

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford

Date: September 5, 1995

Interviewee: Betty B. Matthews

Running Time: 22 minutes

Side One

COUNTER

000

INTRODUCTION

015

BORN OCTOBER 1922. GREW UP IN ATLANTA. MOVED TO
SHELBYVILLE IN 1953. HUSBAND FROM SHELBYVILLE.

025

EARLY MEMORIES OF SHELBYVILLE (1950s).

065

DOWNTOWN TRADING CENTERS.

085

SATURDAY IN SHELBYVILLE.

100

ANTIQUE MALLS.

120

CHANGES IN MAIN STREET'S APPEARANCE.

172

MS. HARRIET POINTER.

200

EXPANDING DOWNTOWN.

220

OUTSTANDING MAYORS: MARSHALL LONG.

230

SEGREGATION.

240

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.

340

SHELBYVILLE PARKS.

365

END.

Betty Matthews
Shelbyville Main Street
Oral History Project
Interview conducted by
Mark Meford
September 5, 1995

Betty Matthews
Shelbyville Main Street
Oral History Project
Interview conducted by Mark Meford
September 5, 1995

Meford: Why don't you start by telling me your full name?

Matthews: Betty Jean Bunt~~on~~ Matthews

Meford: When were you born?

Matthews: October 1922.

Meford: Did you grow up in this area?

Matthews: No

Meford: Where did you grow up at?

Matthews: I spent most of my life in Atlanta, GA. I was born in Pennsylvania and we moved to Georgia when I was ten and I lived there until I married.

Meford: When did you move to Shelbyville?

Matthews: Permanently, 1953.

Meford: You lived here a year before that?

Matthews: Yes, 1950.

Meford: What drew you to Shelbyville?

Matthews: My husband is from Shelbyville.

Meford: Is that right? What kind of work is he involved in?

Matthews: He is a retired attorney.

Meford: When you moved here, in the early 50's what are some of your memories about the Main Street and downtown area? What were some of your early impressions?

Matthews: It was a very little town. Probably two blocks. I think one thing that was interesting was "Dewy's Pool Room". That was in the block between 5th and 6th Street and I used to take a pan up there on Saturday or Sunday nights (they made the best chili). You just took your own pan up there, got some chili and took the pan home and warmed it up. It was sort of a congregation meeting place. They had food and pool tables. A typical little town. I think my husband grew up shooting pool in the pool rooms on Main Street.

Meford: Where women allowed to play pool?

Matthews: I remember women being in there. I had an uncomfortable feeling going in the pool room, the tables were in the back but the counter was in the front and we knew the man who ran it--^{Veola}Tudy Harden. I got my supper and left.

Meford: What do you think a pot of chili would cost from Dewy's?

Matthews: I don't know.....\$2.00 maybe.....not much. That was before Burger Queen and Dairy Vill and all those places.

Meford: Do you think the downtown area served as a social center?

Matthews: Definitely. The movie was still on there.....we had the movies. We lived on the corner of 8th and Main, upstairs in an apartment over Dr. ^{Kline's} office. That was owned by the Shannon's. They lived next door and had the Funeral Home and kept a lot of coffins in the back building. We lived almost downtown....just right on the edge.

Meford: Did you need a car to take care of your business?

Matthews: I didn't have a car. Well.....we had one car, my husband rode the bus to Frankfort. He worked in Frankfort and I had the car. He'd just get on the bus in front of the apartment. Main Street was 2-way then, so he just got on a bus and rode to Frankfort and then came back.

Meford: Do you have any idea how much it cost to get to Frankfort?

Matthews: I'm sure it was about a quarter or something.....I don't know. We paid \$40.00 a month rent to Dr. ^{Chase} ~~Chase~~. We took milk from Byrd's Dairy, they delivered right to your door and it was like \$2.00 per month. I think my husband was probably making \$280.00 per month back in 1945. We were spending a little over \$100.00 for rent, food, utilities and expenses.

Meford: Did a lot of people live in Shelbyville and work else where? Like your husband?

Matthews: No, I think most of our friends owned their own business here. Farmers, Coke-A-Cola, and mill people.

