

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford

Interviewee: Charles T. Long

Date: 9-5-95

Running Time: 35 minutes

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Charles T. Long
Interview
September 5, 1996
Interviewed by Mark Meford
Transcription by Susan McMullan Groves

Full name: Charles Thomas Long

When were you born? April 12, 1941

Were you born in Shelbyville? I was born actually in Lexington at, I think, St. Joseph's.

When did you move from Lexington? Well, we always lived here. My parents were married here and my father was from Shelby County and my mother was from Lexington. So, she always went back. I had an uncle in Lexington who was a gynecologist so she always went back to Lexington for the kids to be born. But, we've always lived here since I was born.

Where did you go to school? I went to elementary school at Northside Elementary School and then...that was grades one through five at that time...and then I went to what is now West Middle School. At that time, it was the high school and grade six was at the high school and the middle school and the high school were all together in one building. Then after...I didn't go through high...I didn't graduate from high school here. About the...I think I attended the ninth grade here and then transferred to Eastern High School and we commuted. There was about five or six of us who commuted everyday down there. The first year that we did it...before we were all old enough to get our drivers license, we rode a Greyhound bus. I got on the Greyhound bus in Shelbyville and rode down...and we bought a book of tickets and the driver let us off down there and then they would, uh, there was a bus that came through Middletown right at the right time—right as soon as school let out so we got on the bus.

Why did you all go to Jefferson County? Well, I went there because I thought I was going to be a chemist. I was really interested in chemistry and being a...they had a much better science and chemistry course there. I don't regret it. Eastern in that period of time—I graduated from Eastern in 1959 and in that period of time Eastern was a wonderful high school. They were great faculty there and I remember a Mrs. Phillips who taught physics...I mean, I'm sorry, taught civics and Edith Woods who was our mathematics, algebra, mathematics teacher. They were great. We really got a good solid education there.

What are your parents names? My father was David Tyler Long and my mother was Edith Marshall Long.

What did they do for a living? My dad was a...graduated from VMI in Virginia...was

an engineer by training but after World War II—after his service in World War II—he came back to Shelbyville and was in the concrete block and silo business with my Uncle Henry. Also, he farmed several farms in Shelby County. So, he was a farmer and a concrete block masonry manufacturer.

I know you have one brother, do you have any other brothers and sisters? Yes. I have two brothers. One, Marshall, is older than I am and my brother, Bob, who is ten months older than I am. I am the youngest.

I know Marshall is still in Shelbyville. Is your other brother still here? Yes. We're all three here. Both our parents have passed away but then all the brothers and their families are still here.

What kind of occupation have you been involved in in Shelby County? Well, all three of us at one time or the other were involved in the concrete block business. My brother, Marshall, and I ended up owning that business and conducting it until 1994. In February of 1994 we sold the business to Urban Materials, Incorporated in Louisville. Since that time we just... well, I've worked for Urban Materials for about a year and a half and left them just about six weeks ago. Marshall is the state representative and he's busy doing that sort of thing and I've managed to stay busy too.

Have you always been involved in the concrete block business? Pretty much, uh, I was, uh... I attended Vanderbilt University and had a couple of years in the Navy and did some graduate work at the University of Virginia. Then I joined the Department of State as a foreign service officer and did a tour of duty in Ecuador. After that was completed, I decided that wasn't what I wanted to do so I came back here and I joined the family in the firm in about 1968. I worked there from 1968 until 1995.

Did concrete block business service mostly Shelbyville and the Shelby County area? Pretty much. In the early days... what limits concrete block in terms of its market is the weight of the material and the distance you can actually haul it. There was probably a fifty mile radius of Shelbyville and that was about as far as you could economically haul the material. But that gave us a market in Lexington, as well as, all the counties that bordered Shelby except there were a number of other companies... these concrete block companies... in Jefferson County and we never did very much business in Jefferson County. All the counties to the north and south of us and to the east of us we serviced.

Are those concrete blocks used for mostly commercial buildings or did they use them in homes, too? Mostly farm and farm buildings, foundations for houses. Up until redi-mix concrete really became dominant in the construction business, concrete block was used for basements around here. A lot of the older houses still all have concrete block basements. But that market was lost to redi-mix probably ten or fifteen years ago. But, also in commercial shopping centers, institutional... hospitals and the schools... that masonry part of the trade is still very important.

So, when your father was running the business he probably serviced a lot of foundations for homes, farms and commercial buildings? Oh, yes, very much so. I don't know but the two towers at University of Kentucky... the two student dormitory towers were made out of a block that we supplied. Blanding and Kirwin, I suppose. Like I said, the block were hauled everywhere—even up to eastern Kentucky cause even in those days there were no manufacturing plants in eastern Kentucky.

