

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford

Interviewee: Don Cubert Sr.

Date:

Running Time: 28 minutes

Side One

COUNTER

- 000 INTRODUCTION
- 010 BACKGROUND: BORN DECEMBER 22, 1928.
- 020 OCCUPATION: SERVICE STATION OWNER.
- 030 RUNNING THE SERVICE STATION.
- 100 SHELBYVILLE'S RETAIL OUTLETS.
- 127 PARKING PROBLEMS.
- 147 CHANGES IN THE MAIN STREET AREA: I-64 REROUTED TRAFFIC.
- 190 DEMISE OF SMALL BUSINESSES.
- 294 MEMBER OF THE CITY COUNCIL & MAYOR
- 382 LOW UNEMPLOYMENT.
- 400 CITY GOVERNMENT AND HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.
- 461 END.

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Shelbyville Main Street
Oral History Project
Interview was conducted
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Meford: Would you start by telling me your full name.

Cubert: My name is Don Cubert, Sr.

Cubert:

Meford: When were you born?

Cubert: December 2, 1928

Meford: What are your parents names?

Cubert: They were Artie and James Cubert.

Meford: Did they live in the Shelby County area?

Cubert: No, in Spencer County.

Meford: What was there occupation.

Cubert: He was a farmer and a small business owner at one time.

Meford: What kind of business?

Cubert: It was a grocery store, just a general grocery store.

Meford: When did you move to Shelby County?

Cubert: In 1956.

Meford: What brought you to the Shelbyville area?

Cubert: I had a small business in Taylorsville and it was a service station. I moved to California in 1956 to go into business with my brother-in-law (a service station) but due to some zoning regulations they got the location stopped. I spent a year in California and then moved back and decided to move to Shelbyville.

Meford: So you have a service station here?

Cubert: In 1957 the person I was working for, Joe Davis, moved to down-town Shelbyville and opened up a car dealership and I took the service station over. It was on the west side of town and was called Farmers Service Station.

Meford: Did you offer gas and full service?

Cubert: It was full service.

Meford: And where was it located at?

Cubert: What is there now in the location is the Shelby County Trust Bank (the branch).

Meford: How long did you run the service station.

Cubert: I was there from 1957 until 1962 and I moved downtown to 11th and Main Street and opened up a bran new, at that time it was called ESSO Station.

Meford: How was that spelled.

Cubert: ESSO.

Meford: OK

Cubert: There is a little history to that name. In the period I was there it was ESSO, then it was ENCO and then it was EXON. One of the oil companies claimed we were infringing on there name or copy write so they had to change the name. So EXON was

worldwide so they had to get this word "EXON" and put it in all your dialects or all you languages to make sure that it wasn't an offensive word in somebody else language being it was a worldwide copy name. It was very interesting.

Meford: Very. What kind of things went on at the service station? I understand you would get gas and service there, but was it full service when you came to get gas, did you have a self serve pump at that time?

Cubert: No, not at that time. We were full service providing minor mechanics (oil changes, windshield wiper blades, and gasoline) and of course we sold candy and the normal things. It wasn't a convenient store. It was full service until, I can't recall the year, but then the trend changed in the service station business. More people wanted to pump their own gas and of course I used to attend alot of seminars with EXON and they said if you don't change with the times, then you are going to be history. So we took one island and had self service and one island was full service. There are a lot of people that just refuse to pump their gas even today. That was before we had any Super Americas or Thriftys in our community or your chain types. I decided that if I was going to have income I was going to have to diversify and get something else. So we opened up a car wash in the back. It was a full car wash with automatic and also you could do your own. That building, we lent it for probably 7 or 8 years and it seemed like more car washing business came to town and it started declining so we remodeled that building into a..... my wife put a craft shop.....you know a lot of people come to Shelbyville for crafts. Well we ran that for a while and then we decided we'd put in a video store. So we put a video store back there. Then I retired and my son took my business over. He's Don Jr. and he just graduated from the University of Kentucky and I ask him if he wanted to go into business and he said sure. So I said, I'll step aside and you run it. Young people have different ideas than us older people. Don decided that he was going to diversify more. He was a young man of 28 or 29 and diversified even more. He took the video store and (my wife and he are running the business) moved it to the front and we did away with all full service and went self service gas with a convenient store and a video store attached to it. We went in the back where we had started out with a concrete building that was a car wash and now it has been remodeled and there is a beauty parlor in there and we have a dry cleaners.

Meford: I see.

Cubert: That about up-to-date on the history of my career.

Meford: Well there have been alot of changes in the business. When you opened your service station here, what were some of the businesses you remember frequenting for groceries and cloths and everything on Main Street?

