

# Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

*Interviewer:* Mark Mefford

*Interviewee:* Rosetta Yager  
Cunningham Davis

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*Running Time:* 40 minutes

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**Rosella Yager  
Cunningham Davis  
Shelbyville Main Street  
Oral History Project  
Interview by Mark Meford**

Rosella Yager Cunningham Davis  
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Interview by Mark Meford

Meford: Why don't you start by telling me your full name?

Davis: My full name is Rosella Yager Cunningham Davis. I was married to Jesse Harden Davis for 54 years.

Meford: What was his occupation?

Davis: We lived on a 6 generation farm 2 miles north of Shelbyville.

Meford: What were your parents names?

Davis: My mother was raised here in Shelbyville and her name was Mary Lou Yager and she was the daughter of Dr. Chancellor Yager and Rosella O'Bryan Yager. She graduated in 1911 from Science Hill School. My father was from Montgomery County, TN and that is Clarksville and his name was Eli Washington Cuningham III.

Meford: Did you have any children?

Davis: Yes, I have 2 daughters. One is Mary Harden Davis who is married now to Bob Stevens and they live in Lexington, KY and have 2 sons and she is a graduate of the University of Kentucky and a Christian College in Columbia, MO. The younger girl is named Rosella Malcolm Davis and she is married to Vaughn Rogers II of Lexington. She and Mr. Rogers are both graduates of Transylvania College of Lexington and she has a Masters Degree from The University of Kentucky. Both of those girls have taught in the Lexington School System.

Meford: How long have you lived in the Shelbyville area?

Davis: 79 years!

Meford: Your whole life?

Davis: No, I was born in Tennessee. I came here when I was 14 months old and I have lived in this area ever since. I feel indeed fortunate. I wish that my children and grandchildren had these opportunities. Of course we were depression children and we had that shield of parental protection around us. When I look back on it, there were many good things too. It strengthened family life and things like that.

Meford: What are some of your early memories of the downtown area?

Davis: Well I lived at the edge of town. I only lived in the city limits for 4 years of my life and it was a place where you felt like everything was safe. There were wonderful caring people. We had the best of everything as I think of it now. Our downtown area was well kept, much better than it is today. We had good friendly people in the bank. We had our own trusted lawyers. You had good restaurants, a good bakery, a good stationary store where you could go in and buy some of the latest books and we had wonderful department stores where the ladies could go into Lawsons and get fashionable cloths that were equivalent to any of the better stores in the big cities. We had men's haberdasheries like Wrothchild. We had shoe stores where you could go in and buy good leather products at Harborson & Smith and places like that. We had two millinery stores and it was really and truly wonderful downtown churches where people took pride in them. Unfortunately we only have three of the main structures left, that is the Episcopal, the Presbyterian and the Catholic. Several have fallen to fire and others have had other calamities to happen. We

also were close enough to Louisville to where we could either ride in on one of the two trains or we had an electric trolley that went from Louisville to the east end of Shelbyville and that really ran about every hour. That gave us an opportunity to take advantage of the good theaters in Louisville or the entertainment at Memorial Auditorium. I mean they were outstanding performers! If you wished, you could go to Louisville and take a boat ride, you could go to Cincinnati and take a boat ride and of course there was even an excursion boat in Frankfort for people to enjoy. Really and truly, it has been a pleasure to grow up in Shelbyville and to have the opportunity of attending Science Hill School, which my children didn't have. You don't appreciate a lot of those things until they are taken away from you. I don't mean that we didn't have a good school system. We had the good luck of having a good school system headed by good principals and good superintendents who made it a point to see that those kids were encouraged to go on to college and further their education. Everybody has always had it stressed to us by our community, by your family, your church and your school that each one of us had an obligation in life to make this a better world. Each one of us was to do something that helped to make it as a better world. As far as I am concerned, it was my pleasure to be able to work with Ms. Milton and get the downtown part of Shelbyville, that included the court house and that business area and that Wakefield/Scarce Gallery, that included 3rd Street to the east side of 6th Street, put on the national registry. I'm sure you've seen some of those markers from time to time. I think that it's sort of ironic that I could come down the court house steps one day and look over and see my beautiful fountain in ruin, decay and rust. At that time I was working at the Shelby News and I went back in and said to my boss, "Why doesn't somebody restore our fountain" and he looked at me and said "go do it"!