Meford: Was most of the trading done in the downtown area?

Matthews: That was the only place. Lawsons Department Store, Lincoln's, Lermans, A&P was downtown, Kroger was downtown, barber shops.

Meford: Did you buy anything on credit at the grocery store or Lawsons?

Matthews: No.

Meford: Was it common practice, to your knowledge, for anyone to do that?

Matthews: Well you probably charged at Lawson's but you paid your bill at the end of the month. Nobody bought on credit.

Meford: More of a convenience credit that credit sake.

Matthews: Well it wouldn't be like a mining town where you ran up bills at the company store and it came out of your pay check every week.

Meford: What were some of the other social events. You mentioned the movies and the pool room. Was Saturday a big day in the downtown area socially?

Matthews: I think so. Probably a lot of the people in the county came in on Saturday's and shopped. Well you could do grocery shopping and get your hair cut and they had the clothing stores. Van's 5 and 10 had anything you'd want there. There was a hardware store there too....Baker and Casper Hardware Store. Clyde Hall had sort of a hardware store.

Meford: Do you think the agriculture influence in Shelbyville was the reason Saturday was such a big day? Maybe the farmers didn't have time to come in during the week?

Matthews: Yes.....yes. And there was no Sunday shopping.....you know.....the blue laws. You just wouldn't think of going. There was no place open on Sunday and there were no shopping malls.

Meford: When did it start to change? There are a lot of businesses open on Sunday now.

Matthews: I think it started to change with the shopping malls.....when they came and opened. Plus families where the wife was working and the only time they had to shop was on the weekends. When I was here, not many wives worked, unless you really had to. It was different, you stayed home.

Meford: When did the shopping centers start to open?

Matthews: I don't know. Twenty years ago.....I'm not sure.

Meford: Do you think it's had a big effect on the downtown area?

Matthews: Definitely! I think not only Shelbyville but all little towns. I think Shelbyville has been very fortunate, mainly because of Wakefield-Searce ~~Scarce~~ Gallery and that's the satellite whereby all these stores that have closed now have antique malls in them. My friends from Louisville tell me they come up here and shop the antique malls, eat and that's what brings people in. Something different.

Meford: Well you mentioned people from Louisville, do you think the antique business is to a large part, drawing from outside Shelbyville?

Matthews: Very much so.

Meford: When did Wakefield-Searce Scarce open? Roughly?

Matthews: After the war. I don't know when. Probably in the 50's.

Meford: Did the other antique stores open soon after that.

Matthews: No.....No.....Lawson's has been closed, what.....ten years? My how time flies. I would say within ten years.....maybe more.....maybe not that long.

Meford: Well, beside the different store fronts, how has the appearance of the downtown changed?

Matthews: I think Shelbyville is very attractive. Everybody has kept up their store fronts (with one or two exceptions, like some of those Masonic fronts that are on say, Biagi's). The trend now is to go back to the way the town was in 1880's or 1890's. This is true of many small towns like Danville, Harrodsburg, Lawrenceburg and what have you., Instead of trying to modernize, towns are trying to restore the ambience of what they were when they were built and I think that adds to the charm of the town. I think Shelbyville, when you just stand in the street and look across the street up at the buildings, they are very interesting. Back then, 40 years ago, people lived downtown over the buildings. There were apartments on the second floor. You'll see the buildings and then you'll see this little door with a stairway going up where there were apartments.

Meford: Does anyone live downtown now?

