

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford

Interviewee: Marshall Long

Date: date

Running Time: 40 minutes

Side One

COUNTER

- 000 INTRODUCTION
- 015 BACKGROUND: BORN 1936, PARENTS: EDITH & TYLER LONG. ALWAYS LIVED IN SHELBYVILLE. FATHER WAS A CIVIL ENGINEER, TOBACCO FARMER, MANUFACTURER OF CONCRETE BLOCKS.
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Marshall Long
Interview
August 9, 1995
Interviewed by Mark Meford
Transcription by Susan McMullan Groves

Full name: Marshall Long

When were you born? October 23, 1936

What are your parents names: Edith and Tyler Long. Both of them are deceased now.

How long have you lived in Shelbyville? I was born in Lexington but just because my mother's doctor was in Lexington. I've lived in Shelbyville all my life.

Did your parents grow up in Shelbyville? My father did and my mother was from Lexington.

What was your father's occupation? My father was a civil engineer... was in the tobacco business for a number of years and then he and my uncle started a business called... at that time was called Long and Weller... manufacturing concrete blocks. Later, it became Long Silo and Block Company where we joined the silo business and then even later than that it became Long Block and Supply Company and was run up until last year by my brother and I, Charles, and we sold out to a materials company.

Where did you take these blocks? Louisville or to farm areas? Well, we had... well, at one time, we delivered a lot of materials to the Lexington area and to Frankfort, Danville, some into Louisville. We were pretty much all over central Kentucky back in the 50's and 60's and 70's.

You mentioned your brother. How many other brothers and sisters do you have? I have two brothers: Charles Long and Robert Long. Charles is the youngest and Bob is the middle one. I know Charles still lives in Shelbyville... Both of my brothers still live in Shelbyville. All three of us live within about four or five blocks of each other.

Are you married? Yes I'm married and have two children. One of them is a senior at the University of Kentucky and is 21 years old... that's Tyler. And one is a... will be a sophomore at Indiana... that's Matthew. And then I'm raising... my wife's name is Claudette... and we're raising our step-grandchild. So, uh, her name is Hannah and she's 8 years old.

Do you imagine your boys that are in college will come back to Shelbyville to work? Do you think they will want to or will try to? Well, you always hope that your children will come back but the realities of that... probably maybe one of the two might. I like the atmosphere of a small town and I think Shelbyville is a good town and I'd like to see them come back. But I want to see them go wherever they want too.

Do you think they'd like to come back? Uh, at least one of them will, but uh, he's about to graduate from college and he's going to have to go where there's a job!

What are some of your early memories of the downtown area? Well, I guess, if you're talking about downtown Shelbyville, I guess two things stick out really. How busy they were on Saturdays which now they're not at all. We lived in town until after the war when my father discharged from the army and we went out about three miles from town and, you know, you always came to town on Saturday. We came to town on Saturday morning and went to the movie. There were two movies in Shelbyville at that time—Burlley and Chalkers—and we went to one of those two movies every Saturday... sometimes even one on Saturday night! How crowded downtown Shelbyville would be... all day Saturday and all Saturday night until ten or eleven o'clock. People lined up to get haircuts, pool halls were always busy on those days, there were people on the street and if you wanted to see anybody you went to town on Saturday. That was the way our rural community was.

Was it strictly social or did they come to trade too? Well, Shelbyville was a big trade area for Shelby, Spencer and Henry counties. At that time, Kroger and A&P were both in downtown Shelbyville and the movie was here... so people came in both socially and to do business.

Well, about what time did they start coming in on Saturday? You would see a lot of people in town by noon. The crowd kind of picked up late that night. One of my favorite places... we always visited the barber shop... the two barber shops! You always got a haircut on Saturday and one of the barber shops was the first place that televisions were sold. You know, you could be in there getting a haircut and somebody would come in and want a television or a radio... you might sit there for two hours while they sold a television set. You know, that was a gathering place at least for the men at that time. A lot of the women shopped.