Meford: What year was that?

Davis: That was just 30 years ago, so it was back in 1965. I said "are you kidding?" and "what do you do?" and he said "you'll think of something." Truly we had wonderful support from it, we had some men in service, in Germany, that sent us \$50.00, we had the little school children walk around a little bird bath at school and put in their coins to the tune of three coins in the fountain. People would send us \$10, \$5, \$1 or just come by and give me \$1. We were able to get it patched together with the help of about a half a dozen volunteers. Three of those volunteers are still living. One of them is Alwin Miller, who was our former Post Master, another is Georgian Carpenter who was the school teacher that thought up the idea of three coins in the fountain for the school children to participate. Of course through the newspaper and I was able to say from week to week who were the contributors, now we could never say how much you contributed but it gave the list of those people who contributed to it. Many people who had moved away from Shelbyville were still taking the paper and they would send in money. So we got it back into operation up until about 6 years ago one of the members of the fountain committee made application to the Moses Ruben Fund, I don't know if you've heard of that or not, it was a local business man who said he'd made his money in Shelbyville, he was of a Jewish family and he left all this money to Shelbyville for a committee to see how it could be used to better Shelbyville. With the help of the Moses Ruben Fund, the fiscal court and the water commission, the Heritage Commission for the 200th celebration for the state, we got \$16,000 raised (I shouldn't say that, they got \$16,000 raised. I didn't have a thing on

earth to do with it.....my husband was horribly ill at that time. I didn't do anything except just say "Hot-dog keep it going!")

They raised it and we were able to take it into Louisville and have it restored by a business that was operated by a Shelby County native named Barney Bright. They had a big going away party that the Shelby County Trust Bank did for us and it was gone for over a year and it came back completely restored and I mean all the water pipes and everything!

Meford: Was it in the same location its always been?

Davis: No. The fountain, in my mother's day, she said was in the middle of the street and it was refreshing to drive in your horse and buggy around the fountain and the spray was just so pleasant on a hot summer day. But, when the present court house was build, they had to move the fountain and they didn't have room enough to place the steps and everything like the original fountains. That is one of the stories we need to stress because many people felt that the fountain was moved for the inter urban to come from the west end of town to the east end of town and that was not true. I've been one of the people that has spread that story, so I wanted to be sure that this correction is made and it's over in what we call one of the four county parks. William Shannon gave an acre of ground and one of them has the court house on it and the other three are available. You don't find many small towns our size having that much open space downtown and we are really fortunate to have it and are fortunate to have the fountain in such good shape. One of the things that I would hope that would be the outcome of this, is that we would be able to establish a fund for the maintenance of that fountain in the years to come. Do you all have any suggestions or opportunities open to us for that?

Meford: Well no, but I'll keep that in mind.

Davis: I wish you'd make a note to that affect, to see if something can be done to help us get a fund going. To a little country girl coming in, maybe once or twice a week to town, and seeing that beautiful fountain spraying out that water on Sunday mornings, it was just beautiful. At that time our fire department and our police department were located there in a portion of what is now Shelby County Trust Bank. Those firemen kept the canna beds going during the summer months and I was always told kept their minnows in the fountain so they'd be ready to go fishing! We love the fountain and we're proud of it and I was glad that the Kentucky Highway Marker commission gave us a marker for the fountain and they've also been nice and given me one for marking Science Hill over on Washington Street.

Meford: You went to Science Hill, correct?

Davis: Thirteen years. I graduated in the class of 1935 and I got my ring out for you to see. It cost the big sum of \$10.

Meford: So what grade did you start going to Science Hill?

Davis: The first grade and they gave one year of college. Consequently, being a depression kid, I took advantage of that and I think it was interesting that I would be the 7th student to get what they called their diploma, since the time my mother got it!

Meford: Well.

Davis: Only 7 students. The rest of them went on a got their 12 years and Science Hill School was preparatory school for Wesleyan, Vassar, Barnard, all the big eastern schools. We had girls from all over the world that came there to school. Many of them were day pupils, but the majority them, of course, were boarding students. I though it was

interesting, this last year, I was cleaning out the safe that the Pointer Family had given to the Methodist Church.

Meford: Were the Poynters the ones who ran the school?

