

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford

Date: 8-30-95

Interviewee: Hugh Hildreth

Running Time: 40 minutes

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An Interview with
HUGH HILDRETH

Interviewed by Mark Mefford on August 30, 1995
Transcribed by Susan McMullan Groves on September 25, 1997

What is your name? Hugh Hildreth

When were you born? July 31, 1920

Where were you born? In Warren County, Kentucky. The county seat is Bowling Green and the actual location is Smith's Grove. It's about 14 miles this side of Bowling Green and 65 just kind of cuts through the edge of it. It's north of Bowling Green.

You went to Nashville for a little while? Yeh after I graduated from Bowling Green Business University with a degree in accounting I worked for a CPA firm in Nashville from 1948-1956.

That's when you got involved in the Western Auto? Yes. I became of tired of doing all the travel and saw a promotion where you could be your own boss, quote, about becoming a Western Auto associate dealer and I became interested and followed up on that and I got to looking at several locations and eventually wound up here in 1956. I took over an existing store in a little bit of difficulty.

Was this the first time you had been to Shelbyville? While I was researching that location before is when I first came here.

So when you came here there was already one there but it needed a little help? Yes. It was low on stock and low on money and it was really having some difficult times.

Did you buy them out? Yep. I bought that store and bought what he had and we added to it and moved to a nearby location that had a little bit more space.

Now the original location you told me was on Main Street? The building is now occupied by Bobby's Furniture Store. Just half of it. We had the western half of it and it was right across from the old post office.

So you moved down the street? Just across Seventh Street. I had a three year lease in the corner building there which is now a karate shop. We were there for three years and after we got through the initial six months to a year, why, things began to perk up. We were sending out flyers and sale catalogs about ten times a year... ten or twelve times a year. Traffic was pulling business good there. And when our lease expired, why, we moved up the same block to a building that has been there, I don't know... I hear that it had been a wholesale grocery store... Blakemore family, I think, operated a wholesale grocery there... and even before that it was called the Old Liberty Garage in Model T days

from what I hear and he would store people's cars in the basement in the wintertime if they didn't want to get...of course, cars were a novelty at that time. Then it was a bus station and then it was a sporting goods shop. Finally it became a Western Auto dealer store. We eventually took over the whole building—the upper and the lower floors. We did real well, at that time, on Saturday nights. Saturday was a big day. Not everybody had television sets and the whole family would come into Shelbyville on Saturday and just kind of make a holiday of it. They'd stay and walk up and down the streets until nine or ten o'clock at night.

Did you all stay open? We stayed open. We stayed open until nine or nine thirty, I don't know which.

Did you all do most of your business on Saturday? Yes, uh, Saturday would nearly always be the busiest day of the six. We never did stay open on Sunday.

Did any other downtown businesses stay open on Sunday? Eventually when some of the...I guess the first shopping center opened up and started drawing business away from the downtown section, why, some of the stores...I think Lawson's department store was one that tried Sunday afternoons and opened after twelve or twelve thirty. Lincoln's and Lerman's no longer exists as far as I know.

How long did you all stay in that location? We stayed there in that second location from, let's see, 1959 to 1980. Which is, uh, in 1980 I began to see the handwriting on the wall so to speak. We had two shopping centers then with one on each end of town...east and west. And it began to take our business away, you know, the pie is only so big and you keep slicing it up in smaller parts. So, uh, at that time I was sixty years old and I neither one of my sons had showed any interest in the business, which I am thankful for. They found better things to do so I sold it out. Closed it up. There were three or four people that stopped in to see about buying it as a joint business and nobody could come up with the financing. I just had a professional close out company, I can't remember the name of it but they were making a business of promoting the closing of a business...going out of business sale.