How did people get in and out of town? Did they drive cars? Did you see any horses at that time? No, I came on after the horses! But, the, uh, most of them drove into town. At that time, Main Street was two way... a two way street. And, uh, you saw everybody either coming or going. And all the sixteen year or older kids where out there cruising around, too. So, there was always a lot of traffic and it was difficult to find a place to park during the day, and, uh, it was a real gathering place. And then, mainly, I think, the movies drew people in. I remember the old theater... I think they called it the Chalkers Theater or the Shelby Theater was packed on Saturday afternoon. At the time, there was segregation and the balcony was full. It was a main gathering place.

Where were these theaters located? Both of them were on Main Street and both of them were in the same block. They were in the block between, uh... Seventh and Eighth Street... no, between Sixth and Seventh Street. Both of them were on the same side of the street. Chalkers showed better movies and the other one showed the older movies. But all of them had a western on Saturday afternoon! You had two westerns and a serial

on Saturday afternoon. You know, your mother would give you a quarter and it cost 15 cents to get in the movie and nickel for a coke and nickel for popcorn and you could... they could get rid of you for half the day! They knew where you were going to be!

What other areas of the downtown were segregated either just by social segregation or by forced segregation like the movie theater where the blacks had to sit in the balcony? Well, you know, like... I think that really came along later. At that time in the 50's... late 40's early 50's... I don't remember there being a social cast system at all in Shelbyville. There may have been but I didn't recognize it. You went downtown, you saw everybody! My father's business was down at the foot of Third Street and, you know, which was in the downtown area and there were a lot of businesses that were down there at that time. A whole host of great characters that I grew up with... they might not all be socially accepted today but they were colorful people like every small town has! From bootleggers to a whole strand of different people! But they were really wonderful people... great characters! And honest and everything else!

Well, was Shelby County dry? Shelby County was dry at that time. I think in the early 50's and late 40's they had two package stores up town. You couldn't sell liquor but you could buy beer at Dewey's pool room... I think that's about the only place that sold it. Dewey's son was my father-in-law so that male only pool room stayed open until about six or seven years ago and, uh, during the time it was open they said only three women ever went in there: my wife, my mother-in-law and a television reporter from Louisville. You know, it was a male-only and women didn't go in there!

Did women just not go in there or was there a sign on the door or what? No, there wasn't a sign on the door it was just known that you didn't go in there. He made the best chili and rolled oysters! Whenever you went in there, your family could always tell that you'd been in there because it didn't have the best ventilation system in the world and you could sort of smell it on you, of course, after you left!

Were there any holiday events... well, you wouldn't remember much in the 30's... during the war time? During the war time... all I remember during the war time was there weren't too many automobiles on the street because of the gas ration. I was seven or eight years old and I don't remember a lot about it and I remembered that we had practice... of blackouts, and, uh, if you had a light on, you had to draw every curtain. We did that all during the war. My father was in north Africa in the early part of the war... in England and then north Africa and then he went to Okinawa in the later part of the war so he was gone the entire war practically... except for about a year or so when we lived in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. We went out there to live with them. But, we had... the neighborhoods were close knit and there were a lot of wartime activities, uh... Neil Hackworth that later followed me in the Mayors chair in 1973, his grandmother had a group called the Wacky Club... which was all the young kids in that neighborhood and we marched in parades and did all that thing, you know. And I guess the big social events at that time... we had the Tobacco Festival which was a big event.

What time of year was that held? That was in the fall. You always had a high school football game and a big dance... a street dance. The town fortunately closed because tobacco was one of the mainstays... a lot bigger than it is now. And, uh, it was important that we had a good tobacco crop.

During the war, was much tobacco produced? Yeh, they kept doing tobacco cause, you know, the troops... most everybody smoked and they kept it up.

What kind of people... I guess a lot of the people who would be farming it were off in the war... what kind of changes were there in people cutting and setting...? I don't really remember that as well cause I was pretty young then. One time we had German prisoners of war in here and they had a camp out on the east end of town and I do barely remember that. They helped harvest the tobacco and helped farm. You got deferment in many cases if you farmed... in many cases you didn't. There were still many people here and I'm sure there was a tremendous labor problem. We didn't move the farm until after the war so I don't know as much about what happened during the wartime.

Well, uh, what changes were going on in the Shelbyville downtown area during the 50's? Well, in the 50's, you still had a pretty viable downtown area. I mean, the stores were all there... you had the five and ten cent store, the appliance stores and clothing stores and everything... I guess the big change that I've seen in the past thirty years... you know, first, we had the shopping center... the shopping center opened and then A&P and Kroger moved out of the middle of town and uh, stores began to close. Then when Wal-Mart came to town, that closed just about the rest of the downtown area... as far as strictly retail. Then you had coming in behind those were antique shops, restaurants and banks and those people.

