

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford
Date: 7-27-95

Interviewee: Lou Lapsley
Running Time: 41 minutes

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Lou R. Lapsley
Shelbyville Main Street
Oral History Project
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conducted by
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Meford: Would you start by telling me your name?

Lapsley: Yes, Lou R. Lapsley.

Meford: When were you born?

Lapsley: I was born November 16, 1913.

Meford: What are your parents names?

Lapsley: My mother's name was Erma Watkins and my father's name was Lois Car.

Meford: When did you graduate from high school?

Lapsley: In 1932.

Meford: Do you remember where you went to high school?

Lapsley: Shelbyville High School.

Meford: What other schools did you go to?

Lapsley: Within the last 10 years, I went to the University of Kentucky and got my degree.

Meford: What did you get your degree in?

Lapsley: Journalism.

Meford: Did you commute from Shelbyville?

Lapsley: Some but I did most of it by correspondence.

Meford: That's good. Did you do the whole thing or had you done some back in the 30's?

Lapsley: No, I did the whole thing.

Meford: What elementary schools did you go to?

Lapsley: I went to Henry Clay, which is a small school out in the county, through the 8th grade and then I came to Shelbyville to high school.

Meford: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Lapsley: I have a brother, Floyd Car, who lives in Florida. No sisters.

Meford: When did your brother move to Florida?

Lapsley: About, I'd say, 20 years ago.

Meford: Are you married.

Lapsley: I am a widow. I was married to James Lapsley and we would have been married 51 years had he lived until then.

Meford: What was his occupation?

Lapsley: He was a postal clerk at the post office in Shelbyville.

Meford: What was your fathers occupation?

Lapsley: My father was an insurance salesman for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

Meford: Was your mother employed?

Lapsley: No, No.

Meford: What do you remember about the downtown area? Any specific memories from the early 1920's.

Lapsley: Not to much from then. One of the things that stick in my mind was the day that the Baptist Church fell in. That's been a number of years ago because I was working at the bank, at Citizens Union Bank, downtown.

Meford: Do you remember the exact year or decade?

Lapsley: Well, lets see. It was probably in the early 60's.

Meford: So the building collapsed?

Lapsley: Yes, it was in the week time. It was not on Sunday.

Meford: Well good.

Lapsley: Of course, there were no people in there. I think the organist was there practicing, and people working in the office. Other than that there was no one there.

Meford: No one was hurt?

Lapsley: No one was hurt.

Meford: Did they rebuild at that location?

Lapsley: No, they rebuild, out west of town.

Meford: Is that where it is today?

Lapsley: Yes. Do you know where the driveway is to the hospital?

Meford: Yes.

Lapsley: Okay, the church is right there.

Meford: So its on out US 60?

Lapsley: Yes, just a little ways.

Meford: What is the formal location of the church now?

Lapsley: That's where it is.

Meford: The one that fell in, what's there now?

Lapsley: Oh, The Falls City Production Credit, I believe is there now and I believe there's some offices in the building.

Meford: In the twenties, did you go downtown much?

Lapsley: Oh yes.

Meford: During the week or just on the weekends?

Lapsley: Well during the week, maybe after school or something like that.

Meford: So, now at that time, you didn't live downtown Shelbyville?

Lapsley: I lived in the country.

Meford: So you came in from the country to do downtown after school? How did you all get there?

Lapsley: Well, we had a little Ford at our house and that little Ford brought me to Shelbyville, to school.

Meford: Did you father or mother drive you?

Lapsley: No, my mother died when I was three years old and I lived with a cousin and her husband until I was married. I came to Shelbyville because that was the nearest high school.

Meford: Well, when you came to downtown during the week, what would you do?

Lapsley: Well, the young people congregated at the drug store and the drug store belonged to Clyde Hall. He had a drug store there as well as an ice cream parlor.

Meford: What was the name of it?

Lapsley: It was Clyde Hall's Drug Store. That's what it was called. It was right down in the middle of town.

Meford: What's there today.....around in that area?

Lapsley: I suppose it was there on the corner next to the Court House. At one time that drug store was called Hall, Pullen, and Ruff, there were three men. Clyde Hall's Drug Store was somewhere along in the middle of that block but I can't remember just what building it was in.