Davis: The Poynters were the ones that running the school when it closed. Among the things that had been left in the safe was my mothers graduating exercises at Science Hill School. Her name is the last name among those, Mary Lou Senda Yeager, 1911. In there also was the program that Ms. Harriet Poynter had received when she was studying violin in Germany. Another thing was a catalog of Phillips Academy where the Poynter's only son attended school and then later became a member of their facility. Now, wasn't that interesting? After all those years that those would be the things left in the safe. Nobody had bothered to clean off the safe and when I was reaching across the top shelf I hit something and it was an old box that had collapsed and that's where I found them.

Meford: Was Science Hill a private school?

Davis: Science Hill was a private school and I have written an article in 1965 along with the days I was with the paper and things like that saying that it operated all those years and yet never had a penny of endowment or gifts in anyway to operate it and that certainly was commendable. Science Hill was started in March 25, 1825 by a woman named Julia Anna Hurronomus. She would not agree to marry a young Methodist minister named John Tevis until he agreed to let her have a school for girls. She was tired of girls not being able to read, write, study French, study Greek or whatever and so he agreed. They opened it in what was the school's library and the next year she had so many students that she had to build an addition to the house they lived in and that is the front part of the school that is on Washington Street. That school was built in four different sections and put together. That really is a wonderful story of it's own. Mrs. Tevis' school grew during the Civil War days, and the girls had to stay there over the summer months. They could not go back to their home because they would be crossing through the lines and that would be dangerous to them. It was sad when she began realizing that she was getting older and she wanted her school to be saved. She went to the Methodist Bishop and said "I do not feel that any of my children are qualified." Wasn't that a heart breaking thing to have to admit? So he helped her contact Wyle Tall Poynter who was working at a bank in Winchester, Kentucky. Dr. Poynter came down here and Mrs. Tevis continued to live with he and Mrs. Poynter and their children there at the school. After Dr. Poynter's death, his wife Clara Martin Poynter, took over the principalship and of course she was there when my mother attended school. Dr. Poynter had just died about the time my mother started going to school. I was the last graduating class that she delivered the diplomas to. I felt like that was just lovely. I had the opportunity of being a close friend of the Poynter family even before I started to school because I was raised by a grandmother. My grandmother and Mrs. Poynter were close friends. It was real touching when Mrs. Julia Poynter had died, the school had closed, Mrs. Harriett was 98 and she called me up one day and said "Rosella, I'm making my will. What would you like for me to will you?" Well, I was thunderstruck!

Meford: I'll bet!

Davis: I'd never had anybody ask me that before. Therefore, I said, "Ms. Harriett I don't know. I've never had anybody ask me that before. You will me what you want me to have." I never knew what it was going to be! But she said that if you want to know I'll

tell you that I'm going to give you my 3 1/2 yard table cloths and napkins because you're the only one that's got a table big enough. So I was willed that and then you see the bronze statue over there. That was given by my mother's graduating class to the school and for many years was kept on the post in the hall way in Science Hill. I felt very honored to be remembered in that way. They were not only my teachers, but they were my friends and I loved them very much. They certainly did a lot for my development and they never hesitated to correct me even after I was a mother if I needed correcting.

Meford: When did Science Hill close?

Davis: 1939. It was a very sad time. Mrs. Poynter had died and these two maiden daughters had worked hard to keep the standards of the school up and they had any number of opportunities to sell it but they were not willing to sell it unless they could put it in the hands of someone that was going to have the high standards of character and principals. They had a lady on the way here to buy it and she was severely hurt in an automobile accident and so it was a sad day and a big shock to Shelbyville that Science Hill was going to close. Yet, when we had the big party in 1965, the school and the building and everything, although the Poynters lived in the residence, which is part of the school, we had the good fortune of seeing that Mark Scarce had bought the building and he was going to restore it. Wasn't that nice?

Meford: Very nice. Well tell me a little about the changes that have gone on in the downtown Shelbyville area.

