

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford

Date: July 26, 1995

Interviewee: Charles B. Long

Running Time: 37 minutes

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CHARLES BENTON LONG
INTERVIEW
July 26, 1996
Interviewed by Mark Mefford
Transcription by Susan McMullan Groves

Full name: Charles Benton Long

When were you born? October 8, 1898 in Shelby County, Kentucky.

Parents names: Samuel Long and Minnie Long

What did your father do for a living? He built Climax Mills...the flour mills and all. We all came in with him. He was a farmer and a speculator and generally around town here. But his main business was the Climax Mills, Incorporated.

Did you take over the mill? Yeh.

What years were you involved with the mill? I don't know...about 1918. I was about 18 years old. I guess closer to 1920.

Is the mill still in existence? I don't know. Part of it. You know where the Old Mill Shop is? The mill sat over there in the big lot right to the side on the L&N Railroad there.

When did it close down? Well, my sons tried to operate it but they got kind of tired of it and they sold it. Then they closed it in about...not so long ago. **Just a few years ago?** Oh yeah, not so long ago. Just a minute and I'll get it. They went...my son...came from Chicago...he was in the advertising business in Chicago...and he came down here. I wanted to get out, I was 65 or 70 years old and I wanted to get out and I didn't think he could do it but he and a bunch of buddies up there came down and they bought the mill and they ran it in the ground pretty quickly. They liked other things. One was an architect and the other one was an advertising man. So they closed it down...it didn't suit them. I knew it wouldn't suit them but anyhow, they closed it down. But it was a wonderful old mill, it was. Out on old Zaring Mill Road, do you know where that is? That's where the old water mill was. All that went through an auction...all those old boys went broke about 1870...somewhere about in there. They could've made it if it wasn't for their partner. He just wasn't any good account. Then (somebody else but I can't make out the name) came in and took it over. It's been a long affair since about 1870. It was a prosperous thing and made a lot of money there. I always made a lot of money there.

So, you ran it until about the '60's? Yeh, for the next 40 years...probably longer than that. Probably in the 50's. 1920 till about 1960...yeh, I think that's right.

What kind of businesses were in the downtown in the 1920's? Were there banks or whatever? Yeh, about the same banks. There was another bank out here out of Cincinnati. There were about 3 or 4 good banks. They're still here most of them. One of them sold to a Louisville bank and the other one belongs to another one in Louisville. We got one independent bank...it's about the only independent bank we've got.

What was the...how did people get around to and from downtown in the '20's? Did they drive or walk or ride horses? In 1920? Well, sure! That's when the automobile business was taking off. Years ago!

How did you drive to work every morning? There was a barn up here. And that was a barn and over there was a barn. Had a cow and 2 or 3 horses. Drive to town with the wheels.

When you started working at the mill, how did you get to work every morning and come home in the evening? Walk. Walk a lot of times. We got wheels because of the automobile pretty soon! We used horse and buggy most of the time. We used to have 2 or 3 farms and I used to go out to them in different places. But used to be you could get a Ford pretty cheap and they came in pretty quick. Horses went out, you know. Nobody knew how...they had to change the oil, you know, and nobody knew how. A lot of change.

When did you start seeing fewer horses? Was that in the '20's or the '30's when they started going out? Well, the horses went out in the '20's. That part of the century, yeh. Pa built his house in the early part of the century, I guess, and I've been here for a hundred years right here. Elizabeth (?) and I we got married and went down while we were raising our children, but my family has been here for a hundred years.

It's a nice house. It's beautiful. We lived in the east end and then the east end kind of moved out and then the west end kind of moved out and then we kind of came out here. All that traffic and stuff now.

How many men were employed at the mill when you started working there? About 15 or 20...something like that.

Did they live in town or out in the country? Most of them were just common laborers. They didn't have too many professional people in the mill. We had wagons we delivered flour meal in. We delivered over to Eminence, Mt. Eden, Waddy or somewhere. We'd load up that horse and buggy or wagon and deliver it.

When did you stop using horse and buggy and start using a car or a truck to transport flour? Well, I don't know. I know we had an old truck with high wheels and solid tires...that was one of the first trucks we had there. It was one of the first trucks in town. It was a long time ago. They took 'em farming, you know.

When did you get that truck? I guess it was right around the 1920's, I'd say. I think that was the first truck in town. It was a Ford of some sort. What did they call it before it was a Ford? You had to crank it and there were lights on it for nighttime. You'd go to Frankfort and you'd be pretty lucky if you only had three or four punctures. You'd have to get out and patch the tube. You'd be all dressed up and going to a dance or a party or something and you'd have three or four punctures.