Meford: So, did you all get ice cream every day or did you just come to congregate?

Lapsley: We'd congregate and sometimes we'd just drink a coke or sometimes ice cream.

Meford: Do you remember how much a coke or ice cream would cost?

Lapsley: No much, probably be a nickel. That was back in the days when money was sorta scarce, you know. But things were not very high either.

Meford: Did most of the kids that you went to school with come down there?

Lapsley: Yes. I had a friend that had a Model T and when school as out, he loaded up his Model T with the rumble seat and downtown we came.

Meford: How old did you have to be to drive at that time?

Lapsley: There was no age limit.

Meford: You just got in the car and took off?

Lapsley: E'mmm. The boy that had the car lived out in the country, the county and of course you had to drive to school in order to get here. There were no buses then so we had good times.

Meford: Was it unusual for someone that age to have a car?

Lapsley: Yes, it was unusual for a family to have two cars. Families were well to do if they had one car.

Meford: Did you go downtown on weekends?

Lapsley: Not really. I was home and had a few chores to do at home. Of course Sunday's were Sunday School and Church for almost everybody.

Meford: Where did you go to church?

Lapsley: Before I married, I as a member of the Methodist Church.

Meford: Where is that located?

Lapsley: Centenary Methodist Church, just the opposite of the Court House on the same side of the street. After I married, I went to the Presbyterian Church with my husband. That's where I still go to church.

Meford: Is it located in downtown?

Lapsley: Yes, it's at the corner of 7th and Main Street.

Meford: So on Sunday's you all came from out in the country to go to church. Were most of the churches in town in Shelby County?

Lapsley: There were a good many small churches out in the county. Some Baptist, some Methodist and maybe the Christian Church may have had some small churches. I can't remember, maybe they did. Of course, we had more Baptist around in the county than any of the other religions.

Meford: What did you do after Church? Do you stay downtown or go back home?

Lapsley: Then you were not likely to go out and eat at a restaurant somewhere, you always went home after church. You had your Sunday dinner, usually prepared a head of time and ready for us to eat when we came home from church.

Meford: Well, did you do most of your trading in town?

Lapsley: Yes, mostly. There was a small store close to us but they had mostly basics. We did most of our shopping in Shelbyville.

Meford: Groceries, dry goods and hardware were purchased in town?

Lapsley: Yes.

Meford: Where did you go for groceries?

Lapsley: We went to Blakemore Grocery, we went to Cleveland Grocery and we went to Hardesty's Grocery, there were three of them that carried good lines of food.

Meford: What about dry goods?

Lapsley: Okay, we had Lawson's Dry Goods and we had Ruben's Dry Goods, we had two.

Meford: Did you know the owners of both of these stores?

Lapsley: Yes, I knew Mr. Stanley Lawson and Mr. Mark Ruben?

Meford: What kind of things did you get at these stores?

Lapsley: Well back in those days we bought alot of piece goods and my aunt would make my dresses for school in the summer time and then they would be ready for school in the fall. Both of those stores carried nice materials and that's where we got it.

Meford: Where were Lawson's and Ruben's?

Lapsley: Lawson's is right in the middle of Main Street between 5th and 6th on the South side of the street and was about middle ways. There is an Antique Mall there now.

Ruben's was in the next block between 6th and 7th, not quite in the middle but almost.

Meford: When did you do your shopping? Any special day of the week?

Lapsley: When ever we needed things.

Meford: How long did it take to get to town from where you lived?

Lapsley: Oh, about 20 minutes.

Meford: So it wasn't any big deal to hop into town?

Lapsley: No.

Meford: How were the roads coming into town?

Lapsley: Well the only road then that was paved then, was US 60. Most of the county roads were gravel.

Meford: Were they difficult to ride on?

Lapsley: No.

Meford: Pretty smooth?

Lapsley: Yes.

Meford: Was US 60 one lane, one way street like it is now?

Lapsley: No, US 60 was 2-way, still is.

Meford: Well it's got the one-way in downtown.

Lapsley: In Shelbyville downtown, yes.

Meford: Was it one-way in downtown at that time?

Lapsley: No.

Meford: It was still two ways?

