

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford

Date: 8-22-95

Interviewee: Albert Minnis

Running Time: 28 minutes

Side One

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Albert L. Minnis III
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Meford: Why don't you start by telling me your name?

Minnis: My name is Albert L. Minnis III

Meford: When were you born?

Minnis: 1933 in Newark, New Jersey

Meford: When did you move to the Shelby County area?

Minnis: We moved to the Shelby County area in 1941. We moved to a place called "The Lincoln Institute" which was a high school for classes 9-12. It was a boarding school.

Meford: Was it all male or all female?

Minnis: No, it was a school for blacks. In the state of Kentucky when they passed the "Day Law", Lincoln Institute was set up for the black kids that didn't have schools in their counties that they could attend. Like Shelby County had Shelbyville, at that time, were not integrated so the kids were bussed to Lincoln Institute. A few from Jefferson County, Oldham County, Spencer County, and as far away as Hazard, Lawrenceburg, but all from the State of Kentucky.

Meford: People lived there?

Minnis: Yes, it was a boarding school. My dad was a teacher, an instructor and my mother was a dietitian. They had teachers that lived on the campus and teachers who commuted. It was a very good school.

Meford: Were the teachers all black as well?

Minnis: Well, no, not all the teachers. They had some management staff that were white and some teachers that were white. The school was state supported. It trained practice teachers from Kentucky State University. In later years, The University of Kentucky took it over and at that time it became the Lincoln School for culturally deprived kids. That was after integration.

Meford: Was that the name of it? The Lincoln School for Culturally Deprived Kids?

Minnis: That was the school after Lincoln Institute. When they integrated the Lincoln school was set up for the culturally deprived and then the University of Kentucky ran it for about 3-4 years. Not it is the Lincoln Job Corp Center. It was named after Whitney Young, who's father was the president.

Meford: Is that right?

Minnis: Yes, of Lincoln Institute.

Meford: So your parents worked there, what were their names?

Minnis: My dad was Albert and my mother was Ruby Minnis and my dad was a very unusually smart man.

Meford: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Minnis: Yes. I have one brother. My brother has a PHD now and is with the Jefferson County Board of Education. He grew up there also. He was one year old when we moved there.

Meford: Did he go to Lincoln Institute as well?

Minnis: Yes, he finished Lincoln. From there, we both went to Kentucky State College, then he got his masters from The University of Kentucky and Western. Well he got his masters from Western and PHD from The University of Kentucky.

Meford: So you lived in the Shelby County ever since you moved here to go to Lincoln Institute?

Minnis: Right.

Meford: What other things do you remember about Lincoln Institute?

Minnis: Lincoln was a very good school and it was good for any kid during those days but I believe we need another Lincoln Institute and a school similar to that now due to the problems we are having with Society. A lot of the kids from Shelby County and who live in Shelbyville who went to Lincoln, turned out to be fine people. I don't know what the future holds for young people, but I can see a trend that's going down hill if something is not done. I think they have a home coming for Lincoln every four years, they just had one this past August. A lot of the kids come back and they still talk about the "good days" at Lincoln Institute.

Meford: I've noticed a lot of bumper stickers around town, alumni bumper stickers. Is there a lot of pride among the alumni?

Minnis: Yes, a lot of pride.

Meford: Is there any anger associated with it being segregated? Or animosity?

Minnis: Do you mean from back then to now?

Meford: Was there then or now?

Minnis: No, I don't think so. I think it was understood then, that Lincoln Institute was set up strictly for the blacks. When the "Day Laws" passed, Lincoln Institute was tied into Berea College. I think they were located in Anchorage somewhere and when they passed the "Day Laws" where whites and blacks couldn't go to school together, then Lincoln was established for the blacks and Berea College is where it is now in Berea, Kentucky. I think Lincoln Institute served it's purpose back in those days.

Meford: Do you think the education at Lincoln was as good as say, what the children got at Shelbyville City School?

Minnis: Yes, in fact, Lincoln was rated higher than Shelbyville and Shelby County. Most of the teachers have their Masters. They were well qualified and well traveled. Even though it was a much smaller enrollment, we only had about maybe 500 per year on the average. Some of those kids came to Lincoln from as far away as the Bahamas and New York. Not very many, but somehow their parents found out about Lincoln or maybe the alumni. Mainly it was for the State of Kentucky.

Meford: Did Lincoln have any sports? Basketball teams or football teams?