Davis: Well, I told you about the businesses we enjoyed. What are we now? An antique market? The banks have decided that they want to pull out of town. Some of the churches have puled out of town. I for one think that's a mistake. I'm very sad that I don't feel like we have the security in our town that we used to have but I enjoy it. I didn't mind walking at 9"30 at night from Science Hill down to East Main Street to my grandmothers home. I felt very secure. I knew everybody house that I was passing. If something went wrong, I could call to them. They were beautiful homes. They had panel lace curtain windows all the way to the floor. They were handsome homes. Our Postmaster lived there, our Doctors lived there. We had any number of merchants that lived there and that has happened to often to to many fine places. Out east of town there is an area called "The Highlands", it's after you cross the bridge down here on the east end of town. That was the highlands and that's where I was raised. There were 5 houses out there. One was a very beautiful house that I lived in. Some of them have burned, some of them have been torn down, some have been made into businesses. It's really sad! Zoning is necessary and we need to have planned zoning. This is the only stretch of ground that I live on here, that is not commercially developed going in to Shelbyville. Yet they are killing the downtown like many other cities, this is nothing unusual, but I'm fighting it. My neighbors are fighting it now. They are trying to widen our road. There's a lot going on. We need to have officials and interested working citizens that,..... yes,..... you've got to have development, people have to have a way of making a living, we are becoming a bedroom community to Louisville, even Lexington and Frankfort but when you go into a lot of our places of business, particularly our hospital, where are these people coming from? Every day from Indiana.....to work here! Why were these places built here? It was to give our own people employment! There is something that needs to be corrected! We, in our own church, are having a minister that wants us to pull out of town



and go out and build a church outside of town. Well, I for one, have been a member of that church all my life and done everything in it except preach and maybe I have preached in a fashion. I've grown up in that church and I love that church. I'm the church historian now and I really and truly feel like that the Baptist have been very smart.....they have two churches. The Christian Church has two churches and there have been other faiths come here. If we have that many people, let them go on and develop another church. That doesn't mean that our church downtown can't keep on functioning.

Meford: What's the name of the church?

Davis: Centenary Methodist Church and it's on the national registry of historic preservations. It's right over there by the side of the court house. I personally paid for the marker to go on it.

Meford: Yeah.

Davis: When you have been raised on 6-pew center isle all your life, it's important to you when you were baptized there, married there, when your babies were baptized there! Those are your roots and those are things that need to be preserved and saved and that's true of many of the younger people. They say "Oh, don't take our church away from us because we need it." Some of our nicest buildings have had their faces changed completely on them and I was interested that there was a issue brought up before one of the committees this last week in the paper to do away with that great big, tall door that is on the north side of Main Street between 5th and 6th. That is one of our important things that lets people know how we were. I was really pleased when the Hayses bought the Hartford Building and a man had come in there with linoleum and he had a flooring store and he covered the marble pillars out front with linoleum. They've got that taken off and its back to where it is, see? Citizens Bank has a building under construction out west of town and yet we need to have those places down in town. Particularly for the older people who do not care to drive out in the heavily traffic areas to go to those things. We don't have but one good place in town where I can go to buy a good dress. There isn't but one good place in town where a man can go and buy a good dress shirt or suit. We used to have others.....but what have we done? We've let Wal-Mart and all these places come in here. Wal-Mart is getting ready to do exactly what Kroger did. Kroger has jumped in my life time to 5 different locations in Shelbyville.

Meford: Gosh.

Davis: They went over into one shopping center, now they've jumped over here into High Point. I understand that Wal-Mart is wanting to come out there. So you see, zoning and planning is the key to all of this. Shelby County has a motto....Good People.....Good Land.....Good Living.....Let's keep it that way!

Meford: When did the downtown businesses start closing and moving out to the edges of town?

Davis: Some of our nicest young people started out by going to the east end of town and buying property on the corner of 1st and Main Street on the South Side and tore down a beautiful old home.....one of the show places in Shelbyville. It sat way back off the street. All this wonderful structure and then they took the house next to it and what did they do? That was our first little shopping center. Then they jumped across the street and from there on it has just been down hill. Then they turned in an extended Washington Street east and west, both ways. They made another bridge over Clear Creek. They went

up to 10th Street and bought in behind some of the houses on Main Street a right-of-way to go through and brought it out at Smithfield Road. Now, I'm not saying it wasn't necessary, I'm saying that made a change. One of the things I regret the most, I told you about this man being named Mr. Moses Ruben, who made his money in Shelbyville and left a great deal of it to be benefited from the people here. Yet his house is across the street from the Stanley Casey House and its a wreck. I've never heard anyone mention it, "shall we do anything to Mr. Ruben's house?" I've never heard it mentioned. We have some strong clubs here in town, they are fine people. They are some of the same ones that helped me restore the fountain the first time around. I must say, I want to give credit where credit is due, that was strictly an combined effort of everybody in Shelby County. Everybody made a contribution and we wanted t go to the children that are coming on today, that's the reason I want to have a birthday party for them, so that they can remember coming down and hearing the story of the fountain and maybe in years to come, who knows, maybe they'll be on the fountain committee. Of course that is the property of the fiscal court and I work under the fiscal court. You know Charles Long, he's a member of the committee. You probably have met Miss Georgian Carpenter.