Isn't there a Western Auto downtown now? Yes. Western Auto supply company itself has changed a lot. At one time, you could buy the stock on the stock exchange for the Western Auto supplying company and, uh, subsequently, a bunch of finance companies took over Western Auto. Oh, they had different ideas and things changed...not all of the changes were for the better as far as the dealer's interests were concerned. Then the next thing I know of Sears & Roebuck took over Western Auto. I know I was down in Florida, uh, oh, I guess it's been seven or eight years ago and I stopped in a Western Auto to get some valve stem extensions and I noticed they had Die-Hard batteries, which are the Sears brand, and Craftsman tools. So I thought then that Sears & Roebuck was running this operation. I've since then heard that Sears does not since this gentleman down here on east Main has opened up a Western Auto store Sears no longer owns it. That's just hearsay, I don't know whether it's true or not. So many companies buy and

sell it's hard to keep up. I'm just thankful that I'm not in the Western Auto or any retail business right now. But, uh, we had a lot of good years. I got in at a good time and got out at a good time. I was one of the first ones to pull the plug on Main Street. Uh, in 1962, uh, I didn't limit my operation to just strictly to Western Auto appliances. That didn't necessarily please them too much but there wasn't a lot they could do about it. I was selling a lot of national brands like, uh, Homelite chain saws and, uh, maybe some Sony products. They would promise the dealer a Sony TV and electronic products. We had a real good business in selling guns. Shotguns and .22's, 3030's, uh, 308's, people were interested in hunting. I even sold some handguns. But then, you know, the government got into regulating that sort of thing so strictly it was no longer any fun!

What brands did you carry in guns? Guns? Oh, yeh, we had Winchester, Remington, Smith & Wesson, Stephens, uh, Ruger...but those were the main brands that we had. Then in the early 60's I started getting people coming in and asking about motor scooters. Something like a Cushman motor scooter...do you remember what they looked like? No. I've never heard of them. Well, they were a very well known motor scooter...one of the big names but I didn't have Cushman. Western Auto did have...in their catalog they did have...two issues of catalogs each year—spring and summer, fall and winter—and, uh, we, uh, had a little Wizard motor bike. Wizard was one of Western Auto's big labels. They had Wizard batteries and Wizard appliances and two-tone radios and televisions, but they did have one choice in their catalog of motor bike and I'd show this to people that were interested and they'd say, "Oh, that's not exactly what I want. I'm more interested in something like a Cushman scooter." So, I did a little inquiring and found a source called Rockford scooter cause it was sent to Rockford, Illinois but it was made in Japan and I ordered one of them on just the assumption that the customer really wanted it and he did. He liked it.

Did he buy it? Yeh. People saw that and asked where he got it and he told them Western Auto. So, I ordered a second one and it went real quick.

Are these like little scooters? Yeh, well, they had...you sit on the compartment which housed the engine and it was rear wheel drive and it had a platform in front of that to put your feet on, brake, clutch and handle bars. That's what it looked like. Eventually after a couple of months of that, I started ordering them for inventory and put them on display. I even had two or three different models for them to choose from and, of course, I already had a service department where I serviced lawnmowers and chainsaws...small engine service, you know, and, uh, then one day I was looking through Life magazine and I saw a full page ad of blonde model sitting on little Honda 50 and I said, "That is what I need!" So, I wrote the company and I didn't hear anything and I figured that they weren't interested in Shelbyville, Kentucky. One day this white, slick pickup truck pulled up and stopped in front of the store and it had three Honda's on the back. You talk about kids swarming the store just like bees swarming around honey! Before the day was over, I was a Honda motorcycle dealer! And I was only approved for the small Hondas...they went up to 90CC. They had two choices, they had 90CC or you could go to all the models that they made. So for about a year or so I was just a small engine and they were very

interested in service and, uh, really improving the image of motorcycle riders. We'd go to seminars and service schools, you know. We would learn how to care for them and repair them and they insisted before... when I bought my first four, I had to have parts kit and a tools kit which is supposed to make you able to take care of it yourself and keep it running... but I eventually after about a year or two I went rolling and things really took off. In the early '70's, after about ten years of having them here, I bought a piece of property in Frankfort and put up a new building up there and had, uh, just strictly a Honda dealer there because the company said that they had to have one in Frankfort. They told me I could have it if I wanted it or if I didn't they'd find somebody else. So, I told them I'd see if I could manage that and it worked out. It was really great for two or three years. Of course, everybody... that was back during the energy crisis, too, the early 70's was and people were buying motorcycles because the gasoline was getting so expensive.

Were these motorcycles off-road bikes or what? We had those but most of them were for road riding. We had dirt bikes.