When did Wal-Mart come and open up? Wal-Mart must have come here in the early 80's.

But in the 50's it was still... was it still busy on Saturdays like it was? It was big on Fridays and Saturdays. Friday at noon on it was crowded and you went downtown, at that time, for everything.

Was the movie theater still open in the 50's? The movie theater was open until about... I'm guessing... the early 50's... it was before... after I... before I went to college. So, the Chalkers, which was the nicest theater burned and was out of business. That was just right after the war maybe in the later part of the war years and they rebuilt it. I remember... and I'm guessing my memory was right... the day the theater burned was on a Saturday and everyone was in town and there was a big crowd. If I remember right, the movie was the "Blazing Trail" with the Durango Kid was on that Saturday when the movie burned. I may have dreamed that somewhere but as I remember that was the movie. But Burley stayed open for another few years and it closed before 1950 but

Chalkers stayed open then into the 50's. And then the movies closed and it got easier to go to Louisville. We've never had a movie here since, I don't believe!

Did you go away to school? Yeh, I went to Centre College in 1955 and I graduated... I didn't graduate from school here in Shelby County... I went to the Virginia Episcopal school in '53 and '54 and graduated from there in '55 and then went to Centre College.

Well, I don't guess you were around much, but do you know much about the end to segregation here in Shelbyville around the downtown? Yeh, I remember it. I think what ended segregation here in Shelbyville more than anything was a fellow named Dennis Morton, who became a half back for the local high school football team. He was a tremendous athlete and a tremendous individual... still lives here... still a very important part of this community. I think that first time they gave Dennis... pretty soon after the first time they gave Dennis... I think segregation had ended just a little bit before that but this was football town... a basketball town... and he was a great athlete and a good person and he, um, I think, he did more as any individual to break the segregation barrier. He later became president of one of the NAACP and was, uh, at the forefront of doing some things here in the community. I guess all small towns have the vestige segregation even today, but, uh, over the years it worked pretty well for Shelbyville. I remember when they integrated the pool... there was some muttering and carrying on for awhile but we all did some swimming in the creek together for years and it didn't bother us then and it didn't bother us when they opened the pool... to everyone. I think the segregation battles that were fought in Kentucky and throughout the south never got to that point here. That doesn't mean everything was perfect, but, uh, by and large I think it worked pretty well.

What kind of changes have there been in transportation in the downtown area and coming to the downtown area? Well, of course, when they changed the highway from one way Main Street to two ways that made a big difference.

What year was that...about? I'm gonna say 1950. That's a guess. I always remember two or three days after they changed it, why, one of the local Realtors here, a fellow named Lewis Mathis... his son is an attorney here now, picked us up to go to a Kentucky ball game and he went the wrong way on a one-way street and we kept saying, "Mr. Mathis, you're going the wrong way!" and he said, "Well, hell, if they stop me I'll tell them I'm from Finchville!" He went right on like that and uh, but, uh, at that time the road stopped about Tenth Street and then they continued it on and joined it on what is now the fairgrounds. That changed things considerably. When I was a... during the war, one of my remembrances of the war was sitting on Main Street and watching them tear up the rails from the old inner urban that went from Louisville to Shelbyville. Now the inner urban was gone, I don't even remember it but I've heard my Dad talk about riding it to school because he lived about three miles out from Shelbyville. But, I remember them taking the rails up. I remember as a kid sitting there on Walnut Street... or not on Walnut Street but on Adair Avenue when they... when the workers were pulling up that steel and using it in the war. So, I often we might have been well if we had just left that thing and had the inner urban today. It would be a heck of a tourist attraction today! But,

uh, the track had changed and then when interstate 64 was built, it really changed and most of the heavy traffic... the big trucks and everything moved out of town. Which made the traffic operate much better in town but it took a lot of business, I suppose.