Minnis: Oh yes. Probably some of the best teams from around here came from Lincoln during those days. Even after Shelby County was consolidated and some of the school who had consolidated with Shelby County like, Waddy, Bagdad, and Simpsonville, Lincoln used to play each one of those and did quite well. In fact, Lincoln went to the state finals in Owensboro one year (that was Randy Embry and that group). It had good football teams throughout the years and baseball teams, we had some good athletes. I was one of them, I played a little professional baseball.

Meford: Is that right? Who did you play for?

Minnis: I was in Cincinnati. I owe a lot of my skills and coaching, basic coaching from my days at Lincoln.

Meford: I don't know if you'd know this but, was your father.....could he have taught at Shelbyville? At the city school?

Minnis: Could he have?

Meford: Yes. Not necessarily legally but could he have been hired?

Minnis: I don't think they would have hired him.....but then again.....the people in Shelby County who recognized his skills, knew he had something a lot different from others. In fact, he did a lot of electrical around Shelby County for people that were well known but I don't know if he would have been hired in the school system or not during those days. When my dad moved (his home was in Louisville and he met my mother when he was in school in New Jersey) when he took a job back in Kentucky he came here with an electric company that build the first vaults and transformers and towers at Standiford Field and that company moved to Africa after they finished Standiford Field and my mother said we weren't going that way. That's when he took the job at Lincoln. As far as being hired in Shelby County or any other county in Kentucky, I doubt very much that he would have been hired.

Meford: When the schools were consolidated, were you living in Shelby County?

Minnis: When the schools consolidated, I stayed at Lincoln until they closed and then I took a job with Jefferson County Board of Education. After I finished college, I took my dad's place at Lincoln. I taught at Lincoln for about five years and then Lincoln closed and then I went with the Board of Education in Jefferson County and taught at Southern High School and Ballard High School. I stayed there for about twenty-two years (Jefferson County). I didn't retire, I just resigned. I got tired of teaching.

Meford: What did you teach?

Minnis: Industrial Arts.

Meford: When Lincoln Institute closed, what was the general feeling about it among the people who had gone there and the black community in general?

Minnis: As far as the kids and parents who knew something about Lincoln, I think they miss that closeness and the closeness of the teachers and the students with a one-on-one situation.

Meford: Kind of solidarity?

Minnis: Yes. The good kids are going to get whatever they are going to get anywhere. There were some borderline kids that maybe would not have gotten as far as they did had it not been for some of the closeness that the teachers had with the students at Lincoln. It was like a family. Whitney Young, who was a very good administration, kind of held the institution together by getting top staff. His son was Whitney Young, Jr. who is the Urban League Director. He died, I think he was drowned over in Africa someplace. He was pretty strong in the Johnson Administration. Lincoln Institute was like a family and he was accepted there. The students, some of the were pretty wild when they first arrived, but then they would smooth out and when they left Lincoln they were quite different.

Meford: Was discipline pretty strict?

Minnis: Yes it was.

Meford: What kind of punishments were given out? Did they have corporal punishment?

Minnis: Well you had day student that were bused in from the area and then you had students who stayed on campus who lived in far away areas that could only go home once a month. Sometimes the boys would try and slip off campus and get into things or go to Shelbyville and get a few drinks or whatever. If they were caught, they were well disciplined and sometimes even put out of school. They knew that and tried to say away from that. It kind of reformed them.

Meford: When Shelby County Schools were consolidated, do you know of any animosity in the white community?

Minnis: Well, there was a lot of competition sports wise. The basketball teams were both well represented, 8th region and Shelby County always had a very good team. Shelbyville, when they were in existence, had a pretty good team and then Lincoln. There was a lot of strong competition but I don't think there was anything serious between rivals like white or anything like this. The competition was keen.

Meford: When you moved here, did you live on the campus?

Minnis: Yes, we lived on campus.

Meford: Have you ever lived in Shelbyville?

Minnis: No.

Meford: You just lived in the county or somewhere else?

Minnis: Even after I moved in my adult life, I bought property right outside of the gate of Lincoln. That's where I am now.

Meford: Is that right? On US60?

Minnis: I've been around that area for quite sometime.

Meford: When you were growing up living down, that near Simpsonville, how did Shelbyville affect your lives? Did you come here to trade?

Minnis: Yes, we did most of our shopping in Shelbyville when I was a youngster. It was a great thing to come to Shelbyville on a Saturday night and kind of see the sights..... you know. That was big time stuff.....coming to a big city like Shelbyville. We did most of our shopping in Louisville but we would come to Shelbyville, since I knew most the students up here.