How did you patch the tire? I'd patch it. There was a little tube and you got the tube out and put that patch on it, put it back on, jack it up. I'd keep a duster in the car, you know... something you could put over your clothes. The tire would blow out if you hit anything rough. It was a rough start for cars. They wouldn't run very fast.

How fast do you reckon they would go? Oh, they'd run about 30 or 40 miles an hour, I don't know. We got it at a Ford dealership, too. They had a contest for Ford cars and how far they'd go on a gallon of gasoline.

How far did they go? (Laughing) I've forgotten how far we'd go on a gallon of gas. I think it was 10, 12 or 15 miles to the gallon.

Did the workers in the mill mainly live in town or out in the country? They lived in town mostly.

How did the Depression effect the Mill and the downtown area? Oh, it did us like it did everything else. It was pretty dull. **Did it ever close during the Depression?** Oh, heaven's no! We were one of the ones that came out pretty good in our business. A lot of people went out of business. The ones out on the farms... they went out of business. But it's just the same old story about everything else going out of business while some people don't tend to. I can't believe anybody now would have a mortgage on his house. I can remember when people didn't want a mortgage on their house. Don't fool with them. They'll cut your throat or something. It was like a criminal. Mortgage on the farm... nobody had a mortgage on their farm. Now it's like everybody has a mortgage on everything. Everything is mortgaged. We built some apartments one time... I had some partners... and we wouldn't get a mortgage. Mortgage will tie you down and it would tie up the partnership. The only ones that suffered in the Depression are the ones that had debt and didn't have any money coming in. Everything got cheap as the dickens! I sold a whole hull for two-hundred and fifty... two-hundred and fifty... twenty-five dollars... well, how was it. Oh, it was two hundred and fifty dollars a hundred. Two dollars and a half... not a hundred.

Do you remember how much the price of flour went down during the Depression? Well, sure, yeh, I bought wheat for 40 cents a bushel or less. Most of it was running six dollars a bushel. 20 cents a bushel... and corn was 30 cents a bushel. Everything was cheap as dirt. The debt now... the debt right now... with the interest is one of the biggest factors in the fueling of the economy, don't you? **I agree.** Huh? **Yes.** Oh, everybody now... especially now with all these doggone cards... these credit card things you know.

High interest. You know they used to get on people and call them old misers or tightwads, but if you don't manage your finances, you'll soon get out of the picture.

Well, you talked about driving to Frankfort and Louisville in your car. Did you do much here socially? Socially? On Saturday nights did you...? Well, certainly. We had three dances here that were known all over Kentucky. Came from all over Kentucky.

Do you know what they were called? The name of it? What? Did it have a name? The Fair Dance, the June Dance and the Christmas Dance. Shelbyville _____ Club required full dress to get into the gate... to get into the hall. We wore tails and all.

What year was that going on? Oh, it lasted from about 1850 to 1900's. I'm gettin' pretty damn old... 1900's. I guess it went on up until I was married. They had dances in different places. But the social life here was a rich social life. People had parties and we used to have dances. My wife used to go when she was young. The fair was really something then, too. Then everybody entertained for the fair and the folks that moved away all came back in.

What time of year did the fair come? August. Just about time it was getting hot... in August. Last of August. We'd go around and look at the county fairs and then we would go to the State Fair about the first of September.

What went on here at the fair in the 20's, 30's and 40's? Well, of course, we had a good deal of horses in there. We had a pretty good fair then. There's too much going on up there now.

Where was it held? Fairgrounds. Still going there. There's the fair this week, I think. This week or next week one. Of course, you don't have all those good farm things there but you have a whole lot now, I guarantee that. Now we're always going somewhere... now.

What kind of changes have happened in the Main Street/downtown area over the years? Well, it's just gone from a country town... from a wonderful country town to just a manufacturing town now. Versailles and Winchester... Winchester is still a nice town. Georgetown got fixed up by Toyota... just like we got fixed up. Toyota has taken that over. This was a wonderful little town... there used to be a lot of wonderful little towns.

People still work in the downtown area here a lot? Well, they're operating, yeh. A whole lot of different things like Mark (Scearce) has that shop he has and there are a lot of little shops in there and there are about 10 or 12 others now in places down there. But as far as a business, I don't know whether you could buy a good suit of clothes in Shelbyville... I don't imagine you could. We used to have 2 or 3 good clothes stores and things like that. Now, they're all antique shops and such.

When did the antiques start showing up? Along about the 20's is when all those things started. They started coming in.