Cubert: In those days there was, if fact, there was a little grocery just down the street from the corner of 11th and Main where I had the service station. In downtown we had, of course we had some pool rooms, some variety stores like the 5 and 10s and some drug stores with soda fountains and clothing stores like Lincolns and Lermans and then we had two independent clothing stores Andriots and Pucketts. There was barber shops and at that time Lee McClains was another clothing manufacturer, they had their plant where they made there cloths over one of the downtown businesses. They moved out to the west side of town. There was a Kroger on the east side of town and there were just small

businesses down there. The movies by this time had already left town, they weren't operating down there.

Meford: Was parking a problem in the downtown area?

Cubert: It had begun to be and I think you can attribute that to, you know families used to just have one car and starting back in those years everyone in the family could drive and had a car and naturally that created more.....instead of all going in one car downtown they would go in two or three different cars and that created parking problems. I think we are working on that now. Part of that now is educating employees to find off site-off-street parking so that the customers can park.

Meford: They get here first thing in the morning and park in front of the store.

Cubert: Yes, that's a big problem and I'm sure you've heard that before.

Meford: Do you think a lot of people (employees) are starting to park away from the businesses?

Cubert: I think the majority of them are but you have a few that just don't want to change their habits. Of course in our community we know who they are.

Meford: What are some of the changes that have gone on in the Main Street area? You mentioned a lot of changes in your business but what are some of the other changes in the Main Street area?

Cubert: Well, it seemed to me like the trend started in, I really think if we're talking about the downtown what changed a lot of it was when the interstate system was built. When they build that it by-passed the community and since US 60 was a through route a lot of people would stop down town to eat or maybe they needed to pick up something at the drug store or something and of course when that happened then we had to depend on local people. I think some of the reasoning, I wrote some notes down this morning, I think some of the reasoning behind the change was merchants weren't opening at convenient times for the customer. They were opening their shops at 9 and at 5 o'clock they were closed. If you had a working spouse and husband and they didn't get off till 5, they didn't have any place to shop, the downtown was closed. I think that's part of the reasoning for our downtown or any other downtown. I think we were fortunate here in Shelbyville that we had a good anchor in Science Hill Inn and Wakefield-Scearce Gallery had brought in a whole lot of people. In our particular community when the grocery stores and clothing stores closed up then we were fortunate enough to have spin-offs from Wakefield-Scearce and antiques. We were very fortunate here in Shelbyville. I know a lot of communities aren't. In my notes, I know we mentioned parking a while ago. Before the Wal Marts and even the shopping centers sprung up, well in our case, like in Louisville, it was easy to drive down there. Then the sprung up around our community and we have 3 in our particular community and I'm sure there will be more. I just think the downtown merchants weren't willing to change, they didn't want to change. A lot of the downtown merchants, I'm referring to ours, a lot of them were middle aged, not too many young merchants, maybe their children didn't want to work the long hours, no benefits, so they just didn't want to do it. They went off to better paying jobs and more security. I also think what hurts the downtown merchants a lot, they don't have the buying power like the big merchant buys grosses of things where a small person could only buy one gross. That will be reflected in the price, the more you buy the cheaper it is. There's ways for the downtown, I'll give you an example of what we did in the service station business. We

were all in competition but we knew we had a common goal so the oil companies, if they had say a deal on oil or tires or whatever it might be, instead of buying 10 we would go together and buy 100, split the cost, the tires were cheaper and we could actually compete better. That's the way we solved part of the merchandising problem. I think, like I stated before, I'm going to say when the senior citizens retired or passed on then the businesses just folded because their kids just didn't want to do it. It's very demanding when you are a small business person. If you notice in our community, some of the businesses that are still successful today over the last 60-70 years, like Traceys, their son just took it over, same was with Smith McKinney, the drug store out here. There's not very many old businesses in Shelbyville anymore that were started 60 year ago.

Meford: Not many more. When did they start closing down or when did they finish closing down? Either one.

Cubert: Of course they all didn't close down. But I think what happened in Shelbyville in particular, like other communities that closed down, it wasn't just boarded up and left as a eyesore in the middle of your block. There was something that came in there, it might not always been successful, but it wasn't long until something came in there. I know we've had alot to do with crafts or antiques, that's been our niche. Of course we had another good anchor with our courthouse being right downtown and with our banks. They didn't pull completely out of the downtown, they build their branches all around our community and still are. I think in our community, this was in later years, we tried to lure tourist. Of course tourist dollars are non polluting dollars other than driving their car in, they don't pollute our streams.

Meford: What kind of measures did you all take to entice tourist to come here?

