Cropper, the church and your school was almost your life. Of course neighbors were extremely close there. I ? feel close in Shelbyville too.

Q. So, you moved to Shelbyville when you were eleven, and uh, what were some of your early memories and experiences when you moved here...some of the things you remember doing in Shelbyville?

A. I guess at that time, just going to school and your friends that you had and enjoyed so much. You made your own enjoyment back then, you didn't have anything, you got to use your imagination, but I had some very fond and good memories of growing up. I've never wanted to live anywhere except Shelbyville.

Q. What are some of the stores you remember going to when you were growing up in Shelbyville?

A. Oh, the dime store! Newbury's and Van's, in fact before I graduated, I worked in Van's after school in the summer. Of course there were plenty of grocery stores this was all downtown too, which it's changed so much because it's in shopping centers now. But, downtown was definitely the main place to be.

Restaurants and what were the restaurants everyone went to, they had the bowling alley under it or...

Bill: The only thing I remember was the pool room.

Ruby: (Laughing...no!) That was on the other side of the street. Clyde Hall's ice cream and..

Bill : Oh, well your talking about where the Brunswick Bowling Lanes used to be. That fellow came in here from New Jersey, can't call his name--was probably in 35 or 36.

Ruby: And then the drug stores, they used to have fountains and

there was a red skeller downstairs that ...

Bill:Ransdall's Drug Store at 6th and Main.

Mark:Where did you all do your grocery shopping?

Ruby:A & P I believe, if I remember.

Mark:Did you all, did people pay you with cash or credit or either one?

Ruby:Cash only.

Bill:Cash or you didn't get it.

Mark:They didn't offer credit?

Ruby:I think they did, we just never believed in buying groceries on credit.

Bill:We never applied for it.

Mark:Were there some other businesses downtown that you all remember?

Ruby:Well of course Nance's Children's Shop was just something else. I dressed my son out of that shop all through the years. Lawson's Department Store of course was there for years and years and really miss that. I can't think of anything that you really needed for around the house or clothing that you couldn't find there. When they closed, it really was a loss to the town. It was one of those places where you could always believe what they told you. They always followed through on whatever you bought. Then of course there was a furniture store Carl Brames Furniture Store...Can you think of something else?

Bill:Oh yeah, you've got Duncans Furniture Store you had Lermans Mens Store. It was a like a regular department store and Lincoln, had Smith McKinney Drug Store, you had Corn Ruff? which handled furniture primarily, well, that and school supplies, then Biagis' has been there a long time... not necessarily on Main Street though because they started out on 6th and then moved to Main. And like Ruby said, we had A & P and Kroger and the Piggly Wiggly, going way back to them. And Ruebens Department Store on Main Street. And Scoffields Drug Store, Brazens Hardware Store...

Ruby:Mary Bloomers Shop..

Bill:Mary Bloomers Ladies Shop, yeah, and then we had the welding shop, my father was a welder. He worked for Amos Porter right there on Main Street as well. And I guess from on down really from the drug store going down, we had the hotel...

Ruby:I remember when that burned, thats about the only thing I remember.

Bill:We had the hotel and then we wound up at Blakemores Grocery, went to Newbury's, the Barber Shop, the movie house and the old hamburger...

Ruby:How about that little chili shop, that's what you're talking about...

Bill:Yeah, then it was the pool room, Kentucky Utilities, Kempers Grocery and then we go way back now getting back to Weavers when he was in the funeral business there, A.B. Weaver. And then Tony's

Bill:Well, it's just the fact that I carried newspapers all over the town, east, west, north south of downtown...and not only a route, I carried four routes cause you had to make money to dress yourself and buy your books.

Mark:How did they get the papers from here to Louisville.

Bill:They had a like a van arrangement, I guess at that time you called it a Panel truck and we had 24 paper routes in Shelbyville. Courier Journal, Local Times and then in addition to that we had a noon edition, we had a red flash at 7 o'clock and then like I said on Saturday nights we had what we called a bull dog that was a Sunday Morning paper, sold on Saturday night to the rural people.

Sold to anybody, but I'm talking about they was the people that bought it because at that time there was very little transportation out into the country for the people so they had to pick up their newspaper while they were in town.

We used to sell 100-125 papers.

Mark:SO you had a route as well as just selling?