Where do you go buy a good suit of clothes if you don't go in Shelbyville? I don't know. I haven't bought a good suit of clothes for about 50 years. I don't know whether there's a good place to buy a good suit of clothes here in Shelbyville anymore, do you? **I don't think...** I doubt it. Briggs used to have one down there. Everybody goes to Louisville. You pretty much have to now.

Do you go to church around here? Yeh. Christian.

What's the name of it? Christian Church **First Christian Church?** (confusion)

Where is it located? Down in the east end. Down by the Post Office... across from the Post Office.

How long has it been there? Been there, oh, 150 or 200 years on that corner. That was the first church right there... the first Christian Church. I don't know whether it was the first church or not.

Have most of the churches stayed in the downtown area? Baptist Church was up by where the fountain is. Do you know where the fountain is? **Yes sir.** Baptist Church was right over there... there used to be a circle over there and the Baptist church was over there. Do you know where the Methodist Church is? **Uh, yes sir.** Well, the Methodist Church is still there but the Baptist Church pulled out and moved to the other end of town. There all still here... the churches are.

How has the appearance of the downtown changed? Most of the buildings... well, as far as I'm concerned it has changed entirely but I guess it hasn't changed much. Except you got people of different areas in here and generally you had most of the old time people from around here running the stores. Now I don't know who they are. They got so many little stores around. There are nice stores around here though. Mark has a nice store. The Old Mill Shop... of course, they're pretty expensive... both of them. These other little shops... one place where the A & P used to be somebody told me there were 40 antique shops in there. Stores! Right there on Main Street, right now. 40 antique shops... junk shops.

Do the customers of these stores live in Shelbyville or do they come up from different places...tourists? I don't know. A lot of these tourists come around if they're looking for antiques they do. I don't know. The livery stables used to be down there. The livery stables took a great deal of space. There used to be five or six livery stables here in town.

How much could you rent a horse for? Dollar and a half.

How long did you get to keep it? Do what you wanted to do, I reckon. But you could bring your horse and put him in there and they'd feed him and take care of him while you stayed in town all day on court day or whatever day you were in there for. I think about 15 cents to a quarter they'd feed your horse.

Tell me about county court day? Oh, yeh, county court day. When did that start? That's the first, uh... first day of the month, wasn't it? Once a month. There would be buggies all over town. That's how people would get a job. I remember when we were kids we'd get a job somehow if we would take a bunch of the hay bails and put them in all those buggies. It was a quarter to put up all those bails.

What else went on on court day? What else went on? Was it a lot of trading? Well, yeh! The farmers would come in and they'd trade and bring their goods. The county magistrates would talk over business with the county. Oh, that was always a big day. Big business day. Honest business. Big stores... oh, five or six big stores, all those stores up town that are all in that big flat up through town. Do you know where anything is through town? **Just a few things.** Well, Sarah's or whatever that place to eat is used to be filled with nice clothes. Both sides were filled with nice stores... clothing stores and hardware stores and ladies stores. Four or five good banks. Restaurants... two or three good restaurants. Livery stables were on the edges of each area. There were four right in that area there. Of course, I didn't know much about what was going on... what they did or anything but that was the day to come in town.

Has Shelbyville had any fall festivals? Fall Festival? What is that? Where all the people come with their booze? Well, something in the fall...you know...I don't know if they have booze or not. I think they do. I think they come right down in here...

Tape ran out—Side B

When was the tobacco festival? Well, I don't know when it was or what time of year it was. Before the opening of the tobacco market. They'd have a festival and parade and all.

What year do you remember it started in? Way back then. Gosh, we had all those tobacco warehouses and they're still here. Still a lot of tobacco being grown. Still smoking it! They sure smoke a lot of it. You get hung with it... don't ever smoke if you can help it!

How many people did you employ in the mill in the 50's? In the 50's? Oh, I guess maybe 20 for the most part?

Did they still live downtown like they did in the 20's and 30's? I guess so. I guess they did but a lot has changed. Everybody is busy. Everybody wants to own their own

business now it looks like. That's good if you can make it go. You've got to work with it/

How has this Wal-Mart around here affected the downtown area? I don't know. They build a tremendous business, they say. I don't know whether Frankfort has one of these Wal-Marts or not. Taylorsville have one? That comes into all these little towns. It's all these malls that are new. Every town has those. They came into town and built these malls. Every little town has four or five malls. Branches...several banks have branches around here.

What do you think the biggest change in the downtown/Main Street area that you remember? I remember it all. All the little shops...I'm just not familiar with what trade is going on. All these people in here. With all of them in here you can't get up and down these streets. They're all working somewhere...in some of these factories around here. I don't know what they're spending their money. On automobiles I reckon. That's the big business, I guess.