Did any businesses shut down because of I-64 or not directly...? I don't think directly but we began to see the service stations close up to some extent... the chains, you know, they became convenience stores rather than service stations. I would say 64 has been a blessing for Shelbyville. It let us open up industrial parks out near I-64 and changed, sort of, the economy of Shelbyville from totally agriculture to a mix of agriculture and manufacturing. So, 64 was good to Shelbyville. We had a fellow by the name of Mack Walters at that time who was in the State Senate and I believe involved in politics, he and Mr. Howard Pearce were instrumental in getting a number of exits for Shelby County. Shelby County has four exits off of I-64... two in Shelbyville. That made a big difference.

What influence has the railroad had in Shelbyville? Well, the... you know, in the '50's we did away with the passenger... I guess, in the late '50's, the passenger depots closed. I used to ride the George Washington to Lynchburg, Virginia. I would ride the George Washington from the L & N Station in Shelbyville and ride it into Virginia and then change trains in Virginia and ride on into Lynchburg. It would... the railroad station was a busy place. The passenger trains were later phased out. This, on the north... on the south end of town was the Southern Railroad and on the north end of town was the L & N. They both sent passenger trains through here. It's been a real decrease in the downtown train activity. The L & N Station has moved a couple of blocks... turned into an antique type store. The old southern station is still here but it's not used.

Where is that now? Across the street here at the foot of Fourth Street. And, uh, so we used to ride the train places.

Were these passenger trains with seats or sleepers or did they have...? They had... the George Washington was... I don't know where it started but it ran from Louisville to Washington, D.C. and it had pull cars on it... club car and then it had seats so you could go either way. It was a sort of a luxurious way to travel. But that's another era and it's gone now.

Do you remember how much it cost to get to Virginia? I seem to remember that it was like... if you just rode in the regular car... it was less than fifty dollars. It wasn't very much. If you took the Pullman you paid, of course, another seventy or eighty dollars.

You've already talked a little bit about some of the businesses downtown, uh, the banks and the antique stores, what other kind of changes have gone in the businesses in the downtown area? Well, we used to have two, maybe three, five and ten cent... what they called five and dime stores... they're gone. They've been gone for years. Uh, you still have some retail stores downtown. Some have been there a long time... Biagi's, for example, has been there for years and years and years. The,

uh... Tracy's, which is another appliance, furniture store has been there many, many years. What really hurt downtown, I think, was the closing of Lawson's Department Stores. Within a short time, Lincoln's, Lerman's and Lawson's... all on the same side of the street up town closed and that sort of took the retail... took the wind out of the retail sails. Lawson's was a locally owned department store. When they closed, it really changed the whole....

When did they close? Oh, they didn't close until the '70's... maybe early '80's.

Did they just go out of business or what? Uh, Jack Lawson died and they ran it a few years after that. But, I'm sure that business changed just like my business did when I sold. Big marketers for down here at Hurstbourne Lane or the Louisville area... people didn't buy... didn't feel obligated to buy locally anymore.

Well, when did people start going to other towns like Louisville and Frankfort? Have they always gone there at least for Christmas or something like that? Yeh. Mostly Louisville in the 1970's. Used to be, when I was a kid, a trip to Louisville you did about once a month and you went to Levi's Brothers downtown to get clothes and that was about it. You'd be gone the whole day. Now you can be in any of the main shopping areas in Louisville in twenty minutes. So, that changed! That certainly hurts small towns. There have been lots of efforts to keep people shopping here but what's happened now is we don't really have... very few clothing stores now... only one men's clothing store here now where there was four or five! Uh, there again, I think that's the Wal-Marts the K-Marts... the chains....

How did the appearance of the downtown change aside from what you mentioned earlier...the one way streets...what other changes happened? When I was a kid, the downtown was pretty stark... there was no trees on the street. The trees were put in when I was mayor of Shelbyville and we went out and helped Mark Scearce of Wakefield-Scearce Galleries, uh, we went out and got people to donate seventy-five or a hundred dollars for trees and we put it in with the street department. Now those trees are probably going to be removed as Shelbyville puts in the new sidewalks... Streetscape... which are badly needed... and a different type of tree put in there. But, we went out... Mark Scearce and I went out and solicited money from people to put trees out. And, you know, uh, at that time, it was on street parking... which, of course, it is now... and we had very few parking lots and people would just park everywhere and anywhere! Now that's changed. We took the parking meters out during the time I was mayor.

