

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford

Interviewee: Clarence Miller

Date:

Running Time: 38 minutes

Side One

COUNTER

- 000 INTRODUCTION
- 010 BACKGROUND: BORN 1912. MOVED TO SHELBYVILLE IN 1925.
- 030 GRADUATED FROM SHELBYVILLE HIGH SCHOOL.
- 040 WORKED WITH AAA OFFICE.
- 050 TOOK OVER THE FAMILY FARM.
- 058 AIREAL PHOTOGRAPHY FOR AGRICULTURE.
- 069 1952: HEAD OF TOBACCO DIVISION IN EISENHOWER'S DEPT OF AGRICULTURE.
- 090 1957: ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE IN CHARGE OF FOREIGN AGRICULTURAL SERVICE.
- 114 EARLY MEMORIES OF SHELBYVILLE.
- 140 WORKING ON THE TOBACCO MARKET AS A TEENAGER.
- 150 TOBACCO REDRYERS.
- 180 GROCERY AND HARDWARE STORES.
- 191 LAWSON'S, RUBEN'S, ROTHCHILD & SON.
- 213 BANKS IN SHELBYVILLE.

- 227 DRUG STORES, CONFECTIONERIES.
* 248 RAILROADS IN SHELBYVILLE.
326 BIGGEST CHANGES IN TRANSPORTATION.
360 DAIRY FARMS DECLINING IN SHELBYVILLE.
400 CHANGES IN SHELBYVILLE.
520 RELIGION: BAPTIST.

Side Two

- 010 RELIGION
033 AGRICULTURE IN SHELBY COUNTY: WHEAT, CATTLE, HOGS, SHEEP.
125 CONCLUSION.

An interview with
CLARENCE MILLER

Interviewed by Mark Mefford on

Transcribed by Susan McMullan Groves on September 28, 1997

What is your name? My ^{name} Clarence Miller. I was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1912. My father had a lifetime career in the Bureau of Internal Revenue as a store keeper ---- in the whiskey distilleries and then later as deputy collector in the Internal Revenue and then his latter years he spent as probation administrator for the state of Kentucky. We moved about all over the eastern part of the United States prior to settling here in Shelbyville in 1925 and bought the farm just south of town. My father commuted from here into Louisville for about three years and then he retired in 1927 and then came back again in the service and served in Chicago and Detroit and Cleveland and other cities in the same capacity until prohibition was repealed and he retired in 1933. I graduated from Shelbyville High School and attended Western Kentucky University. I also attended the University of Kentucky law school and did not finish either pre-law or law in order to attain a degree. I was employed in the old AAA program in the United States Department of Agriculture in the county agents office here in Shelbyville. We were determining acreage compliances with the allotments for tobacco in order for people to obtain price support. Then I was other related farm programs and stayed in that capacity until about 1941, at which time, I assumed full operation of the farm. Of course, this was the time of war and, uh, before I had come back to the farm they called and said I was going to serve in the military I had been operating the farm since 1930 when my father went to Florida in 1932. It became very apparent that the farm programs were, at that time, sort of phasing out and, of course, the need for food and the agricultural production was great so I assumed full time responsibility of the farm but I maintained my association with farm organizations. I became...working in the county agents office and, uh, and I said, I was in charge of compliance supervision...we used aerial photography for the first time in 1937. We calculated acres for compliance purposes for compliance with the farm programs in 1937 to '41 and I was associated with the Department of Agriculture for the University of Kentucky just as a farm operator but as one of the cooperators and worked the county agents office. I became interested in farm organizational work and became interested in Kentucky Farm Bureau federation and, uh, continued in that capacity on up until 1952. In that capacity I was appointed to the Kentucky State Fair Board by Governor Lewis to represent the Kentucky agricultural interest on the fair board and at the same time I was an officer in the Kentucky Farm Bureau Federation. In 1952, uh, we had the election and Eisenhower was elected and there was a great push to get somebody from Kentucky in the Department of Agriculture. The Farm Bureau Federation was pushing pretty hard for it and John Sherman Cooper was a United States Senator and he was also pushing pretty hard for it. So, uh, he wanted me to go to Washington. I certain had no inclination to do that because my father and my mother both were mercifuls at that time. I had my farming operation which I had continued and that was my only financial obligation I had to making a living. But they insisted that I come to Washington to be the head of the Tobacco Division. At that time, when I first started with it, it started out as the AAA Administration under Roosevelt and Truman. When I went into office in 1953, they