Meford: No, I haven't met her.

Davis: Have you met Roy Collins?

Meford: No.

Davis: Have you met Steve Collins?

Meford: Yes.

Davis: Well he's a member of the committee. But we've got some wonderful clubs here in town that, well, we hope the young people will come along and try to make them better than they are now.

Meford: You were talking about the clubs in town.

Davis: We've got a strong Shelby Count Historical Organization and when it was organized I was one of the original members and I was the secretary of the thing. I remember we met in the little log cabin and there are only 3 people that are members of that now that still continue to be members. Those are Ms. Georgian Carpenter, Francis Cottingim (have you talked with her) and myself. We have some good literary clubs here in town. For the ladies, we have garden clubs. Shelby County has been the agricultural community and we've had registered cattle, we've had registered cows from the isle of Jersey here in this county. We have had Chester Dare, who was a fine horse, and his remains and stone have been taken up to the horse park at Lexington. Shelby County did for the best. We had a strong Shelby County Fair Board and we still have the fair board. We are beginning to become very "Horsey" in Shelby County creeping towards Simpsonville. They have just finished having the Shelby County Horse Show. They tell me it was a big success and was well attended. I was just delighted to here that. Shelbyville has always appreciated good things. We have a community theater down on the corner of 8th and Main Street. Have you seen that?

Meford: No, I don't think I have.

Davis: Well you should. That used to be an old garage.

Meford: Is that right?

Davis: People like mark Scarce and the people on the community Theater Commission deserve much credit. They have a series of play and musicals that they put on throughout

the year. All of us buy memberships to it and things like that to help maintain it. But, we've got this Shelby Development Commission that Bobbie Smith is working with and I'm delighted because I think she has a lot of good ideas and is going to do a lot for Shelby County. Anytime anyone wants to do anything for Shelby County and I can be a part of it, I hope I get invited.

Meford: I think you've answered all the questions I have. Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything I haven't ask you? Of course I haven't ask you a whole lot.

Davis: I just hope that any of the new people coming into Shelby County and those of us who have lived here and raised our families here, realize what a wonderful thing we have. Things don't stay still. They either go one way or the other and it's our duty and obligation to each one feel that we have to make a contribution to make our county and our city better. It certainly doesn't help, and it hurts my feelings t go up the court house steps and see that somebody hasn't given them the attention that they should have. It hurts my feelings to see my Shelbyville Main Street not swept as clean as it should be. I am delighted that they have turned in and put trash cans on the corners. It's very convenient when it's my turn to go over and pick the dead blossoms and trash out of the fountain. It's nice to be able to take my bag and put it in there. But it's still going to be what we want it to be and we're getting ready to make some changes over at our jail and back in the 70's, I had the pleasure of meeting a young gentleman from Chicago that was working with Sears and he became charmed with that jail because he had an interest and he said, "oh, don't ever let anything happen to your jail." Now I've been in that jail, not because I had to go but because I wanted to go, let me clear that out for you, but it's interesting. I know it's antiquated, I know they are going to have to do something about it but I just hope that they preserve it and let us put some of our wonderful old records in there. We're fortunate to have a good library. We are fortunate to have a lady that knows our old Shelby County History. She's from an old Shelby County family. We are all getting to old and we've got to get some of these younger people that know something about these things, to help people in the future. We're bringing in an a lot of people that are coming in here and working on genealogy. Why? Because the people from the east moved through this area going t the western states. Naturally they have populated this area and there is lots to learn. We've had wonderful records kept here. I certainly appreciate everything the state has done to help us preserve them. I was delighted 2 years ago they helped me preserve some of the old church records from the Centenary Methodist Church. They did a beautiful job.

Meford: I certainly "Thank You" for letting me stop by and talk with you for 45 minutes. I hope I haven't been too much trouble.

Davis: Well I hope I said what you wanted said.

Meford: I'm sure you did.