Bill:Oh yes, that was where you made your money, we had a morning route at 4 o'clock and then we had another edition at 12, 3 o'clock right out of school had another route then at 7:00 at night, had another route. So I was carrying papers and going to school all day.

Mark:: Stayed pretty busy!

Ruby:Still a firm believer thats one of the best...

Bill:Good things for young men. Teach you to manage your money you get to know people and some people you don't want to know!
(Laughing)

Ruby:Well, I tell ya, for two weeks I helped my neighbor lady deliver, he son had gone on vacation and she broke her leg. And, that was in the middle of winter, and I don't want any part of the newspaper route for a child.

Mark:My brother did that for a while and I just couldn't see how he got up that early every morning.

Bill:It's...tough, but once you get used to it it's no problem. Even to this day, it's no problem getting up, I went in the US Army cause I've been getting up so many years, it doesn't make any difference to me...just hand it out boys, we'll take it.

Mark:Well, where did you go to school?

Ruby:Shelbyville High, Shelbyville grade, then Shelbyville High. Then I went to work at the bank when I graduated.

Mark:What bank did you work at?

Ruby:The Bank of Shelbyville and stayed there 47 years.

Mark:Did you move around to different locations or did you stay at the same place?

Ruby:Stayed in the same place all the time since 1859. I started in as just the lowest possible and ended up fortunately as President for 7 years. I retired as President and still on the board of directors, however Liberty national has bought the Bank of Shelbyville and Liberty has sold to Bank One. I hoping that

they will keep the tradition that we had there.

Mark:These banks just can't stand their same name for a year or two can they?

Ruby:No, thats true (laughing)

Bill:In fact, they might of lost business, so really, I mean everybody's' out on the market gobbling up, hoping they can make an extra dollar...

Ruby:Well, I think its just a big change in the business climate you have to have more assets than we had to of been able to stay individual.

Mark:Well, before we talked about the bank, you said you worked at Ruby:Van's Store? Had one of the nicest bosses anyone could of ever had. I've only had two bosses in my lifetime. Mr. Van at the Van's store and Richard Randolph at the Bank he was President at the time. Both of them were just entirely southern gentlemen all the way and I learned allot from both of them.

Mark:What did you do at the dime store?

Ruby: Just a clerk.

Mark:Can you describe what the inside of the dime store looked like?

Ruby:It was just a building, straight and narrow and had everything under the sun in it and it kept you busy keeping it up because there wasn't any room to have any things around in the aisle as the aisle wasn't that large. But, it was a great experience, a lot of my friends worked there.

Mark:Did many kids find work like that during the summers and after school?

Ruby:I think all of them that wanted to work, there was always a job open.

Mark:What did you start doing at the bank?

Ruby:Started on the very lowest...not even a teller.

Mark:What are some of the changes that went on at the bank?

Ruby:It seemed like there wasn't any for about 15 or 20 years and then there was never a year that there wasn't a change after that, but they were good years.

Mark:When you were president, what were some of the changes in the bank and industry that you noticed?

Ruby:Well, of course I guess the biggest one particularly in the years when there was so much paper work you really couldn't enjoy what you really liked to do. But, I always enjoyed the customers very much.

Mark:Did you know most of the people that banked there?

Ruby:Oh yes, at that time you knew everybody in Shelbyville and the majority of them in Shelby County. and if you didn't you made it a point to know them.

Mark:Did you all charge like a bank...did you charge for balancing checks?

Ruby:At that time? No, that all came in later years and it was justified because people didn't used to not give cold checks.

Back in the 1950's there were very few.

Mark:Where is the bank located you'd said it's in the same location.

Ruby:6th and Main Street

Mark:After the paper route, what kind of work did you do?