changed the name of it to the ASC... Agriculture Stabilization Administration. It was called ASCS, which it can be recognized by that name. But, I did the same thing in tobacco as director of tobacco and we were in charge of determining the national allotment every year and, uh, providing that information. And, again, checking compliance to be sure people were in compliance with it. I stayed in that capacity for some two or three years and then they asked me to assume responsibility for the state committee system in the United States as the associate administrator in the ASCS office. In 1957, I left that field and President Eisenhower appointed me the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture in charge of foreign agriculture's. I promoted the export of agriculture products. The agriculture marketing service, as most people know, it had to do with domestic donations and anything dealing with marketing of agriculture commodities and I had the commodity exchange authorities which regulated those areas. Then Eisenhower retired and the rest of us did too and I came back to the farm again and started working for Farm Bureau Federation in Kentucky and worked there for a number of years. I talked about my experience in Kentucky, to give a background, which I think you're interested in, and that's the city of Shelbyville and Shelby County.

Why don't you tell me about some of your early memories of Shelbyville? Well, when I went from grade school on up through Shelbyville High School and, of course, in those days I walked to school. Shelbyville wasn't very far...just a mile and a half. I finished high school here and we had a great deal of pride in our high school as they generally do today. No different then from today. My school lunch program consisted of my mother made a sandwich for me nearly every day made out of hickory nuts and raisins and country butter. As someone said, you had all the nutrients your body needed from that and I'd buy a glass of milk and have a pretty good lunch. That's true! It was very delicious! But, times have changed with the school lunch programs and the schools and the whole educational system has changed. In my lifetime, I've seen it change in Shelbyville. But we had a lot of pride in our city. At the time, it was the Shelbyville High School. This Shelbyville Grade School embraced an area of three miles around Shelbyville and we all went to Shelbyville Grade School. So, uh, I was raised here and after I got out of high school, I did like everyone else and worked in tobacco. My first job as a boy was working on the tobacco markets. The tobacco market was a big thing in Shelbyville then as it is now. But, uh, tobacco was processed in Shelbyville to a great extent. When I was a young man I remember the tobacco market extended from December on through to March. Now it just runs about six weeks. And we had tobacco redriers. We had three large tobacco redriers and one of them was a bubble drier that belonged to the pool of the Tobacco Growers Association that did contract drying for others. They dried what was left of it here in Shelbyville. Most of it was certainly in the western end of Shelbyville. Southwestern came here. So they redried and processed the tobacco here and put it in the closet and store it in the storage warehouses which were built by the individual trade. It provided a lot of employment to people. People would be employed...seasonal, of course, and the tobacco redriers would be going all the way up till May before they got all the tobacco processed. So it was quite an industry. Town was pretty well smoked up in those days with the redriers but we weren't worried about pollution as long as it was furnishing...we didn't know what pollution was—it was just smoke from the redrier. But

it furnished employment and was the main industry in Shelby County. The merchants relied heavily on it. The independent grocers did. Gee, what wonderful food they used to have in the independent stores. I've often said the dried fruits you buy in little packages now used to come in big boxes...big wooden boxes. Figs. Prunes. Even raisins and dates would come in a big blocks from Syria and were sold by the independent grocers. They bought their meat from the packers in Louisville and it was brought out here and they cut it up into individual steaks and sold it to the independent grocers. We had, uh, oh, I don't know...four or five large grocery stores in Shelbyville. Hardware stores was furnished by Belknap. We had three or four big hardware stores in Shelbyville that were independently owned and locally owned by families that had been here for many years. Automobile agencies had grown from the horse and buggy days when we had Goodman Brothers and the Shelby Motor Company, which is still in existence. And, uh, the things sort of gradually went from horse and buggy days which preceded me and, uh, they evolved into automobile dealerships from buggy dealerships, you see. They stayed in the county. The grocery stores were the same way. Their fathers had grocery stores here and their sons and grandsons. Merchandising of dry goods...we used to call them dry goods, you know. Bolts of material. We had Lawson's, we had Ruben's and Schratsky's and a wonderful supply of material that we could make clothing out of. And then we had one of the greatest institutions, I guess, in Kentucky...A. Rothchilds & Son. We're kin to the Rothchild's. They were Jewish and they were the leadership in Shelbyville. A. Rothchild and Mose Ruben were two of the finest leaders in Shelbyville. They had a men's ready-to-wear store and one of the finest clothes. They sold Arrow shirts (and a lot of other name brands that I couldn't understand) their store was one of the center attractions in the city of Shelbyville. Any time you wanted any stability you could go to the Ruben's and the Rothchild's. I mean stability of economics. Banking or anything like that, they were always available and were always very knowledgeable. Of course, we had the banks that were independently owned. We had five banks in Shelbyville at that time. All locally owned and managed by the local people. Before there were federal loans made to farmers, they made them loans. They didn't have Farmers Home Administration in those days...the local banks did all that. The local directors of the banks and the presidents of the banks were farmers or businessmen and all were part of the community, you see. So, all in all, this was a pretty close society. You could go to the drugstores or the confectioners stores, where we used to go. Hallenbach's was a great confectionery, as they called it, and they had soda fountains and they even had a restaurant. There was a bakery in conjunction with it at one time. Then you had the locally owned drug stores. Smith-McKenney's, which was here for fifty years, I guess. Practically the only drug store in town. Hall's came in...Clyde Hall and his brother. They had a drugstore. So, uh, you see it was a rather closely knit community. People that operated the businesses, the owners, the directors, the managers...they were all a part of the community and they themselves had investments...most of them had farm interests. In fact everybody owned a part of a farm cause they came from the farm community. So, it was a pretty close-knit society. We had wonderful transportation back in the twenties even from the turn of the century when they first built the railroads through here. There were three railroads. We had the C&O, the L&N...which ran on the same track...and the Southern, which is south of here. I remember when we first moved to Shelbyville, we had three passenger trains