What was your term? I was elected in '73 and served to '81. I served two terms. We took the parking meters out at that time. A lot of controversy about that... people didn't want them taken out and most, I think, thought they ought to come out and then the store owners that wanted them out wanted them back because people were parking and staying all day. So, I remember that was one of the first big battles when I was mayor. But that sort of died down in a few years. I think that another thing was Wakefield-Scearce Galleries... when they opened... gosh, I don't know when that was... early '60's... that

made a tremendous boom for tourism. That sort of changed the downtown from closed buildings with nobody in them to antique malls and crafts and so on. So the community just changed like unfortunately every community I've been in Kentucky... LaGrange or Danville or some of those places... they've all sort of taken the same path.

What does Wakefield-Scarce carry? Oh, they're... antiques. Very, very nice antiques. One of the top antique galleries in the country, I suppose. Mark Scarce, who sort of the founding father... along with Mr. Wakefield, had a lot of vision to take that old girl's school, which is what that was, and change it into what's over there now. And, uh, his death was a tremendous loss to the town because he had a lot of vision of what his business ought to be in Shelbyville.

What are some of the changes that occurred while you were mayor? Well, we, uh, I think the biggest change... the one that has lasted longer than anything else was I had appointed three people to the Water Commission, which was virtually broke at that time and had not extended a water or sewer line at that time for a number of years. I appointed Clayton Baker, who is now dead and Shug Hickman is a local pharmacist and Tommy Hower is a local businessman. They really grabbed hold of the reins along with Bill Stout, the manager, and expanded the water system and put us on firm financial basis and that's continued even today. That, I think, was probably the best thing we did. We built streets and did some annexation. Annexation always comes hard on a small town but we did some of that. We redid the local swimming pool which I thought was badly needed. Now it probably needs redoing again... you know, they don't last very long. But we had a good council and we did, I think, a lot of things. We got a professional fire department and professional police department. Hired the first woman policeman who know is the City Clerk... Bobbie Brenner. When Bobbie was hired, I remember telling her, "Now Bobbie, we've got some joints in town and you're going to be... they're gonna try you!" I worried about here as a lady policeman. I worried until one night Bobbie went into one of the local bars and somebody gave her some mouth and she went out to the car and called for back-up but by the time back-up got there, she had them both on the floor handcuffed. So, I wasn't worried about her after that! I figured she could handle herself pretty well! I think during my time there was a lot of industrial expansion as well. We brought in some industry and, as I say, changed it from primarily agriculture to sort of a mix. I think it's been good for Shelbyville. We've got both industry and agriculture... we're not recession proof but we certainly are better than some communities.

When did agriculture start to lose hold as a predominant employer? Basically in the '70's.

Did the need for tobacco production drop off or...? Tobacco has held itself pretty steady over the years. What happened, I think, is farmers... you began to see the tenant farmer moving off and uh, farmers having to run the farms themselves. It became pretty obvious that all of our young people were moving away from town... not staying... because there were no jobs. And, uh, there were some people... Everett Hall, a

local funeral director who was the father of one of our future governors at that time, Martha Layne Collins... Everett Hall and my dad and Howard Pearce and four or five other business people realized that we needed to do something and they formed the first industrial foundation. One of the things they did first was Guist Creek Lake... which became our water supply. You can't have industry without water. But those people had great vision about what could happen and took a lot of criticism at that time. But they did it and since then we've had an adequate water supply, industry has grown and I think it justified what they did. Industrial development at that time... I came on the Industrial Development Board about a year after I got out of college... after I was back here. I came home, I think, in 1960... along in there. We've continued, you know, we've brought in Budd Corporation... which Martha Layne Collins had a lot to do with. All the other industry that is here... there was always sort of that controversy about bringing industry in to the community. Another thing that really helped the community was the schools were consolidated. That was in the '60's... I can't remember exactly. There was a Shelbyville system and a Shelby County system and there was always a source of conflict between the city and the county and, uh, once they were consolidated a lot of that went away. I think we had an era in there where we had county judges and mayors that got along a lot better than they had in the years past. They worked together and that continues today. That's probably the... I would like to think that when I was mayor that that was probably one of the highlights that we did... worked very closely with the county and had a good relationship with the county and I hope, one of things we did at that time... not anything that I did particularly, I just came along at the right time... was the judge then realized that we were one community and I thought that... if it was anything, we got away from those bad feelings.