Bill:US ARMY. Wore the suits for about 2 1/2 years. But, then I came back and went to work for Chandler Distillers in Frankfort and we had offices in Louisville, Lawrenceburg, Indiana, and of course the main office was in Cincinnati. And, I got into industrial engineering and I went to UC and took some Industrial Engineering courses and I just worked my way up to become an industrial engineer for the company. I left them in 69 and went to Louisville and worked for a packaging company doing industrial engineering and accounting work at that time. But most of the time was spent in the whiskey business. We had a real nice plant, with 200 acres and 2,000 people and we produced about 4 million cases of whiskey a year. We also manufactured about 9 million gallons of whiskey so we're quite busy. Our central production office was in Cincinnati and then of course was in the Empire State Building in New York. IN addition to that, they had four large plants here in KY and Indiana one, then they started buying up small plants immediately after the war just to get the inventory, and we had plants under our supervision and most of the other plants had 3 or 4. But soon as we got the whiskey, of course a year or two afterwards, we closed them down. Of course they began to get on us because we were monopolizing the business. So anyway, we met the law, we kept some of them 3 or 4 years after the purchase then we closed them down, but we used them as a warehousing plant all of them, and then when that got too expensive, on account of hauling and transportation, then we sold them. People used them for various and sundry things because well, by far and large the biggest thing people could use them for was knock the ricks out of them and use them for storage. Course, their good sized buildings, your talking about 4 or 5 storied buildings you know and I guess thats about it.

Mark:Do a lot of people that live in Shelbyville work in Frankfort or Louisville?

Bill:At that particular time in the whiskey business, there was probably 20 or 25, but most of the people worked for the state and there were quite a few of them.

Ruby:And still.

Bill:I was just thinking, even when I started out, oh I don't know, it would be strictly an estimate, but people riding the bus and they had car pools, there were probably 75 people by and large.

And of course remember Shelbyville at that time is still a small town you know, we only had 4,000 people. I'd say today, with the suburbs around it, we've probably got 12,000 people, wouldn't you think?

Ruby:at least.

Bill;So it was very small, so people had to seek employment elsewhere. I knew when I came up from service that I had to go somewhere else, I' m not saying Shelbyville's not big enough, but

it just didn't have enough plants here to occupy and like Ruby said, most of the people employed, they were uptown and that was about it or else you were on a farm out in a rural area. SO, even during the war, we had a lot of people and they stayed on, Ruby's father was one of them went to Louisville to work in the fence plants and urban bo? Lawrenceburg, her sister went, and probably, I have no idea, but 1942 or 43, I expect there was a grey hound bus full of people out of here. In addition to that, they had automobiles carrying people to ...they really did, naturally, with the amount of money earned had the side of Shelbyville and let the town grow too. Some of the furniture stores expanded and drug stores expanded and of course had a few more restaurants around and of course it helped the banking business, just one of those things, it just keeps multiplying. Just like the farmers that always claim and rightfully so some of it, some of it I have question about, they grow tobacco and they sell their beef cattle and helps deposits at the bank and of course the bank has to lend them money to operate on during the year, calendar year. But, they're not the only ones that helps boost the economy, there are other people too.

Mark:Well, you mentioned that there were not a lot of plants here when you got out of the service, and you mentioned how the economy was growing, and I know theres a lot of plants out ...how has that affected the character of the Shelbyville besides the increased economy?

Bill:Well, one thing, just like talking about the bank, you just don't get the personal touch, naturally, thats gone. Might as well forget that and then the plants far as the outlying plants, I can't really speak to that other than the fact, we'll say for conversation 5 of 600 people work out in the plants and you've got a nice payroll coming into the town, and other than I cant' really speak to that.

Ruby:I think we've lost a lot in that maybe we're not known as a "friendly little town" anymore because it is impossible to know everybody even now when you go to church, we don't know everybody in church like we used to. That part, I miss to a certain extent of course, I was thinking of some of the elements that have come in, but they were probably already here anyway, its probably the times that have changed that more than anything else.

Bill:I think we've got an influence too of Jefferson County. People are trying to get out of Jefferson County and there are a lot of farms on the east end of town especially, and there are some on the west, but, they broke them down and sold them off in 5 acre plots and of course everybody in the city was screaming to get out after, depending upon where you worked in Louisville, but anywhere from 20 to 25 miles with an interstate system coming across about 60-62, can make a big difference, so we started getting a lot of a foreign element in here. I don't know, I was trying to think because it's been such a long time ago, but I think the County and City now, are we talking about 30 something

thousand people?

Ruby:I expect.

Bill:When Ruby and I were growing up, I don't know, I don't know if there was 18,000 people in the county and the city, do you?

Ruby:Well, all you'd have to do is just ride from here to Louisville and you just see such a difference.

Bill:Well, like when you's a paper boy and you come into the city limits there was a sign up there 4,044 people and like you know, and then of course naturally that has tipped in the city of course the boundaries have been extended too. Right now, I guess the County for example wants to west, goes all the way out to Walmart and Winn Dixie doesn't it? OF course it used to stop right there at the fairgrounds.