railroads and electric lines and other transportation systems. So, its evolved. A changing pattern. I don't know about the school system because I don't have any contact with it. I have no children or grandchildren, uh, I do observe some of our primary teachers. I'm sure they have the camaraderiship that they did when I was in school. But, I don't know. There doesn't seem to be that close connection between families as in the schools that there should be...that would be desirable if you had a closer connection between the parents and their children and their PTA's and so forth. So, uh, yes, its changed. Its changed for the better. One often asks that questions and wonders and those others that have a little age on them wonder if it has...we don't doubt that it has, we just wonder if it's for the better or what is this change that we've evolved in. Here Shelbyville had an unemployment rate announced this year of, what was it, three and one tenth percent or three and six tenth percent...the lowest in the state of Kentucky and one of the lowest in the United States. We've got a lot of industry here. We've brought a lot of industry here. Uh, Shelby County has always been noted...up until the last four or five years...for dairy production. One of the largest dairy producers in the United States. Now it's fading way, way, way back. I heard some figures the other day that were very shocking to me and I can't quote them but from experience I know the number of dairies that have gone out of here is astronomical. Uh, those people that worked in the dairies have sold out to their neighbors and their farms became larger or people who worked on their tobacco redriers and so forth have gone to work for the big industries that have come in and, uh, I think...I almost hate to say it's worse than it used to be but I'm going to say this, we live in no better scale than we did when I was a boy...even during the recession. Here during the recession I know a lot of people suffered. We didn't...our family didn't because my father worked for the government. I know there were very many people who suffered during the recession. The people are better off now than they were during the recession...in certain ways. But, everybody packed in there together. Don't you think they let them sit out here and die...starve. They after their own family and they looked after their friends and their close associations and I'd say we don't live any worse than we did. Our standard of life is no less than what it was but it's not so revolutionarily greater than it what it was. We weren't in poverty. So, uh, that's my philosophy on it. I don't long for the good old days because there are certainly a lot of medical advancements and educational advancements, uh, cultural advancements and they are the things that are the most important things in life. So, yes, I guess you could say we've improved.

Well, uh, you mentioned a lot of places like Wal-Mart and other stores and the banks now, uh, how has that changed the downtown area? Has Wal-Mart pushed the others out of town? Physically...physically, uh, it's changed. It hasn't changed downtown. People say the Main Street itself doesn't look like it used to...no. The inner urban line used to run up and down the center of the street. Gosh we had trouble in those days parking the cars on the side of the street and the inner urban...the trolley cart would come through there and he'd want to get by between the parked cars and the trolley car and a line of traffic coming. So, it had to change. Uh, increase in population and with the advent of the, uh, chain stores and chain banks and chain everything else in the conversation, it had to get away from the concentrated downtown area. So, this is true of Shelbyville and I know it's true of Louisville and every other city. Very few of them are