Lapsley: Yes.

Meford: When did they split it? Washington and Main Street?

Lapsley: Maybe ten or twelve years ago.

Meford: Do you remember a railroad that came through here?

Lapsley: We still have two railroads, one south and one north. We used to have a street car that went down Main Street.

Meford: Where did it come from?

Lapsley: Louisville.

Meford: How was it powered?

Lapsley: Electric.

Meford: Down US 60 all the way to Louisville?

Lapsley: All the way to Louisville.

Meford: Downtown Louisville?

Lapsley: Yes.

Meford: Did you take that to Louisville a lot?

Lapsley: The place where the cars went in to do the turn-around and everything was call the car barn. I remember that much about it.

Meford: Was it a barn?

Lapsley: Well it was just a big building where they did their repair work.

Meford: So the cars had to go somewhere to turn around. Where was the car barn at?

Lapsley: Here they turned around down where the Catholic Church is now, at the other the Presbyterian Church. They use it forend of town. East, yes.

Meford: So that's where the car bar was?

Lapsley: Yes.

Meford: Well, did you all go to Louisville much?

Lapsley: Oh, maybe once a month. We didn't run down there like we do now. We usually had to wait until we got a number of things together that we had to buy and then we would go.

Meford: Would you walk in Louisville?

Lapsley: Yes.

Meford: How much would it cost to get to Louisville and back?

Lapsley: You know, I don't remember but I doubt it cost over a dollar.

Meford: How many people would this thing hold?

Lapsley: It would hold probably 30.

Meford: Did it usually get full on the way there?

Lapsley: Sometimes it was full and sometimes it wasn't, but it ran on a schedule all the time.

Meford: Was it a pleasant ride? Did it ride fast?

Lapsley: Oh, it was fun!

Meford: Smooth?

Lapsley: Yeah.

Meford: When was that put in?

Lapsley: Now that I don't know. Because my first recollection was of it being there and I don't know when it was put in.

Meford: How did people in the downtown make a living? Was it all commerce or did some people (now I mean back when you were in school), did they live downtown and drive else where like to the farms as farmhands?

Lapsley: Usually, if the farmer was cutting tobacco he'd have to have extra help and he would come to town and the man would usually be standing on the street corner waiting

for somebody to pick'em up so they could go to work. They would bring them out and they would work all day and then they would bring them back at night. They didn't have transportation like everybody has these days.

Meford: Did you all hire hands from the city? Did you all raise tobacco?

Lapsley: Yes. Yes.

Meford: So every August you'd come to town and pick up a few. Do you have an idea what they got paid to cut tobacco back then?

Lapsley: I have no idea.

Voices on tape changing volume

Lost some dialogue

Lapsley: The old post office belongs to class rooms and different things.

Meford: Do the sidewalks generally look the same.

Lapsley: Now, they've done some work on 6th Street, some brick work on the sidewalks. But other than that the other streets are just like they were.

Meford: So it hasn't changed a great deal?

Lapsley: No.

Meford: Has most of the business moved toward Louisville/ I don't mean just because of Louisville but that end of town?

Lapsley: Yes. Let's see. The Citizens Bank was right in the middle of the downtown block and they moved to 9th Street to a new facility about 10-12 years ago. Now they are building a new building out west of town. A new building. They've outgrown the size of their facilities and had to build a new one.

Meford: Anymore, kids don't go downtown like they did when you were in school. When did that change occur? When did they stop going downtown?

Lapsley: Well, it's been several years now. When they did away with the drug stores and places where the children would congregate, then they started going some place else and I don't really know where they do go. We don't have a movie in Shelbyville anymore.

Meford: When did that disappear?

Lapsley: Oh, we haven't had a movie for a long time. It's been maybe 20 years.

Meford: You mentioned that money was scarce. I assume you were talking about during the depression. What other changes happened during the depression?

Lapsley: During that time?

Meford: To the downtown area.....

Lapsley: I don't remember too much. During the depression, we still had our downtown stores. The dry good stores, the grocery stores, and drug stores. We had all those things down there.

Meford: What happened during W.W.II?