Cubert: In the early years, I'm not real positive, I think a lot came back that had been through Shelbyville at sometime. Maybe when it was a through road, maybe something they saw and maybe told their child. It was like a word-of-mouth thing. It wasn't a big national advertisement, it was like I had traveled in Shelbyville, say 35 years ago and I might mention it to one of my family that we spend a night in "this and this" and it was just such a quaint little place or something and if you were in the vicinity your might drive by and see. Just that type of thing until we got our tourism division and now we are promoted quite a bit more. They tax the motels and I think that has helped. They were very active. Guist Lake has helped bring tourist in and then I do believe when Carl Sanders moved to town and opened up Claudia's Dinner House and then moved to Shelbyville, I think that probably had some impact on tourist being a national known person.

Meford: Well now that you are retired, what is your occupation?

Cubert: Well as of right now, I've been on the City Council for 13 years and our Mayor, Neal Hackworth, resigned in January to take another job so I was appointed Mayor to fill out until the next election. I've lost, so as of November 7 I won't be mayor. I'll probably stay active, probably either back on the council or I will stay active in the community and try and promote it.

Meford: During the 13 years of serving on the City Council and as Mayor, what are some of the changes you have seen initiated by City Government or just changes that have come about in the government?

Cubert: We have been very aggressive in trying to get industry here. We were basically a farming community and as we all know, the farms are declining all over the nation, so we had to have something to keep our young people and get people employed. My basic goal when I went on the council, one of my goals, was to try to provide jobs for our young people that we sent off to college for education, if they wanted to come back to our community. We wanted to offer them that opportunity because I feel like people, not recycle, but if your community doesn't grow and young people come back and people like me just get old and in my thinking it just dies off unless you can get the young people to come back. I think we have been successful in that because I see young people today that were here, went off to college and now they have come back as professionals. Lawyers, or maybe have taken over the family business and I think that is one of the changes. We have been fortunate, we are in a good location, that's excellent. I think that we are a friendly town and I think you have to be friendly to strangers. I've learned that in my business. If you weren't friendly, people aren't going to trade with you. Everybody had a product so you had to give them a little something extra.

Meford: Do you think Shelbyville is a friendly town?

Cubert: I do. Yes I do. I think that's another thing that I was very much interested in and it hasn't been implemented yet, and they will probably do it through SDC, my suggestion was to get all your service people at a seminar and try to education them, if they aren't already educated in what we have in our community to offer. If someone comes in, don't say anything negative about your community. I know in my lifetime I've had young people working for me and perhaps they would stop in the service station and someone would stop in there and they'd say "Where's a good place to eat?" "There are no good places to eat, go to Louisville". Well, you try to educate them that this is the best place in the world to stay or move. Then we had, I think, another big impact on our community was when The BUDD Company decided to come here and other things spun off from BUDD and even from Georgetown-Toyota. Plants have just sprung up and we have a very excellent interstate system, its easy to access, just within a mile of our city limits. Mayor Hackworth was very aggressive for growth as we all know in cities, the tax basis is what you have to have for the services to grow. We have been very aggressive and still are. Our biggest problem now that we have in Shelbyville is affordable housing and labor force. We are almost zero unemployment and it is difficult to attract industry if you don't have the unemployment. If you do attract them then your existing plants loose employees to them and it's not really helping the situation. That's one thing that we're trying to do in Shelbyville is try to find affordable housing for the people and it's very difficult to do that for someone making \$7 or \$8 dollars an hour. They can't afford \$100,000 house. Right now we haven't been able to do it but we're working on it. Industry is working on it, SDC is working on it, and the city is trying to help.

Meford: SDC is Shelby Development Corporation?

Cubert: Yes.

Meford: What role does city government play in historical preservation of the downtown area?

Cubert: When I came on City Council, 13 years ago, you could just notice the town was decaying all around you. People would buy nice homes when they came up for sale and they would cut them up into apartments. At that time they just went down, down, down.

I didn't know anything about historical districts, so we got together, Mary Hackworth, Lucy Long and myself, and we met with Frank Gilbert for lunch one day and we got to going into the historical districts. We decided that's what we needed in Shelbyville to protect our homes and we formed the historical district. There's been some rough edges because a lot of people don't like to be told what to do but that's not our thing, we want to help guide them and help them keep their property up and show them the value of keeping their neighborhood up and the property values won't go down. You can get one or two decaying houses in a neighborhood and the property values will go on down. I think a classic example in our community is our east end of town. When I moved to Shelbyville in 1956, I lived on the east side of town and there were beautiful old homes and they were just bought up, and not to be critical but back 4 years ago, if we'd had something like that maybe we could have protected those areas. Now I think we protected, and in years to come will appreciate that we do have our district. I know I'm kinda proud of it.

Meford: Well, I think that's about all the questions I have for you. Is there anything you'd like to add? Anything you thought about that I've neglected to ask you?

Cubert: Well, I think I've about covered about everything.