You all were bought out by a Louisville firm? We were bought out by a Louisville firm who was, ironically, very interested in establishing a redi-mix plant here. They were also in the masonry business and had a concrete block plant in Louisville which was a high capacity plant. They could make a lot of product... more than they could sell in the Louisville market so they were interested in having this market as an outlet for the block that they could manufacture there, as well as, establishing a redi-mix. That is what they are doing now. They use brick, block and redi-mix—a combination.

Is this a nationwide company or are they just based in Louisville? Well, it's really in two states: Indiana and Kentucky. The home office is in Indianapolis, Indiana and they have been buying up a number of redi-mix plants all in the northern, central area of Kentucky. As far as I know, the only block plant which they own is the one that they purchased... the old American builder company in Louisville... they inherited a block plant. I mean, it was just right there with it on the same site as the redi-mix plant. So, this is, as far as I know, the only block plant that this company owns outside of Louisville.

Are there any other companies that are in a comparable situation? Locally owned businesses that have been bought out by other companies? There are some. Coca-Cola, the local Coca-Cola was a family operated manufacturing business which, uh, has been bought out. There are other companies here that are still, uh, the clothing factory, which is run by the Webb family, is a family owned business and is essentially manufacturing. I think it's becoming more and more difficult as the year goes by for the small manufacturing plant to be able to compete with the ability of the larger whose economies have scaled or are certainly better and who can transport so easily now that material into all the rural areas. The roadwork in Kentucky—the interstate highway system has really changed the dynamics of getting goods to the customer. It's so much easier now to do that and there's less, as you'll find in most of the small towns, fewer and fewer, uh, businesses that were established primarily because they operated within a confined area—because of the market area and because of the difficulty of moving goods. And the masonry business has changed quite a bit over the last twenty years. Metal buildings have taken over a large and growing section of that market and less and less masonry is being used. That means that there are surplus block machines in the state—still are. Used to be that every town... almost every town had a concrete block plant and now there are fewer and fewer of those. That's just sort of a change that needs to take place. There was a surplus of machines that needed to be eliminated. The two machines that we had were dismantled and sent to Mexico. They've got a good market for that machine down there. In the Louisville market area, we have so many companies

and so much capacity with a declining masonry market that we've got to shut down machines. There are still plants and companies that probably need to change still yet but it's an ongoing process.

When did these changes in the market fostered by the transportation improvements happen? Was that in the Sixties? I think it started in the late Seventies. I-64 was built through Shelby County around 1963 or '64—in that period of time. It was really another ten or fifteen years before, uh, probably full advantage of that improved transportation system came into force. But it's a... certainly by the late Seventies it was a factor.

Tell me a little bit about some of your early memories of the downtown area. Well, we were always... we were country kids. We lived out on Benson Road in a house that we moved into in 1948. We lived in town until then from the time I was born in 1941 until 1948 and then we moved to the country. During all that period of time in which I grew up as a teenager, we lived in the country. So, we essentially... we came to town periodically. I remember the store that fascinated me so much was Dice's store. He had sort of a strange combination. It was like wallpaper and stationary and sundries like that—pencils and pens and, uh, toys, uh, at Christmas he was the toy shop—and he also had all the comic books and reading material there. So, if you wanted to do a book report, Mr. Dice had the classic comic books in so you didn't have to actually read the book. We had a couple of... we had two five and dime stores. Van's was one and the other is that chain five and dime... it's not Mayberry... **Begley's?** No, Begley's was a drugstore, uh, but, uh, so we would always... you could visit the five and dimes and, of course, in those days nothing was in a package. Everything that you wanted was on these counters with little glass dividers dividing them so there would different kinds of candies or buttons or that sort of thing all open so you could go up and get however much you wanted. But, there was no such thing as little cardboard and cellophane things with sixteen screws in it or anything like that. It, uh, all the goods were out for you to see. And then the clothing store that was here that I remember, of course, was Briggs-Hower, which was located in those days where the Bistro restaurant is today. It was a successor firm to the Rothschild clothing factory that was here earlier than that. There was also... we had a Lincoln's department store, a Lawson's department store, we had a movie theater. We all would come on Saturday when we could and go to the movies and catch some old serial westerns that would change from week to week or month to month. I think I saw, I believe I saw "Gone with the Wind" in that theater. That was about the last time I was in it probably. But I always remembered it was just like everything else that we had in those days—segregated. The balcony was reserved for black folk and the whites sat downstairs and I would always think that the better view was up there in that balcony! But, I'm sure they didn't think so! But, we, uh, and it was except for the polio scares in which everyone took that very seriously those years in the Fifties. Those years in the Fifties were pretty good years to grow up in.