-----END OF SIDE A. FLIP TAPE-----

Why don't you tell me how tobacco has effected the community over in the changes over the years? Well, tobacco has always been the cash cow for Shelby County... 20 million dollars... something like that... tobacco market here. In my early years of business here, a lot of people didn't pay their bills till they sold their tobacco. They buy stuff from you all year and then they'd come in when they sold their tobacco and pay their bills. It had a lot to do with the growth of development in the county. There was fortunes made in tobacco, there was farms bought at the tobacco sales... when the tobacco market opened up it was the biggest day of the year in Shelbyville. The banks and all the merchants knew they were going to get paid for the last year. They knew people were going to come in and buy trucks and cars and whatever... televisions. While it's not as big now as it was then in the whole scheme of our economy, it's still a big day when the tobacco market opens. More people in town... you see people that you don't see everyday. So, it's had a strong hold on not only Shelby County but on all of central Kentucky. The fight that it's in now over health and all that will have a significant effect on our economy in the years to come. I think it's chased some people out... the fact that tobacco is changing has chased some people out of farming because they don't see a

future. There are a lot of good farmers left that do see a future in farming but we've lost quite a bit. I think you've seen because dairy prices have gotten so bad over the last couple of years... this was at one time the biggest dairy producing county in the state. But, you've got a lot of people doing a lot of different things in farming... innovative farmers out there trying to find different products to grow and sell... all the way from trees and bushes to vegetables and so forth. I think farming is always going to have a strong hold on this community.

How far away do you think the tobacco markets draw farmers? Oh, they draw farmers from all over the state of Kentucky. Certainly from Shelby, Spencer, Henry, Anderson... you know, the closest market to us, I guess, is Carrolton. So, they draw a lot of people in. Our warehouses are still very busy. There not as many warehouses as there were when I was a child but there's still a lot of them. You don't have redriers. My father was in the tobacco redrying business where he dried the tobacco and then shipped it out. He sold out his interest in that in the '50's... early '50's, I think. I think there was another redrier here at the time. A lot of that tobacco was shipped out of here by rail but now it's practically all moved by trucks. They're in and out a lot quicker than they used to be. You used to see the trucks all over town but you don't see that as much anymore. Trucks are bigger now, I guess, and can haul more at a time.

Do you think there's a future in tobacco? Oh, I think there's a future in tobacco. All those people smoke... you know, someday you hope they'll find another use for tobacco but I don't know if that will ever be... I don't know if they'll ever find another use for it as profitable as smoking. But as long as people smoke and it's of the quality of the tobacco that they grow here I think there will be a market. It just won't be as central a piece of the economy as it used to be at one time.

What do you think makes Shelbyville unique? I think that like most small towns it's unique because... what do they say about small towns? They know when you're born and they care when you die. That's probably true in Shelbyville although that too changes because we've got to go home and watch television at night instead of socializing. But, the unique people with unique characters in this community... like every small community has.... I think it's a caring community... people care about other people. It's had, I think, reasonable race relations over the years. They could be better but they could've been a whole lot worse. The fact that people like to live in a small town that, too, is changing. You don't know all the people. When you go play golf or go to the country club or go out you don't recognize all the people like you used to. I think the new people that have moved into our community have brought a lot to our community too. There's a trade off there, I suppose. The agricultural economy and the fact that we are one of the few cities in Kentucky who made a commitment to go after manufacturing years ago and brought them in here is another thing that makes us unique. I think we did right! We built up our infrastructure when we brought them in and we have water and sewers and all those things. I think the cooperation that has occurred with the county and the county government and city governments in the county have been lovely. That's a good relationship that you don't have in many towns. People get along!

Do you think people in town have a sense of the history of Shelby County and Shelbyville? Yeh, I think they do. You know, we've got a local historical society that's done a pretty good job of keeping that in the forefront... published stuff and they have meetings and so forth where they bring people in and talk about areas in Kentucky and in Shelby County. And, uh, I think that people have a pretty strong sense of history here for a lot of reasons. Many of the old families are still here, you know, and haven't moved away.

Is there anything you'd like to add? No, I just appreciate the opportunity to do this.

—END OF INTERVIEW—