I was just trying to see how much the agriculture community was influencing the business. Well, they were the biggest part of the business... the farm trade. I'd say they were well over half. But a lot of people came and bought motorcycles and you wouldn't suspect! We even had a couple of local ministers that became motorcycle riders.

So you think a lot of it was just the gasoline? Well, it was just a thing that the time was right for it. I've seen Honda motorcycle dealers closing up in droves here in the best few years because the demand is not there but at that time, it was the thing to do. They had an advertising campaign that was very famous nationwide. "You meet the nicest people on a Honda" and it was a big boost for my success and, uh, it lasted... in Frankfort after I opened up there—I was the only motorcycle dealer up there for about a year and then, you know, the major Japanese brands were Honda, Yamaha, Suzuki and Kawasaki and then in about two years, all four... now, you know, those Japanese companies and manufacturers are very jealous and competitive with each other and they all said, "Well, we're not going to let Honda get ahead of us" so they opened up a dealership, too. Well, there wasn't enough business there in Frankfort for four. There's nobody there now. Not a single one. After about five or six years, why, I had a young man that was doing a good job of managing it and he left and I ran the store... both stores... commuting from Shelbyville to Frankfort and I ran both stores for a year or so and then I decided that I'd get rid of that.

The Honda store, you mean? Yeh. I still own the property and it's been a good investment. It's in an excellent location.

What are some of the changes you saw in the Shelbyville area in your several locations? What are some of the businesses that came and went? Well, let's see. One of the, uh, active stores in downtown Shelbyville was Lawson's Department Stores which is now occupied by antiques. We even had a five and ten cent store right next to Lawson's... Van's Five and Ten. You could go in there and find almost anything you

needed in that line of merchandise. We had two, I believe, three jewelry stores on Main Street. Two or three. There was Mark Searce and, uh, Lou Ray's. We had, uh, Crane's Barber Shop and, uh, Johnson's Barber Shop. Two or three barber shops on Main. Then we had Briggs Hower Clothing Store. Briggs Lawson was Jack Lawson's brother and Jack had Lawson's Department Store. He had a nice clothing store right across the street. We had, uh, A&P Food Store pretty close to where Lawson's is and we had Lincoln's and Lerman's. We had Smith-McKenney Drugstore and we had, uh, Mr. Scofield was in business with a drug store but I can't remember the name of his business...the name that he operated his business under.

{Mrs. Hildreth came in and joined the conversation and her conversation will be denoted by italics}

Can you remember what the name of his store was? *Scofield's*. Scofield's, that was it. We had a theater, which is also an antique shop. *Our town has changed a whole lot.* What? *I say, our town has changed a whole lot.* Yeh, that's what they say. Do you want to sit down and join us you could add a lot. *Are you just getting a history of the community?* Well, our experiences and what we remember about the way it was and the way it has changed. *It was a very nice town and it still is.* Yeh, that's what everyone says. Are you going to be able to sit down and talk? *Well, let me see what I have to do.* I used to like to go in...of course, when we came we still had the theater operating...the movie theater. I remember Jennings...Roy Jennings? He opened the Coffee Cup right next door to the theater. We used to love to go in there and have a piece of their homemade pie and drink coffee. Their pie was legendary. Up on the corner of Sixth and Main there was Begley's Drugstore. I guess we had three drugstores right downtown. I remember Mrs. Nanny Acree was the...they had a soda fountain in there. *Nanny Saulk, wasn't it?* Yeh, Nanny Saulk. She ran the soda fountain. And I used to eat lunch up there. I loved the way she made those fried corn cakes with the lacy edges and all. But she used to serve some awfully good food up there and, of course, everything else that a soda fountain had. Baker and Caspar had a hardware store. We had the Bank of Shelbyville on the same corner where the Liberty Bank is now. They have expanded into a space that was once Dewey's Pool Room. Not only did Dewey run the pool room, he made good rolled oysters and soup. A lot of people went in there and had lunch but you didn't see very many ladies in there. If you'd been in Dewey's Pool Room and you'd come back out and people would say, "Ah, you've been to Dewey's!" What else did we have, we had Bank of Shelbyville and Dewey's and Van's Five and Ten. *Two dime stores, two ten cent stores.* That's right, we had Newberry's and it was right down there where Tracy's store is now. *Four banks.* Yeh, four banks.