What were the polio scares? Did that come out of Shelbyville or what? Well, we had polio cases and it was just all over the state and in the country, too. The, uh, things like the swimming pool were established and that was one of the... you just were not allowed

to go in the summertime when that was happening... July and August particularly, I think... to any group type function. You couldn't go to the swimming pool and we would always take lots of risks during the day. I mean, you'd have to put a blanket out in the yard under a tree and lie down and rest for an hour or two. What that had to do with not catching polio, I do not know! That was considered a good practice to keep you from getting polio. But it was a dread disease that really changed everybody's view of... I mean, it was mainly a summertime disease as I recall it and that's when we used to worry so much about it. But, pretty soon we got the Salk vaccine came out in what, the mid Fifties, Sixties, something like that. I remember getting the shot and I remember going out and just masses of people lining up and getting the oral vaccine a year or two later when that came out. Then it was sort of one of those mass vaccine type things. Everybody went.

Do you think the downtown area then with the movie theaters and five and dime and everything served as a social center for the kids growing up? Pretty much. I'd say you would... it was the retail center. It was the place you went for entertainment. That and church and church activities and summer camps connected with it were pretty much a sort of axis around which everything else rotated. But we did not... I mean, I visit downtown everyday. I'm downtown everyday. In those days, we weren't downtown everyday. We were downtown maybe two or three times a week.

Did you all make it a point to come down on Saturday? If we were going to the movie. We'd talk our parents into bringing us into town and dropping us off at the movies and enjoying that. But we had a... out on the farm we had lots of other things to do, too. I mean, there was fishing and swimming and chores and whatever that had to be taken care of. We weren't in town constantly but we would come back and forth.

How many cars did you all own? We had, in our later years, well, we had two. My father had one, of course, for the business and he was... we didn't see very much of that car back and forth. So, pretty much all that was taken care of was my mother, uh, and, uh, I can't remember... mostly they were Buicks.

Were the roads in and out of the country good roads? Pretty good. Pretty good. We lived about two miles out the Benson Road and I recall that they were narrow and trees overhung the road so at night it was kind of a scary scene! It was pretty rough to travel down those roads! But we had a terrible problem of all the county roads in those days with the trash. There was no place to dump trash. There was not a county landfill. There was a city dump over in Martinsville which burned all the time. And so people got into the habit of throwing the trash along side the road. That was a terrible aggravation to my father who thought that the county ought to do something about it. Ralph Mitchell was the county judge one time so my father got a tractor and two wagons hooked on to it and his three boys—free labor—and we started at our house and we went all the way to town picking up all the trash. By the time we got to town, we had two huge wagons full of trash. Dead animals and stuff you wouldn't believe! He took it up and parked it in front

of the courthouse! I don't know if that ever got any action from the county on cleaning up the roads or not but he made his point.

You mentioned a little bit about religion in the downtown area. What church...?
Presbyterian. We were Presbyterian. My mother was Presbyterian and my father actually grew up in the Christian church. When they married, the Christian church still had the requirement that if you were to join the Christian church, you had to have total immersion and that... my mother was not about to do that. So, my father joined the Presbyterian church! We all grew up as Presbyterians and we still all are Presbyterians. That church is located at Seventh and Main. As I say, I probably have been a member of the church now... you usually join at twelve, so about forty-two years.

When you were growing up, did the church serve as a social center? Sort of. There was always a youth group. Sometimes it was better than others just depending on who was leading it and the number of kids that were involved in it. There was always, uh, there was 4-H and that was always another popular club to be in and we were members of that. Then there were camps in the summer—Camp Piamingo. We'd all go down to that which is, I guess, a Boy Scouts camp.

Is that in Shelby County? No. It's in Jefferson County. A lot of kids from here would go to Camp Piamingo... and still do!

Do you remember any annual events in the downtown area? Fairs? In my day, we always did the Tobacco Festival. Everybody would participate. And the business—Long Silo and Block Company, that's what it's name was in those days—always had a float in it and, uh, generally, as I recall it was a little tractor like a Farmall Cub Cadet sort of tractor pulling a small wagon and we had a silo built in the back of the wagon. Then one of us would be in the wagon in a big pot just kind of tossing fake money up and down trying to demonstrate that a silo was a... that you could make good money by using a silo to feed your cattle. One of the kids would drive the tractor and the other would stand back there pitching this money up and down! So, we did that for a number of years and then we would... we all had ponies so we would ride as cowboys in the parade. That lasted for two or three parades. We were a pretty scuzzy looking outfit! We didn't have... we had old worn out guns and cowboy shirts and stuff that had seen some hard use and I think we did that for two or three years! We showed up there one time and some kids from Finchville came and were the best looking outfit that you'd ever seen in your life and I think that was the last year that we... we couldn't compete with those kids from Finchville!!