like they were. Some have done a better job than others maybe of maintaining their patrons downtown. But by and large every city that I've ever seen has changed. Moving out, uh, to the suburban areas. We had to because our transportation wasn't what it used to be. Everybody owns their own automobile...got to. We didn't have automobiles when I was a kid. My family didn't have a car. So we couldn't go downtown. Well, we had to go downtown to get our groceries and.... Main Streets changed. The social gathering places...the, uh, sweet shops, and, uh, the, uh, what did they call it, the, uh...Hallenbach's. That used to be in down there in the drugstores and we'd all go to the soda fountains. It's changed. It's gone out to the suburbs, you see. And, uh, younger won't find anything to do in the downtown area anymore. Most merchants that had faced on Main Street have gone out to...sold out and chain stores have taken over. Uh, I think we lost a lot of our downtown area not preserving it...we couldn't preserve it. Look at those log cabins that were faced up and made into storefronts in Shelbyville. Shelby County applied for them. A lot of them are torn down now...most of them are. But they had to go, you see. They had to go. I've often talked...I'm a great fan of a ---- of Whitakers. One of the fine leaders of Shelbyville...one of the very fine families in Shelbyville. One of the pioneers. The Whitaker home was on Main Street between Fourth and Fifth Streets now where the post office is. Uh, I say it torn down but didn't realize the importance of it until now...it was just another little old brick building. But it housed some of the original people in Shelbyville. So the size of the buildings changed, uh, maybe the hearts and the minds of the people have changed. But it's a part of evolution that you can't stop. And, uh, do you want to stop it? I don't think anyone wants to go back and have the log houses facing on Main Street...as attractive as they are there are two or three of them left, you know. But, uh, they have no place in modern day society other than there is a curiosity to look at and something to say, "Gee, how marvelous that is!". So, uh, yes, downtown Main Street has changed. Its changed a great deal.. I'm trying to think what it looked like when I was a youngster and see some of those pictures you see in the historical books you see and what it looked like back before the turn of the century right after the Civil War. But Shelbyville is a very historical city and it's pride of its history...Shelby County's history. The farms are part of it...it was part of the Whitaker's farm and that's the reason it was called a settlement. And, uh, I don't think present day youth appreciates as much...I know I didn't appreciate, uh, the, uh, original settlers until I got older to realize the significance of it. You realize the significance and the impact it had on the county. We're rich in tradition here and history. Rich families...people I can name off...I'm not one of them in Shelby County but you go and look at the Whitakers and the Beaches and the Thomases and you look around here at the Winlock's and they do balls in Finchville, as so forth, they date back to the original families. The people are here...we're just not doing the same thing we used to do. Uh, there are not as many farmers out of the old original families but they're lawyers and they're doctors and they're still here.

Do you go to church in Shelbyville? No. I'm a Baptist but I don't attend church very regularly I'm sorry to say.

Where you brought up Baptist?

Yes. Somewhat Baptist...immediately, historically, my family were French Huguenots and they were Lutherans and Presbyterians. But, somehow, I think it was my mother's side of the family they were Baptist and that's how I got to be a Baptist.

My wife was Episcopalian before she died. She was Episcopalian...her mother was before.

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Did you all attend church regularly when you were growing up? Yes, we went to the Baptist church pretty regularly. Uh, before I left here. Did you go to church in town or out in the country? In the city of Shelbyville. See, there were no churches out here until you got quite a ways out to Olive Branch Methodist Church out this road. Uh, the first church in Shelby County was down the road from here...down the street from here now in the curve of the road.. He called it the Brashear's Creek Baptist Church. It was established in about 1780, something like that. Right down here in the curve of the road and it moved from that site into Shelbyville. That's one of the first churches in Shelbyville. Uh, he gave...the fellow Whitaker gave the land, uh, for the erection of the church and they moved it in about 1780. But my wife went to the Episcopal church up here and that's quite an old, historical church in Shelbyville. Does most religion center around in town? In town because even in those days our interest was in Shelbyville. Of course, they're scattered throughout the county, you know, the churches are still there...still strong out away from the city of Shelbyville and they were the center of community activities and religious activity as well, uh, throughout the county. That's true all over the country.

You mentioned earlier about the tobacco processing in town, what other kinds of crops did you grow besides tobacco and how did Shelbyville interact with those?