What was the name of the banks? *Citizens, Farmers & Traders....* Oh, yeh, there was the Bank of Shelbyville, Farmers & Traders—which was on the corner of Sixth and Main there were the Citizens Union is now, and then you had the Citizens Union up a block there on the front...it's kind of narrow...it used to be a jewelry store there. What's in there now? Probably a lawyer's office now but anyway. Bank of Shelbyville, Farmers & Traders, Citizens Union and Shelby County Trust. Shelby County Trust is still in the same location. They have done some remodeling, I believe, but they're still in the same location. I remember kidding people about a small town like this having four different

banks. When I had been in Warren County in Bowling Green, they had two banks... three... two banks and a trust company when I was a boy. And they said, "Well, we've got so much money here, we've got four banks!" *What, you just need to know all the stores?* Well, I'd like to know what people remember for one reason or another. Then right next to me, the store we had was such a big improvement over the other one because... when we had the truck coming in on Monday to unload down there on the corner where the karate shop is, we had no unloading zone and the city wouldn't give me one because, I don't know, politics or something. They wanted me to use the unloading zone up there by the theater. So, what we do, see, is Monday morning I'd drive my truck down and put it in the space there where the parking meter was and feed the meter all day and when the truck driver came in from the Louisville area... we had truck drivers you could set your watch by because they always came through when they said. He'd stop out there at the Southwind Restaurant and call me and say, "I'm here," and I'd tell we'd get ready for him. So, when he would come in I'd get out there in the truck with the motor running and when he got right there to Seventh and Main, as he got ready to come across, I'd pull out and he'd pull right in my space and we'd unload right on the sidewalk. Had to take everything in and out of the front door... heavy appliances. It was kind of an awkward location and when we moved to a bigger location, the truck driver could come in off of Clay Street and we had a platform there he could pull up to and unload. What a big improvement! I was so happy I cried the first time he came! Let's see, we just above me there... between me and the next door was that little, looked like a little residence and we owned that for a period of time and Shelby Chamber of Commerce had it for awhile. But just next to that was Puckett's Men's Store and the late Jesse Puckett operated that. He later became mayor and I don't know if you know anything about his background or not. I've heard his name. He just passed away this year. His daughter Duanne is a sweet gal and works at the paper. Great girl. But, uh, we used to have a lot of fun with all our business neighbors and friends. It was quite a treat. When lunch came... the man at the Coffee Cup next to the theater moved across the street and opened up a restaurant... Jennings' Restaurant. It was just pretty close to the courthouse and that was everybody's favorite place to eat. We had kind of a community table there where six or more could sit around and trade stories and tell lies. We had a doctor that you we used to see pretty regular and he's gone now, Dr. Klein. When Judge Saunders used to come in and join us on occasion, you know, this doctor would say right to his face, "Here comes the best judge that money could buy!" They enjoyed ribbing each other.

What kind of... a lot of these businesses are gone now... when did they start to pull out? We had... I don't know who the first one was... Mr. Diess had a store... that's D-E-I-S-S, I believe, up right next to Crane's Barber Shop and he used to sell stationary and kind of office supplies. *Lincoln's and Lerman's left... Lawson's, I believe, was the last store to leave... don't you think?* Probably. I think Lawson's was probably the last. *Yes. Eve Lawson has a store now. Have you talked to her? She can tell you a lot. I believe Lawson's was one of the last to go in town. It was still there after we closed. I guess the shopping centers and things like that, you know.* It's the same story that has happened in so many small towns. Mom and Pop and the small business people are history. *The sad thing about it... seems like we have people going to Louisville more than ever. Can't*

find it at Wal-Mart. There's hardly any place other than your groceries and your drugstores and things like that. So that's sad. It's hard to compete with the big stores like that. It's just a different world. Mostly everybody I enjoyed waiting on and helping them find what they wanted and what they needed, you know. You go in a store now and you're on your own. If you want help, you've got to go ask for it and maybe you'll get what you want and maybe not. I enjoyed that but I sure don't miss all the responsibility and the hassle that goes with running your own business but I do miss a lot of the people I used to see on a regular basis. It's still a good town. Oh yeh. It's different but it's still...