Lapsley: Okay. During W.W.II all our husbands were in the service. All my age, younger and older too. Most of the wives went to work. There were lots of factories in Louisville where you could work where they were doing war manufacturing. I worked for the American Red cross at the blood bank. That was interesting work. I enjoyed that. My husband was overseas at the time and most of my friends

husband's were. If they weren't overseas, they were so far away you couldn't get to them to visit.

Meford: Does Shelbyville have any civic organizations?

Lapsey: Yes, they have Kiwis, Rotary and it seems to be that there is another one. They have a Lion's Club at Simpsonville, which is down the road. They do a lot of work for the "eye bank" and helping people with glasses and all those things.

Meford: Do they meet in the down town area?

Lapsey: Simpsonville meets at Simpsonville. Yes the two, I think they both meet at the Christian Church. I'm not real sure about that but I think they do.

Meford: Do their activities, in anyway, center around down town?

Lapsey: They work with children more than anything and helping children. They are interested in the children's hospital in Louisville. They help to get children down there and they just do an awful lot for children.

Meford: How have the city services changed since you were in school and over the years? Like the postal services and banking, fire department and police department.

Lapsey: Okay. Banking has changed a great deal. We have 4 local banks.

Citizen's Union is the largest, then we have Liberty, Republic and Shelby County Trust. The Republic Bank has never had an office down town. They're out in the shopping center.

Meford: Their probably newer then the other ones?

Lapsey: Yes. It's the newest one. CUB has bought Farmers & Traders and right now they have bought a bank in Owenton. They are branching out.

Meford: How has the fire department changed? Is it full time?

Lapsey: Yes.

Meford: Has it always been that way?

Lapsey: We have a volunteer fire department here but we also have a paid fire department. I think it's always been a paid, up until several years back when they started the volunteer part of the fire department. It's been going longer than I've been thinking about. Probably 12-15 years. Something like that.

Meford: When you were in school, do you remember any crime in the down town area?

Lapsey: Very little.—

Meford: What kind of crimes were there?

Lapsey: Oh just, just, maybe a pick-up in the store. We didn't have much crime then.

Meford: How did the police patrol? On foot?

Lapsey: On foot, of course they have a car now. They patrol the streets and out lying sections.

Meford: When did they start using cars?

Lapsey: A long time ago. Probably 30-35 maybe 40 years ago.

Meford: Does Shelbyville have a city park around the down town area?

Lapsey: It's not a city park, it's a county park. Yes, it's north of Shelbyville just a little way.

Meford: How long has it been there?

Lapsey: It's been there longer than I can think about. It's probably been there 25-30 years. It's a nice park.

Meford: What's the name of it?

Lapsey: Shelby Park and recreation.

Meford: Since the TV repairman just left, let me ask you. Do you do all your trading with Biagi's for electronics and things like that?

Lapsey: Yes.

Meford: There's not many retailers like that downtown.

Lapsey: Not to many. Now Tracy's have GE appliances and TV's and things. But Biagi's is the better known store and all my electrical things came from there.

Meford: How long has Biagi's been there?

Lapsey: Since I was a little girl. The elder Mr. Biagi came from Germany over here and he came to Shelbyville, I understand on foot with a pack on his back. That's what I've been told.

Meford: Has it been in the same location?

Lapsey: Yes, been in the same location.

Meford: What did they sell when you were in school? Electronics? Radios?

Lapsey: They sold radios, not TV's because we didn't have TV then. Small appliances like electric irons, toasters and things like that. Of course they sold washing machines, dryers and all those things.

Meford: Are their prices consistent with some of the stores not in the downtown area?

Lapsey: Yes. Just about the same. Wal-mart might be a dollar cheaper.

Meford: Hard to beat Wal-Mart, right?

Lapsey: Right.

Meford: When did Wal-Mart open up here?

Lapsey: They've been here for several years. maybe 10 years or something like that.

Meford: Do a lot of people do their shopping out there?

Lapsey: Yes, because that's the only place we have to go to get certain things.

Meford: Like what?

Lapsey: Well like, piece goods, patterns, towels, sheets, and bed cloths and those sorts of things. They have gardening equipment.

Meford: Where did people go for these things before Wal-Mart? Did they go to Louisville?