What other kinds of things went on at the Tobacco Festival besides the parade?
That's mainly what I remember. Now there would be greased pole things and the coon hunt. I don't ever recall... I'm sure there was a dance or something. There was always a king or queen and there may have been dance. I just don't remember at all. I know when we revived the festival a year... several years ago... we had something called the Burley Ball—that was just a dance. I don't recall that being a part of it. And, of course, there

was always the fair. There was, uh... with the amphitheater, the old wooden amphitheater and the old wooden Floral Hall that was just packed with produce and flowers and every imaginable kind of rabbit there was in the world and chickens and everything else on all the animal and livestock displays. We showed cattle and everything at the fair as part of the 4-H project. There was always something like that going on. Let's just say that, I guess, a lot got done in those days—more than you think!

Were there any events for holidays like Christmas or Easter that happened in the downtown area? I don't remember... no, I don't think there was a... of course, there were always the store owners and everything would decorate, you know, for Christmas. Christmas in those days though was certainly a whole lot less commercial than it is today. As I recall, most of the Christmas events were centered around Church rather than being uh, of course, you'd get all the presents you could hope for sometimes but it... the whole thing seemed to last a... didn't last quite as long as it does today. It just started later and there wasn't quite as much emphasis, I don't think, on the gift giving. Although to a kid that was pretty important!

How do you think the appearance of the downtown area has changed over the years? Obviously, a lot of stores have closed down; but, besides different store fronts, how has the downtown area changed? Well, there's less retail downtown than there was in those days. There are more offices and more real estate offices, more lawyers offices downtown than we had in those days. You don't have... like we had two five and dime stores and we had two department stores; well, we don't have any of those now. Instead of having just one of something, we had two or three of them. So, there was a wide variety and I always... you did not go to Louisville by and large to do anything other than special shopping that you might do at Christmas... to buy a special suit or something like that. That was rare. In those days, you really could find... what you needed could be found at home in Shelbyville. On Saturday, of course, downtown was full. People were on the streets up and down all the time. It's quite different now. The antique business which is so important now downtown and the antique malls and everything... that's a creature of the last ten or fifteen years. There was none of that at all. Wakefield-Scarce, when I grew up instead of being a gallery and uh, it was a, uh, a home for elderly ladies. They served dinner over there. We'd occasionally go over there after church to dinner and uh, we would all come into the main hall and they would ring a bell for the ladies to come down and have their dinner and after they were seated and taken care of then we would go in and eat, too. But, it was certainly nothing like it is today. It's sort of an antique... in those days, Mark Scarce, who was the founder of Wakefield-Scarce, had a jewelry store on Main Street called Scarce's. Shortly, you could find anything there that you wanted in terms of jewelry or silver or anything else in those days. But, it was a lot more... I think there was a lot more activity on the retail side, certainly.

It seems like there is a lot of movement in this town nowadays for the preservation of the appearance of the downtown area? Do you think that's affected in any way by the antique stores? Do you think either one supports...? I think... yeh. Essentially,

you know, when somebody comes from out of town to visit, they can go to any number of communities. They could go to Danville or Bardstown or Lexington or Georgetown to Midway or Shelbyville so you've got to make that visit interesting and you've got to...

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Okay, go ahead. People like to see the older buildings preserved. I think that makes it a bit more interesting trip and a more interesting visit for them. It also makes it nicer for the people who live here. Most of the older buildings... lots of times their use has been altered now from what it was years ago. But, that can be done and still maintain some integrity for the architecture that was there. We need to do more of that. We need to look at our own downtown in terms of visitor coming in and looking at downtown—not as a resident that is used to seeing the cracked sidewalk or that rusty sign—but look it with the eyes of somebody coming in and making a judgment about whether this is the sort of place I would like to visit for five or six hours. We've got Madison, Indiana over here to the north of us that's pretty easy to get to and some awfully nice communities that you can visit so I assume it's a pretty competitive business.

It seems like there's also trying to understand some of the history of the area. What kind of things are being done besides this project to preserve the history or learn the history? Well, we're always looking for an opportunity to teach. We have a very active—for a county our size—we have a pretty active historical society. That society has purchased a house here at Third and Washington Street and have spent some years now renovating that to preserve that and the integrity of that. We also do projects connected with trying to tell the story whether it be the dairy industry or what happened here during the Civil War just so people can appreciate the area that they're in and learn a little bit about... even learn about the cemetery and how the monuments and the families that are buried there. It's a constant on-going battle to try to tell the story that makes people appreciate the area that they're in without inflating it to anything connected with the history of the whole area. You always have to be careful about nostalgia instead of really understanding what makes this community what it is. It's just not that different from all the little communities all over the Kentucky. It isn't really to that big a degree.

Well, that's about all the questions that I have. Is there anything you'd like to add that we haven't talked about? No. I think I've... you know, that about encompasses my experiences for the town. I can't think of anything else we need to add.