-----END OF SIDE 1-----

I know there's a very low unemployment rate here. Do you think the industry on the south side of town has anything to do with that? Oh yeh. I remember at one time the people... we had an industrial committee that would try to bring some business in here for jobs, you know, but a lot of the people that operated farms—the farm people—they had an influence, too, and they didn't want it for a lot of their own reasons. But that's all gone. *I think you do have something to be concerned about with the loss of farmland if it continues.* That's not just here in Shelby County, it's nationwide, the farmland is.

You're not going to have anywhere to grow anything. Well, you talked about a lot of changes in your business and a lot of the things you sold, what other kinds of things changed besides... you mention a lot of things you sold other than automobile parts, how did the business change besides that? Well, you had government regulations. I couldn't enumerate all of them exactly how they effected us but I remember being aggravated by the way the local, federal and state government kept intruding on and telling you how to run your business—filling out this form and filling out that form, dictating how you could hire people. That was one thing and then another thing wasn't the government but also the company itself would quite often dictate. That's why I put quotes around "be your own boss"...it didn't work out that way. You were between the customer and the Western Auto Supply Company. You had to try to keep both of those happy and that wasn't always easy. Like I said, I got in at a good time and got out at a good time, I think.

You think the downtown area is going to stay like it is with the antique stores and things? I don't see it ever becoming a retail center. I didn't mention this but the big problem with downtown Shelbyville... if we could ask a lot of the dearly departed business people they would all agree is parking. You've got parallel parking. I remember before the interstate was built it was almost impossible to carry on a conversation out on the sidewalk because these big trucks east bound would come right up Main Street and you talk about noise! Can you imagine all that traffic coming through town? *All the 64 traffic?* I still see a lot of trucks coming through here and I can't imagine them being all the ones on 64 coming through here. It would be an impossible situation. But, uh, there were attempts made to provide parking and we've had a lot of meetings with the business community to try and solve the parking problem but they never got it solved. Attempts were made but, uh, and it is the nature of the shopper to want to park as close to

your door as possible. So now they go down to St. Matthews and they look and find a parking place. They're going to have a pretty good walk all around in the malls! I'm the same way, I want to park as close to the door as possible. So that, I think, helped to contribute to the demise of the downtown business as anything.

Any other factors? Well, ever since we moved to Shelbyville, we have had to accept the fact that people are going to drive to Louisville because, well, one thing is they just like to take a little trip. If you get down there you'll probably have a little bigger selection for what you are looking for. But we did have some nice mix of businesses here on Main Street. You had everything you could want but when the interstate opened up that just increased the traffic down to St. Matthews, you know, to shop. But that's a day out—an outing for a lot of people and I can understand that. We still have it to do it. There's no shoe stores here. You can't buy shoes in Shelbyville. We had real fine clothing stores. Just a lot of things you have to drive to Louisville for now.

That's all the questions I have. Do you have anything you'd like to add that I haven't asked? I don't think so. *It's a nice place to live still. Don't think I'd want to live anyplace else although I would if I had to.* She didn't want to come here. *I didn't want to come here.* We had lots of good relationships with a lot of people in Nashville, you know. Church, schools.... *I never had lived in a town this small.* She's a native of Ashland, Kentucky and I'm from the Bowling Green area. She left when she came down to go to school in Bowling Green. When we went to Nashville we built a nice, new home down there and whether we could find anything here or not we didn't know. *You can hardly anything to rent at all. That has definitely improved.* It was very hard for us to find a place to live. It's a nice place to live.

You like my flag? I was wondering why there was...I didn't recognize it. *No, this is the star-spangled banner. This is the one that inspired Frances Scott Key. It has fifteen stripes and fifteen stars. This stripe right here is Kentucky. It was the last state to have a stripe on the flag.*

Is that right? *Uh-huh. This is Vermont and this is Kentucky. It flew in the Battle of Baltimore in the War of 1812. A tremendous battle.*

Well, I didn't know that. *I learned it in high school many years ago and I've been looking for that flag for a long time and we finally found one.*

Where did you find it? *Over at the map place in Frankfort on Holmes Street. They had hats all made up for their bicentennial and they had one left. But they weren't promoting this. It's not draped. I read the rules and they said to hand it up and not drape it. Turn that thing off.*