Mark:well, you mentioned something about the drive to Louisville and How things have changed. Has Louisville always effected Shelbyville or did it used to be further away?

Ruby:Much further away. In the 1940's and 50's...

Bill:We rode the bus to Louisville to watch the movies didn't we?

Ruby:But, now, they're almost in your backyard and I wouldn't be surprised what another 10 years will bring.

Bill;Up to the amusement park. Thats what we...If we couldn't find somebody with an automobile to take us, then again getting back to one of the biggest things to me and this applies to allot of cities throughout this entire country and thats the interstate system. They brought a lot of traffic, they really did.

And, of course the population exploded right after the war with the boys came home, first thing you know they had one, two three, four kids, some of them had 8 or 9, so...

Mark:SO you think a lot of traffic is coming through town because of interstate?

Bill:Yeah, I think so, of course we had all the traffic had to go through Shelbyville going east or west because 60 was all we had, now you've got to go through Main Street, but the people now that travel interstate, they come over to McDonalds, wont' they?

Ruby:But, we have quite a growing thing with Wakefield Scearce Gallery and the antique shops. I mean, people really come for that now, because it has taken the place of the downtown small country town that we did have.

Bill:Of course people come in off the interstate and stay overnight at the Best Western and Days Inn, and you get that element, no how much of that traffic comes into the city, and gives money to the city per say, I'd say it's very limited, I'd think.

Mark:Well, now, a lot of these businesses that we talked about earlier, in fact most of them are probably closed now in the

downtown area, Lawson's and things like that..

Ruby:Right, Biagi's of course is still there with all of their electoral appliances...

Mark:Biagis' and there's the banks are still there and quite a few churches, but a lot of the retailers have moved if not closed, they've moved to the edge of town wouldn't you say?

Ruby:Well, of course the discount stores have come in and effected this town just like they have everybody's.

Bill:? can't make out.

Mark:Do you think the interstate had anything to do with that, I know you can't get to the downtown without, if you're coming on the interstate you have to go to the edge of town to get to downtown, do you think the interstate had anything to with that?

Ruby:Not really....I don't do you Bill?

Bill:No, I think just like your generation and mine, we were ready to break out. That's all there is to it...at least I was I know. I wanted bigger and better things. We probably wanted bigger and better things than our parents had and I think the interstate probably helped a lot of that to come about don't you. I mean, just like the building of houses, we had so much dirt flowing in here that we never even think about getting in here. I just can't help but believe that the interstate something to do with getting it quicker and cheaper. Because I can because as a young boy if you had a truck of lumber or a truck of coal (?cant make out?) it was about the biggest thing you had coming through town. Because you can't just jump off, soon as they catch a hill they couldn't pull, they jumped up on the truck they'd get a ride. I think interstates had a big effect across the country, I can't help but believe that. And, just like when you have a factory or a plant, these large trucks now and the amount of material they haul coming up the interstate, it's hard to say, I was trying to think, for example we went to Florida, when I immediately got home from service shortly thereafter, you're looking at 25 or 30 hours. Now, you can kick it off in 16 or 17 hours. And the reason I'm using that as an example, thats the reason those companies that have no problems of transportation, but on the interstate system, we've got it and I think it's helped boost everything. Now a lot of people may not agree with me, cause no doubt about it, these little towns or villages lost out completely. Like Simpsonville, even though Simpsonville's probably grown some, cause they've got an access road going in off the interstate, but I still think the traffic going off US 60 it hurt them some. For example, halfway to Frankfort, there is a halfway house, had restrooms and did a bang up business. People were coming in all the time...trucks, well it was a truck stop...they stopped in there, I've seen the time cause I'd go out of here at 4 o'clock in the morning, that there'd be 20 trucks up there and guys having breakfast. I'd stop

town at that bridge out there where McDonalds is, see, the only thing you had in houses was what was on US 60. There was no houses going North or South there just wasn't any. And I don't know myself, but I'd guess between Crestview and I don't mean Crestview, but East View and Webb Mont and Hazel Heights, I'd say that what we've added 350 homes out there. That's the type of thing I was talking about all this (? can't make out) Like I told you a few minutes ago, if this is true, if we've gone from 4,000 to 12 ...tape runs out.

Tape picks back up....