Lapsey: We had smaller businesses where people could go to get those things. We had a store on Henry Clay called Walters and Thompson, that was one of our better stores. They carried feed and things for the farmer. Equipment and stuff that the farmers would have to have.

Meford: Kind of like a Southern States?

Lapsey: Yes. Of course we have a Southern States now but we didn't have years back.

Meford: What do people think about Wal-Mart?

Lapsey: I think they have mixed emotions. They hate for a business like that to come in and put all our local things out of business which is what they did. Other than that, Wal-mart is the only place we can get a lot of things now.

Meford: It sounds like you don't like it but it's all you've got.

Lapsey: No choice. Yes

Meford: Do you remember any government officials that stand out in your mind? Any mayors?

Lapsey: Local?

Meford: Yes.

Lapsey: Okay. Yes. I remember our County Judge was Harry Walters. I remember Mr. Robert F. Matthews, he was mayor of Shelbyville at one time.

Meford: What was his name?

Lapsey: Robert F. Matthews. Let me think who else. Judge Harold Saunders was mayor at one time and Jesse Puckett was mayor at one time and Neal Hackworth was the last mayor that we had and he resigned but the man that filled out his term goes out of office at the end of December. So we'll have a new mayor.

Meford: Do you remember any of these people having a really big influence on this town? Not just going through the motions and traditions. Do you remember anyone that just stands out?

Lapsey: Yes, More than anybody else is Mr. Paul Schmitt and he owned the Coke-A-Cola plant here. I believe maybe he was mayor at the time. But anyway, he had planted up and own the streets in Shelbyville, dogwood Trees. In the spring when the dogwoods bloom they are just gorgeous and he is responsible.

Meford: When did he do that?

Lapsey: That was back.....oh gosh.....about 25 years back or something like that.

Meford: Did any of these government people have an affect or were big players in state or national politics?

Lapsey: No. We have Marshall Long who is in the state legislature. He still is. We had Martha Layne Collins who was from Shelbyville and she was governor and I don't know if we've had anyone from here that has gone to Washington? Right off hand I can't think of anybody. Robert Matthews, Jr. was Attorney General at one time. No I can't think of anyone from Shelbyville that may have gone to Washington.

Meford: When you were in school, going to the down town area, were there any occupations? What kind of occupations were there for women?

Lapsey: About the only thing there was....being a clerk in the store. They were not holding public jobs at that time.

Meford: Were many blacks employed down town?

Lapsey: The shoe-shine boy at the barber shop.

Meford: Did he get much business?

Lapsey: I'm sure he did.

Meford: Did any women own businesses?

Lapsey: Back at that time?

Meford: Yes.

Lapsey: I don't think so. It was a gentleman's world.

Meford: What do you think is unique about the Shelbyville and the downtown area?

Lapsey: Well of course the buildings, I think. The old buildings are unique. The down town churches are beautiful and I think the little trees that have been planted along Main Street are an addition and people have been interested in keeping the front of the buildings

like they were years ago. That's nice. Our court house is a pretty building and it's been there for a long time.

Meford: now you have lived around here all your life so you don't have much to compare to but how do you compare Shelbyville to other towns? Say, in this area that you've been to?

Lapsey: Well, that's not a fair question because I naturally think Shelbyville is ahead of all the other.

Meford: Sure

Lapsey: I think Shelbyville is just one of the finest little towns in the State of Kentucky. Out in our country, of course your not interested in things out in the county but we have so many show-horse farms in Shelby County. They are just gorgeous. Next week we have a horse show at the fair grounds and there will be lost and lots of horses from right here in Shelby County and they will be shown. Of course we've always been a tobacco area. One of the largest in the state and tobacco has been a big crop for people around here. When they do away with it, I don't really know what people are going to do. The ones who have made a living of their tobacco crops. It's going to be bad. It's a big corn growing area and lots of dairy cows in Shelby County. Shelby County is a reasonably rich county. There are a lot of fine homes out in the county as well as here in Shelbyville.

Meford: Is there anything else you'd like to add about the Main Street Area that I haven't ask you?

Lapsey: I don't think main Street has changed an awful lot. Maybe the eastern part of Main Street has changed some but the rest of the town is more or less the same and the buildings have been preserved. We are proud of that too.

Meford: