

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford
Date: 8-10-95

Interviewee: Eve Lawson Lewis
Running Time: 31 minutes

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Eve Lawson Lewis
Shelbyville Main Street
Oral History Project
Interview was conducted
by Mark Mefford
August 10, 1995

Eve Lawson Lewis

Lewis, Eve Lawson

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interviewed by Mark Mefford

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Interview was conducted at Mrs. Lewis home on Plainview Drive in Shelbyville.

Lewis: I'm Eve Lawson Lewis and I was born August 29, 1951.

Mefford: What are your parents names?

Lewis: My parents names were John Clark Lawson and Evelyn Marie Conley Lawson.

Mefford: What was your fathers occupation?

Lewis: My father was a retailer. He owned a department store in Shelbyville, KY.

Mefford: Did your mother work?

Lewis: Only before she married my father and she was a secretary for the President of the Chase Manhattan Bank in New York and then moved to Chicago where she sold war bonds and was a female pilot that flew interstate missions.

Mefford: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Lewis: Surviving I have a half brother that worked in the department store with my dad and myself and a half sister Lyath who is a photographer.

Mefford: When you were growing up did you work in your fathers store?

Lewis: No, not as a child. It was just a place that I would go and wait after school or run down to the drug store and get a soda and some french fries but I did not work at all as a child. I didn't work in the store until I was around 25 years of age.

Mefford: What are some of your early memories of Lawson's?

Lewis: I guess a lot of the people that work there were are my memories. A lot of them as still alive and they were long time employees. Most of the people that came to work there had many personalities. A lot of the women there were not married that had made their careers in being buyers and daddy would get them trained. We offered many services. We even had a carpet installer that we referred to a basement as his name and it was Dumar's basement, even after Dumar died it was still "it's down in Dumar's basement". So, the elevator. I think everyone that has ever heard of Lawson's or remembers anything from their childhood. We had the only elevator in Shelbyville and it went up three stories and it was just very unique, it was old, it was the push button kind. I remember going in with my Daddy on Sundays because he would always go in after church and do paperwork and he would never let me ride the elevator without him being there. That was a rule, that if you were in the store by yourself you always had to take the steps.

Mefford: What were some of the names of the people who worked there?

Lewis: Oh gosh, Kathleen Perkins is still alive and she must have worked there 30 years. Shelby Bailey just passed away. Dumar Davis who I remember. James, I'm trying to think of James' last name because he is still alive too and he installed for us for years and years and years. Catherine Lay worked for use for years, she has just passed away. Ruth Wilson worked for us. Elizabeth Smith was a buyer. Doris Tensley who is still very active and works for the Wakefield Scarce Galleries worked and pretty much ran the notions department. Sussie Carpenter worked there for years. Annie Smith, Christen

Colter is a Bible retailer here in town, she worked there for around 12 years and has become very successful with her own company here in town now. We had a lot of influx of younger people. We had Helen Cleveland who worked in our offices for years and years and years and she was quite a character. We had Mrs. Kenney and I really never knew her first name. She started with my grandfather who actually started the business with his brother and she was just "old school". When I came into the store there were a lot of changes I made and it was not received real well at first. Because I wanted a computer and it was "oh no, we don't want a computer" and it was just a lot of times and a lot of things were happening and changing and it was very hard for me to assert any form of authority until after about 3 years and then I was finally able to.....they knew I was there to stay and that I wasn't just a fly-by-night person that was just the daughter of the man who owned the store.

Mefford: What early memories do you have of the store inside and out?

Lewis: Well the outside pretty much had a huge change I guess in about 1950s or so and Dad put in all these great big windows. We also started from only being two stores wide, we acquired another store. There were painted tin ceilings that are still there. I still go into the store.

Mefford: Where is it located?

Lewis: 528 Main Street and we had three different floors. There were steps that when you walked in on the one side, that was our furniture side. We always had room displays going all the way back and we could decorate them with windows in the front and then a big swooping staircase. At one time that building had been the Middleton Building and it was an old hotel. There was a huge sky light that we had covered and had a grand chandelier hanging there that Daddy had imported. And upstairs we had more furniture galleries, we had a bedding gallery, over on the left we had an interior design studio. Years ago we sold notions, fabric, etc. We did classes on every type of craft that you could possibly imagine and as time went on and those things became more obsolete we really interfaced into bridal registry and did a lot of that in terms ofit was an old type of store with cases that were behind the counters, we wrote tickets, we didn't ring things in and I still have some of the old ticket books, you know that we wrote the tickets and figured the tax, and had the tax charts taped on the counters and when someone wanted to see a slip they weren't hanging, you got them out of the boxes, that type of thing.

I remember when we first put in revolving jewelry counters, that was a big deal. Because you could push a button and the cases would go around and around and around and that was very exciting. The changes that occurred were ongoing. After we acquired the store, my husband and I, we did a lot of face lifts. Moved things around and more or less updated. We finally did get our computer and became computerized. We always carried our own accounts. There were people in this community that only paid their bill once a year. They would come in and when they sold their tobacco they.....you know, when my daddy died.....it was amazing to me the out pouring of cards and letters, personal letters, directed to me on experiences they'd had in regard to my father. People sought me out after his death to tell me of something he had done for them that I never knew about. I honestly never knew of the.....I knew he was a good man, but I never knew he gave

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so much of not just himself but of his store to people who really needed things. He helped a lot of young couples get started.

Mefford: What else did you sell besides furniture?

Lewis: We sold furniture, floor covering, we were probably one of the largest distributors and installers of state floor covering. Most of the state parks, Dad was really in to that bidding process, he loved that competition of winning the bid and being a small store.....that was really exciting for him. We also sold infant ware, infant furniture, bedding, mattress, boxsprings, we had junior department, we had a miss department, we had linens, full interior design department with an interior designer so we did custom drapery work, miniblinds, fine-line blinds, everything that was available. The only thing we didn't carry were shoes and men's apparel. The reason we didn't to that was because his brother Briggs, who is still alive, by the way just turned 90 years of age, owned a store across the street called Briggs, Briggs Hire actually, and he sold ladies and mens shoes and men's apparel, so we never got into that competition. But we had everything.....it was a department store. It was basically a little Lazarus. We always carried the very best of quality. Davis Cabinet, Calden McLenden, all the big names in floor covering. In fact, Bobby Andriot, who now has Coach House Interiors, a very successful business here in town, got his start with my Daddy and worked there for almost ten years in floor covering and interior design. One of the most famous designers in Louisville got his start and he was from Italy, John Paul Vanchinee, and he came from Italy basically and started at Lawsons and now he has one of the largest interior design studios in the state of Kentucky. A lot of personalities went through that store, a whole lot of people. There was always a big Christmas, Dad would always do special things. There would always be big dinners and he was very, very minimal in terms of what he could actually afford to pay them on a salary basis but the rewards were always in the form of bonus, if the store did well and he always entertained everyone very well. He was just there for them. He was very strict but at the same time very soft too. It was just a very unique situation. One where I don't think to many are left in existence. There is not a week that goes by, that someone, doesn't say how much they miss Lawson's. We offered free gift wrapping and we only had the very finest gift wrap, very lavish and people would just come in to do their gift buying. We had free delivery, we charged 1% interest on our accounts. It was just a world of its own, just in a different era. It grew and grew and became a very successful store. When we took it over, things were starting to change. We had opposition from the Wal-Mart coming in. We had all these different discount stores popping up here, there, and everywhere and a lot of them were getting privy to some of the lines we before had exclusively and it was really an angering time for Dad because he was getting older and we were coming in and having others ideas. Some he agreed with, his idea was that if we carried a line and it showed up at a discount store, that we would just tell the line to "blow off", well they could have cared less. In order to try to maintain competition, a competitive edge, it just became a struggle because the loyal customers were adventurous. They went out and had to look into these better deals, these better prices, but in hind site now I think that they, if given an opportunity, if they could say, I'll only shop at one store if you'll just let us have it back, they would be there. I think you would have no difficulty in just getting an unbelievable response to that. But it would be cost prohibitive now. It would just be cost prohibitive.

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Mefford: Do you think Wal-Mart was mostly responsible for closing Lawson's?

Lewis: No.....no.....I think that they were just part of the changes that were coming about. Before we closed Lawson's I opened a store out by Wal-Mart. It was a larger store than the one I have now, but it was the same store. I have relocated since that time because it was too large and I opened it under the corporation umbrella and I did very well out there. But the people that owned the shopping center, it was sold from local people, to people in New York, they didn't care. That was something I just wasn't used to. I'd been brought up where I could walk in the bank and say I am going to need twenty five thousand dollars today and they would say "fine"..... and that was it and of course it's changing even ever more so now where you just can't.....a hand shake just doesn't mean much. There's very few people left that when they tell you something you know that they are true to their word. It's just different time. I was just fortunate to grow up with a father with a lot of integrity and a brilliant mother.

Unfortunately my mother was ill the last fifteen years of her life. She's been gone for almost 16 years and never got to enjoy the later stages of her life. She died when she was 65. She was brilliant, a woman who needed to be born and active in the nineties. Because she had her own airplane and she hunted and a very fast life where where she lived and then she moved to Shelbyville which was..... nothing. There was nothing here. Her only outlet was going to Cincinnati to see the.....Louisville grew with Actors Theater, of course today it is one of the finest art cities there is anywhere. And dad loved the arts too, he just loved life.....he really did. I don't remember my grandfather, Stanley. My brother that was killed in Viet Nam never worked in the store much. He was very young when he was killed. He was named after my grandfather, but people who remember him say that there was just not a finer man. He upheld the highest integrity there could ever be and that's nice to know. My grandmother, I remember very well, Letty, my daddy's mother and she never left the house. She was not a social person. We grew up with cooks and there was a loyalty that was involved that was just unbelievable, there was no separation of the person, it wasn't like people worked for you, it was like people worked with you. Dad was not afraid to get down on the floor and help roll out carpet or help move furniture and I was the same way. It didn't bother me. It wasn't like you ordered people to do it, you get involved and you do it with them.

Mefford: Do you think your dad knew most of the people he was trading with?

Lewis: Oh absolutely! I would say that he was one of the most respected individuals, not only with his other business people in the area of floor covering and furniture but when he went to markets he was addressed by his name and there were always warm handshakes. In fact there are still a couple of "reps" that I deal with that remember Daddy, you know, that were young and getting started in the business. But see, even that has changed. Retailing today is just a different market, it's a cut throat market, it's not fun anymore and it's a battle. My little store is a battle. If I didn't have my loyalty, from my customers, it wouldn't be worth keeping open. But most of them are, other than the new ones I have acquired, because of the influx, and I do carry very high quality clothing, it's still the older customers that were customers of Lawson's that know they gonna get the service. That's just not found anymore.

Mefford: What kind of service could someone expect after they bought a piece of furniture? For the life of the.....

Lewis: Pretty much. There was, I can remember Daddy a couple of times he made people angry but there were a couple of times when he deserved to make people angry. I remember a couple, a very nice couple, but they were just people that could not be pleased. We had done some drapery installations and this was wrong and then that was wrong and Dad went and redid this and redid that and finally he said, "You know what, I really think that Mr. & Mrs. (and I won't give their name because they are still alive and probably still have those draperies hanging there) I want to give you your money back. I want to maintain our friendship. So for that reason, I would ask you not to shop in my store again."

Mefford: Well.....

Lewis: So, that was just the way he worked with things. If he felt like he was right he would never leave the ball hanging. And he had an anger about him when was furious. But once he got it out, then it was over and ten minutes later he'd be slapping you on the back. He always called you "scout", and called all black people "boy", he just did. He never could remember people's names but no one ever knew it and I've inherited that horrible trait. Someone would come in and he could remember the exact floor covering they'd put in their house, the pieces of furniture they'd bought, how long ago they'd bought it, where they lived and everything and he'd carry on the huge conversation about their son who is in this and that, and then they'd walk around the corner to go over and he'd come up to Annie or Catherine and ask "what's her name? what's her name?" and he did it all the time. I've gotten to the point now where I am honest enough and say "I remember the outfit you bought, you know I did a style show last year for the homemakers, I do one every year for them and it's a big deal and I was talking, doing my little speech and everything and prior to the show I had noticed a little lady and she must have been in her late eighties if not in her early nineties, a little black lady out there and she motioned for me. I said, "yes" and she said, "I just have to tell you" she said, "I bought this dress at Lawsons, almost 15 years ago. The last good dress I've ever had." I said, "Can I share that today?" So, it was really fun for me to be able to say that quality will show today as you can see that she bought this dress and I still see people in cloths that came from that store and its funny because I'll be in a group at the church or something and I'll look out and think, oh gosh, I remember that's a John Meyers suit, that thing must be 15-16 years of age. But that was the quality that we carried. People still call, it's not a frequent now, and want to know, "We've got to replace floor covering, who would you recommend?" or people will call and say, "we bought this Davis furniture, who carries that, where can I get it. I'm ready to get a headboard or I want to get this" and that says a lot too. Daddy was very much on his faith. He believed in faith, he believed in honesty, he believed in what he did in terms of right from wrong and how you did business. He was big on words, it was nothing for him to put his opinion on things in an add this big in the paper, a half class view of them. He had his motto that we were a good store and a great county. LAWSON's! We upgraded our logo over the years. I remember we gave a yard stick, every customer got a yard stick, I have some of the oldest ones. People still bring me things.

Mefford: There's probably one in every house in this town.

Lewis: Probably, especially the older people. You know it's a shock to me when people who have moved here, even if they've been here 5 years have even heard of Lawson's. Of

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course now it harbors antique stores, and the building is not well maintained. The original, everything that was in there when we left it is still the same and the same people still own it. We never owned the property at all. You know Dad would put on the wall in our back parking lot, when he re-did that "free customer parking.....use it.....don't abuse it". He was just one for sayings, you can not climb the ladder to success with your hands in your pockets. He quit smoking when he was like 35, I was young, I was smoking and everything and as he would always say, "where there's a fire at one end there's a fool at the other." He just always had these little different sayings that he just always thought about and he always slapped you on the back, he always touch you. He was a real "touchy" person and when he laughed, he'd kick his head way back and just cackle. You could hear him all over the place.

Mefford: What were some of the changes you brought in when you took over?

Lewis: I just went in and did a whole lot of changing. We put in a computer system, put all of our accounts on computer, put all of our accounts receivable and payable on computer. I changed the interest rate. We used to have 90 days same as cash and I just got very realistic in terms of what we had to do. I put in a lot of changes in terms of a new cash registers which I have to tell you, people just became upset. These people who had been employees and writing tickets all these years could not figure out how to work these cash registers. It was as bad a putting a computer in front of them. It was just something that they never thought they'd have to deal with. I went through log changes, I had tee shirts made with our name on them. I loved promotions. I was always doing advertising and Daddy loved it too. I have a picture of him and it was one from the paper where he had an employee hold an ax over his head and she was coming down with it like this, it was Trish Clifton actually is who it was, as saying "We're taking the heads off the prices" or something like that.

Mefford: What were some of the other adds that were promotions?

Lewis: Oh gosh, there were always so many. When we had a sale, people would line up outside that door, and back then 10-20% off was a big deal. People would be outside going in both directions, waiting for those doors to open. You literally had to unlock those doors and get back because they came in and they came in droves, and droves, and droves! It was just something unusual. I did a baby, it was real neat, my daughter who is now ten and a half, I came up with an idea and it was really cute, we had, "Will the real living doll, please stand up" contest and it was a baby contest. Baby pictures had to be submitted and an age group. And at that time we had new dolls I had found in Atlanta, that looked like real babies and Ruby Marie looked just like them and was the same size, so I took a picture. I put three of the dolls and her in a crib and took a picture and then put "Would the real living doll please stand up" and then people brought their infants in and then first prize was \$500 worth of baby furniture and baby cloths, it was an assortment of a layette type thing and there was a second and third prize. I think we had something like 450 entrance of everyone who brought in pictures of their babies and then we had independent judging. We were always big with the Dairy Festival, we always supported everything. I can't imagine the support system that that store gave in regards to Homemakers, 4-H and Kentucky Dairy Association. Every year my uncle always had the cheese with my grandmothers mustard across the street and we would put out a lavish spread. We had a moonlight madness.....closed off main street one year and had costume

contest and had all the employees, I'm not kiddin, it was wild, it was just wild, it was fun! It was just a lot of fun. People came in and would just have a real good time. Saturday nights as a child, you couldn't move on main street. People were out and running about and shopping. There were quaint restaurants with good home cooked food that I don't think they knew the idea of artificial margarine or anything. It was all just very unique! A time that is good to remember but one that unfortunately is never going to be back again.

Mefford: What has happened to the retail business on Main Street?

Lewis: It basically has become an antique mall. You do have Biagi's who is very viable. They are very strong and they have a lot of the very same beliefs that I think Lawson's did. They are family owned and operated, but they've suffered too because at one time they were exclusive with RCA. At one time they were exclusive with Frigidare and now you can go to Radio Shack. You can go to Western Auto, you can go anywhere and get those same brands. You can go to Circuit City. The thing that has kept them alive and why I go there is because I know their service department is going to take care of me and I know they are going to deliver it for me free and those are things that are just important to me. A lot of people don't find that important but I do. And I like to try and trade at home if at all possible, it's just something I really like to do.

Mefford: Even if you have to pay a little more?

Lewis: I don't think you have to pay too much more anymore because everyone has had to sharpen their pencils. Even my little store, I offer a 20% discount everyday. I started that about a year and a half ago. So I'm right in line with Bacons, I mean, when they have a bigger sale they may beat me, but every day.....you can compare the prices because I carry only name brands, but my overhead is less. I have just a real nice group of women that work with me and they don't really have to work. They just like working in cloths and getting nice cloths, and I would say that basically, most of the people that worked at Lawson's, alot of them fell into that category. They really didn't have to work but they liked it, it was a nice place to work. There was nice feeling. We had an ongoing disagreement between two of our employees, one was U of L fan and one was U of K fan. The very first dream game ever, happened to have been during a when a big style show was planned and of course that game was going to be at noon. You know what the dream game is.....the basket ball game and the game was going to be at 1 or 1:30 and my models were supposed to be there, and the luncheon was at noon and I knew that no one was going to show up because we had planned it way before and everyone around here, you know are just die hards. They bleed blue.....I'm serious. Well that morning we came in and Doris Tensley had taken this stuffed Red Bird and put it in one of our wicker bird cages and had it hanging for Betty Lloyd Mathews who now works for Tweed and Tartin in Louisville to see because she was the U of L fan. Well everyone was so panicky about that game that I got everyone together and said, "We can do this show, we can do this show in 15 minutes. I have no doubt. I can have everybody out of there but we've got to move fast." So what I did was, I took everything I was going to say, and just speed it up to such a degree and everyone appreciated it, it just ended up being hysterical because ; "Here comes Marilyn, she's got on a red dress. Isn't that a nice red dress. Oaky. Here comes Sue. She's got on a blue dress. This blue dress is really in style. Okay. Here comes Mary." Needless to say I got everybody out of there and I took the entire crew, including the men who packed up all the cloths and were in the vans over to my house

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which was real close to the school where the style show was. We all sat down and I ordered pizza and we watched the game. We she did!

Mefford: Did U of K win?

Lewis: The very first dream game, I don't remember. You've called me on the one. I really don't remember. I think U of L did. I like them both. We have a daughter that goes to U of L.

Mefford: That's about all the questions I have. Do you have anything you'd like to add about Shelbyville?

Lewis: Anything about Shelbyville?

Mefford: Anything?

Lewis: Some of the changes I really like, some of them I really don't. It's difficult for me to see a lot of the growth, a lot of the gifts that are given in terms of tax breaks, utility breaks because before we made the decision to close Lawson's, I personally, before I ever made it public, went before officials and said this is the situation and was never offered a dime. I like to think that something good came out the closing of the store. From that they realized the loss and from that they started creating low interest money for loans. We never had that privilege We never were given anything and it's a shame because that downtown was beautiful, absolutely beautiful. The windows were impeccable. You'd drive through at Christmas time and it was just magnificent. We had carolers and one little girl, well she's not a little girl, she's probably older than I am but she is mentally retarded. I'll see her to this day with her mother in the grocery store and she bought, when we closed the store, our mechanical Santa Claus and she said please come over this Christmas. I want you to see your Santa. That's just really neat. It really is. Promotional.