Well, when I was a young man, we raised a good bit of wheat in Shelby County. At one time we were the largest wheat producing county in the state of Kentucky. It might have not been larger than Christian County. Of course, Christian County is a large agricultural area and was a milling center for a long time...they had a mill down there. But we produced a lot of winter wheat here in Kentucky. There was a big market for it and the local flour mills...Climax Roller Mills was a buyer and they had two other independent buyers that put it directly into boxcars and shipped the wheat out. The wheat we grew was a cake flour and crackers...is made with -----(this certain type of wheat that I can't make out). The hard bread and the spring wheat out west that goes into our bakery bread. Uh, Shelby County has always been a rather large producer of corn and in those days we used to collect corn and put it in -----, shuck it and plant it and plow it both ways to keep the weeds out of it...and I got ahold of a revolution and I've got a plague in there... just on that wall for the hundred bushels of corn derby that Pearce Motors had here in Shelbyville and three or four of us participated. We never heard of a hundred bushel of corn prior to 1950...it was unheard of. But I know Louis Payne... and I always won the one acre contest and he always won the three acre contest. So, we started producing corn

for a grain and we fed a good many hogs in Kentucky, uh, that was the principal use of corn. But we didn't use it for our dairy feed. Cattle production was never very great in Shelby County at that time...now I'm talking about ---- cattle, it's always been a big feeder calf producer and that's what business I'm in now...feeder cattle and tobacco. So that was it. Dairy products, tobacco number one, uh, income and dairy number two and hogs and we had a lot of sheep in Shelby County at one time too next to Clark County. We were one of the largest sheep producers in the state of Kentucky. We only have one or two flocks now. Dogs and disease took them out and people...you never could get people to eat very much lamb. After the, uh, Europeans immigrants died out and became no longer immigrants their taste for mutton and lamb ceased to exist. So that's what happened to your lamb market. Uh, then, uh, the, uh, they used to ship out a carload of lambs every Friday night out of Louisville for New York City and they killed them in Jersey City. Slaughtered those lambs in Jersey City and they, uh, the Jewish trade bought them in New York and that's a very exclusive, high priced clientele and then the ships chandlers that supplied the food for the big trans-Atlantic liners took a great deal of Kentucky horseshoe...put a horseshoe on it...Kentucky lamb. I started out as a young man, uh, sponsoring one...one of my first activities in agriculture was the "Eat More Lamb" program trying to get people to eat more lamb in Kentucky. Never could get them to do it but they had a heck of a market in New York. You could sell them on the seasonal market for spring lambs. So, uh, the agriculture...there was no commercial elevators here. They did have a little commercial elevator here across from me in the 1960's, uh, I'm talking about for purchasing grain. That came in being when we soybean and corn crazy in the state of Kentucky and, uh, we got away from a good many dairies and the sheep industry and people started raising soybean and corn for a cash crop next to tobacco. And, uh, it's a big...I know it's a big production thing and it's a lot of them were not exactly happy with them plowing up our land to put in soybeans and corn but, uh, that's not for me to say. I don't do it. Too much erosion occurs. This is not soybean country. Soybean country is flat coastal plains and the Midwest. Corn, yeh, you can do pretty well on corn. So, uh, we used to have a lot of big sheep. Our sheep were so big we had a big wool market up here. We used to gather wool together and it made very fine garment wool. And, uh, we had a ----...set it up in the tobacco warehouses and we'd shear wool or take it up there. Those days have disappeared. Those big long wool sacks and I remember how we used to pack it in those wool sacks and take very good care in the world cause we knew wool could bring a good price. And, uh, we had quality products and our sheep and our wool and our milk and, uh, our tobacco was always...gosh, you talk about great quality tobacco. We don't discuss quality of tobacco anymore like we used to. In tobacco, you know, in those days, they had a real light colored tobacco and of course now it's a real dark colored tobacco. We always thought that the light color was associated with the lower nicotine which made for a more quality tobacco. I don't know... that's not what people want but quality is what people want, see. It's not what you think it is, it's what the buyer thinks it is. So that's what were trying to get...the quality product. Quality product that you could sell for a little better price maybe and we did a pretty good job in Shelby County. We had a wonderful bunch of farmers in Shelby County and they supported the city of Shelbyville. The city of Shelbyville always recognized that their main

avenue of support lies in the rural area from agriculture. I don't think that's now true cause we've got so much industry in Shelbyville. Still a big factor but not what it once was. So that also contributed to the changing face of the city of Shelbyville and Shelby County.

Well, that's about all the questions I have. Do you have anything else you want to add?
Well, I think I've rattled along for long enough.