Matthews: I don't know. I was wondering that the other day when I went through and look up at some of the buildings. I live on Main Street in what's called the Hartford Addition and Mr. Hartford had a store downtown and it has Hartford Building on the top of it. They lived over the building. His daughter lived there probably until she died. Miss Hartford.....one was Elizabeth and I forget the other one's name. An interesting story, I don't know if anybody has told you this or not but you know Science Hill School for Girls was there on Washington Street. A very upstanding famous school. The girls were brought up in a very kind of strict atmosphere then as most people were. Their big excitement was walking up 6th Street, the little connecting street to Main Street, and then they would go down and Mr. Hartford had what was then called a saloon with swinging doors. Several of the people have told me that the most wicked thing they could do would be to look under the swinging doors to see who was in the saloon playing pool or eating. Vincent Biagi can tell you a lot. His father had a tire store there on 6th Street and moved around to Main and I think his building may be the Hartford Building, I'm not sure. There were a lot of restaurants there, Hollenbacks Drug Store, it was the center of town. Mrs. Hartford apparently aspired to better things than being the wife of a saloon keeper. She had her husband buy property up in the west end of town from the Wilson's and I don't know how many acres, quite a few acres and he subdivided the lots on Main Street into five lots and built houses along there, which we live in, from Plainview up to Ashland Ave.

and back is called the Hartford Addition. She elevated herself from the saloon keepers wife to a property owner. That's an interesting little tid-bit.

Meford: Are there any other local stories that you've been thing about?

Matthews: Right down the hill from me, down in the lower part, where Beechwood comes in, used to be a pond. Ms. Harriet Pointer who lived up into her 80's or 90's, told me that when she was a young girl, she had a gentleman caller, she called him, and they walked out to ice skate on this pond. Your talking from 6th Street there on Washington out to the 1400 Block, so your talking about 7 blocks she walked out to go ice skating. The gentleman caller fell through the ice and the closest house then was (our houses were not built then) the Willson house upon the hill. So they walked up to Professor Willson's house and Professor Willson (who only dressed in black) and Mrs. Willson were very nice. She took them in and took the young man's wet cloths off and dried them out. She gave him one of Professor Willson's suits to wear to get back. This is the property we have now, the Willson property (Willson with two L's) and after they fixed them all up, they walked back to Science Hill where she lived. Her mother was so upset, she didn't know what had happened to little Harriet, she had been gone so long. That was ice skating there and then it became a filling station and now it's a Dr.'s office. So it's hard to visualize the town ended kind of at the railroad tracks on 11th Street.

Meford: I guess even though the architecture is a lot the same as it used to be, there are still a lot of changes?

Matthews: A lot of those old houses, the old Hall House, which then became the Hanna House, the Jackson House, and the Simmions live in it now, that was a farm house. All that land from there back to the railroad track and almost up to the fairgrounds was where the Willson's lived. The old house Pat Burroughs lives in, that was a farm house. The Randolph House was the farm house. They owned all the land from the railroad track on 11th Street, you know, up to probably where the Hall's lived. It was all farm land.

Meford: The downtown area kinda pushed the farm further away.

Matthews: Yes. The oldest part of town would be down here along Clear Creek. Town did go out that way some. But all of your old homes (to many of them have been torn down now) all your fine old homes were on Main Street from the creek up to about 3rd or 4th Street. Eventually they were torn down for A&P's and what have you. Then the town moved west, there was more room out that way.

Meford: What kind of changes have there been in public services since you've been here? Post Office? Banking?

Matthews: I think they stay about the same.

Meford: Do you know you're mailman by name?

Matthews: Oh yes. They look after you.

Meford: Are there any Mayors that stand out in your mind?

Matthews: Well I think we've had some good ones. Marshall Long was an excellent mayor before he went to Frankfort.

Meford: He's the State Representative now?

Matthews: Yes. Dr. Porter, we've had good mayors. The nice thing in a little town, everybody kinda knows you.

Meford: We talked a little bit earlier about how we didn't know if women played pool at Dewy's or not. Were there any other things that were shunned by one gender or other? Any kind of segregation either forced or social?

Matthews: I can't think of any off hand.

Meford: We also talked a little bit about the movement to rebuilt downtown to look like it used to. Is there any historical preservation in Shelbyville?

Matthews: I think quite a bit. One reason for that is parking. It is very hard to park on Main Street. That was before they opened up the back of some of these buildings and provided parking. Now.....what was the question?

Meford: The historical preservation.

Matthews: Oh yes, the preservation thing. I think we've done a lot. About 1985 we researched all the buildings along Main Street and back there to get them on the national register. I think everybody is conscientious now in fixing the buildings up and when they have added on. When Farmers and Traders added on and expanded they did it very much in keeping with what was already there.