Bill:After I came home from service, I don't know that Gary would remember, he couldn't remember some of them cause they've gone out of business.

Ruby:Right, but there used to be a lot of people living up over stores downtown and on the two streets on each side of Main Street. There were a lot of houses and some beautiful old houses, but that's all changed considerably now. Some of them still cling to their old homesteads because they love them so much its too bad that they are deteriorating so badly around them so much.

Mark:Do very many people live downtown anymore?

Ruby:Very few. Very, very few. I know all the time I was in business, we were constantly looking for something to draw them back downtown, but I think thats just like all towns, its just almost impossible now. I don't, I just don't believe it will ever be, cause, Frankfort is a prime example of that they've tried so hard to bring it back, and of course Louisville too.

Mark:Wonder why people don't want to live downtown? I'd think it'd be, I guess theres not as much down there within walking distance as there used to be.

Ruby:Thats right, see theres not even a grocery store down there now, and a lot of people, particularly older people would be able to go to the grocery store, the drug store, the churches and there's just not. And, I guess we all crave just a little bit of green ...with yards, flower gardens, and things.

Mark:When you were growing up in Cropper, how were the roads to and from Shelbyville?

Ruby:It was a state highway and it wasn't bad.

Mark:Were most roads in from the country, were they paved or at least graveled?

Ruby:Uh hum

Mark:So it wasn't much trouble?

Ruby:No, they were just two lane.

Mark:Do you all go to church around here?

Ruby:First Baptist.

Mark:Have you always gone to that church?

Ruby:Used to be downtown until the ceiling fell in...I think the lord was trying to tell us something. So we had to move. I love

the churches downtown they're still several downtown.

Bill: I guess we moved what was it in '57 to the new building?

Mark: Did religion, before you moved, did religion play a big role in the downtown area?

Ruby: Oh yes, of course once again, that's what you did for entertainment.

Mark: Kind of a social center?

Ruby: yes, right.

Mark: Did the downtown churches get patronized by mostly people living in the city or did farmers come in?

Ruby: No, everybody came.

Bill: I'd say we had quite a few farmers come in and become members. They probably wanted to get away from the small country church and I guess they, you know, they had a better pastor there and I guess at that time, of course we've always been the biggest, but even then, you know you can I guess the Presbyterian, I guess they had 150-75 up to 300 enrolled....

Ruby: But, I tell you, I've got some of my best memories of Cropper Baptist Church when I was really young. You went every time the church door was open I think sometimes we still strive to find that but its just not there anymore.

Bill: And of course, downtown, we had primarily Christian, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and Catholic, I'd forgot about that. But, they were down on 1st Street and there wasn't much down there.

Mark: Did anything go on at the church during the week or was it strictly a Sunday...

Ruby: Wednesday.

Bill: Wednesday, Boy scouts.

Mark: How do you think the appearance generally of downtown has changed, you know we talked about stores that have come and gone, does it look a lot different than it used to?

Ruby: Oh yes. It looks different, but just recently they've redone a lot of them and it still has a lot of the old time charm I think. I'm very pleased with the way our downtown has tried to control the way its' going.

Bill: Except for the antique shops, I cant say to much for them.

Ruby: Oh Bill,

Bill: You think so? I guess if you're an antique, they're supposed to look that way. (laughing)

Mark: When did they start to open up?

Ruby: The antique shops? Oh, I guess about 10 or 15 years ago it started, we always had several, we had about 3 in town that have been there since I can remember. I don't think they're in existence any more, but they always had a good following and people really came to look forward to going to them. But now, it seems that we have just a large number but its almost known as an antique capitol, but at least its something...its not closed stores.

Mark:What do you think makes Shelbyville unique?

Ruby:Well, of course I still think we have a friendly attitude. I think a lot of people that move in say its not a friendly town, but then maybe they don't give it a chance. Maybe they're not friendly. But, I still think we've got a real good part in that.

I know so many people, friends from out of town talk about how much they love to come and have lunch and go to the antique shops and I think its a good place to live. Our old saying was Good Land, Good Living, Good People. That pretty much speaks to what Shelbyville is.

Mark:Thats about all the questions that I have. Is there anything you'll like to add that I haven't asked about?

Bill:Well, if you'll turn that tape off, just a minute, I'd tell you something I think, I don't want it on that tape. It's not nasty, but.....

tape off.