Meford: Do they just replace things identically or do they.....

Matthews: Well you can't. A lot of things you simply can't replace. You do the best you can to make it blend. It's a pretty town a very pretty town. I think one good thing with the Historic District Commission, is that they are trying to keep the integrity of the town. This should have happened about twenty years before. One thing.....I'm in favor of shopping malls even though they take business from downtown. If they had started sooner we would still have some of these beautiful homes in the east end of town.

Because of parking (you couldn't park between 5th and 6th) they came down to Second Street and tore down 3 beautiful houses. Build an A&P and a parking lot. That's what happened.

Meford: Do you think most of the community is in favor of preservation?

Matthews: I think so. I hear some adverse comments when somebody tries to put a new roof on and it isn't quite up to standards. Or somebody wants to enclose a porch. They can carry some things to an extreme.

Meford: Besides the preservation, do you think there is a general interest in the community for the history of Shelbyville and Shelby County?

Matthews: Yes, I think so. We have good attendance at our Historical Society meetings.

Meford: What kind of things does the Historical Society do?

Matthews: Our big project was behind the Casey house on Washington Street.....restoring it which we hope to eventually have a museum in there, if we ever get funded....permanent funding to keep it in operation. We'd need to hire someone to stay in there. I'm amazed too, I work a lot with the library and court house during Genealogical work and people come from all over. Somebody came from Indianapolis with ^{their} ~~there~~ daughter and stayed for three days at the Wallace House Bed and Breakfast. A man came from Missouri and ^{he} ~~they~~ stayed out at the motel. People are coming in here, they are staying at our motels and bed and breakfasts, they are eating here and they are looking up their Shelby County ancestors, those here during the 1800's. It's a big thing now but you have to get older, you have to get older to kinda think about the past and then you were sorry you didn't know enough to ask your grandmother. So these people are now coming in and trying to find out why their ancestors left Shelby County.

Meford: So do you think the antique malls is one of the reasons for keeping the downtown looking as it always has?

Matthews: Very much so.

Meford: Is it kind of a general feeling in the community, a historical feeling?

Matthews: Yes

Meford: What do you think makes Shelbyville unique?

Matthews: Well probably several things. Mainly it's an attraction for people who like to come and shop. Fine antiques or just plain antiques that you have at your mall. They have good restaurants. That's the drawing card for people out of town. Probably Lee McClain brings a lot of people in, they come to buy cloths.

Meford: The clothing factory.....do they sell cloths there as well?

Matthews: Yes.

Meford: Are there any other historic memories or stories that you have in your head or that you've been thinking about? Anything you've been wanting to share?

Matthews: Well, off hand I can't think of any. I ^{used to} ~~met~~ to write some notes down.

One thing you don't have in Shelbyville is the "cruising". I don't know how old you are but it used to be that you would cruise from one end of town at the hamburger place to the other end of town to that hamburger place and see who is out and about. I don't think Shelbyville has that or maybe I'm just to old to realize it now.

I think one of the great things we have is the Clear Creek Park that the Burch's gave. That is great. There are ball parks out there, there is a golf course, there is a picnic shelter which people use (we used it for the Historical Society Picnic). There are playgrounds. I think they are getting ready to build an Olympic size pool out there. It is a great thing for this town to have a big public-accessibly recreation facility.

Meford: Has there ever been any place else where people could do that in Shelbyville?

Matthews: Not to my knowledge. They had a little park down on 3rd Street with tennis courts and basketball goals. It didn't last to long. There was another one back on Lyndon but it's more for the people that live around there in that area. Probably the Weissinger Hills Golf Course out there, it's a public golf course and brings people in.

Meford: Are there a lot of new people in Shelbyville?

Matthews: I'm sure there are. When you don't have children in school you don't know all the new people that come in. There's bound to be with all the building that's going on,

Meford: That's all the questions I have. Is there anything you'd like to add? Is there anything you wanted me to ask you that I didn't?

Matthews: I can't think of anything.