Meford: So what kind of things did you do on a Saturday?

Minnis: Oddly enough, we'd go to church on Saturday, so I didn't get involved in too many activities on Saturdays. In fact, I had to give up my pro career because of my religion. We don't participate in activities from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. We are very much like the orthodox Jews. I didn't get into anything and didn't play any ball on Saturday. After sundown on Saturday night we could participate in activities. Saturday was kind of a quiet day for us.

Meford: What is your religious denomination?

Minnis: Seventh Day Adventist.

Meford: Is there a large following here in Shelby County?

Minnis: Not really. They just started a church, established a church here in Shelbyville which is located out around Clay Village. I think they only have about 50-60 members. But the larger congregation, where I belong now, is St. Matthew's Church which is in Middletown. St. Matthew's Seventh Day Adventist Church and we have about 300 members but in Louisville they have four or five churches. But as far as the denomination now, nation wide and world wide it's well known.

Meford: Was that your religion growing up?

Minnis: Yes.

Meford: Your parents instilled that in you?

Minnis: Yes.

Meford: So you decided you couldn't play ball on Friday nights?

Minnis: Friday nights or Saturdays. That's when most of your big athletic events take place.

Meford: When you were growing up and you needed to go to Shelbyville, did you all drive or what was the mode of transportation?

Minnis: My dad always had a decent car and we were one of the few black families that had access to transportation in the community. My dad had enough money to buy what he wanted. In fact, my dad had a unique thing. I think he did or almost or did.....he made the first TV that hit Shelby County. He made it with his class.

Meford: Really?

Minnis: He had a demonstration board and had the TV stages all made out and they displayed this at different shows, fairs and different activities they had around Jefferson County and around the community. But the class, with my Dad, made that. That was before TV hit the market in this area.

Meford: Were there stations in Louisville at that time?

Minnis: Yes, WAVE and WHAS were some of the first stations then.

Meford: When you all came to Shelbyville, what kind of businesses do you remember going to? Do you remember any of the names of the stores?

Minnis: Yes, some of the old stores, Lawson's, Lerman's and Biagi's, they've been around a long time. There was an A&P here in those days. All of these stores were in downtown Shelbyville. They didn't have any shopping centers then like we do now. Some other names were Smith McKinney and Beagley's. Meford: Were any of those stores segregated in any way?

Minnis: I think the lunch counters during those days like at Beagley's and Smith McKinney (I don't remember if Smith McKinney's had a lunch counter), I'm pretty sure they were (segregated) so we just didn't bother going in there to eat. We didn't eat a lot of the things they fixed anyway. I do know that the chicken place out on US60, that is now the Claudia Sanders place, you had to go to the back door to order chicken. We just didn't eat chicken, we just didn't do it. Most places were segregated.

Meford: Was there anything you had a hard time finding like clothing or shoes that were not accessible to blacks?

Minnis: As long as you had the money, we didn't have any trouble getting commodities or day goods. It wasn't that bad. People weren't as friendly and they didn't break their necks to wait on you. If they liked you they liked you and if they didn't there was nothing you could do about it.

Meford: How long have you been with the Shelbyville Public Works Department?

Minnis: I've been here about six years.

Meford: What kind of things are you working on?

Minnis: Well, we do a pretty major portion of some of the things that we needed to do for a long time. Shelbyville has a lot of bad sidewalks, the streets are in fairly decent shape. We have a sidewalk program going now where we are replacing all the defective

sidewalks and the residential pays for materials and the Public Works supplies the labor. We have several other programs going. The Martinsville renovation program, we play a big part of that I matching funds. We do a lot of the street paving, sidewalks, curbs in the Martinsville area.

Meford: Over the years that you've lived here, what are some of the biggest changes you've seen in the Shelbyville area?

Minnis: Shelbyville, to me when I was growing up, seemed to be very, very conservative. You had only a few big names that actually ran the community. Folks that you heard about a lot. I think over the years, that has changed. Some of the younger generation and even some of the older, conservative generation have died or are out of the picture. I think Shelbyville is kind of opening up now and it's a fast growing community. Before, a lot of outside business just couldn't get I here. Now the area is growing and the city limits are moving out further and further. You have more affordable homes going up. More business is moving in. The unemployment rate is fairly low so I think Shelbyville is a growing community. It's a good community to live in. Taxes are reasonable, I mean they don't try to raise taxes every time they want to do something. They try to look out for the interest of the people.

Meford: When you are doing stuff for the downtown Shelbyville area with Public Works, do you all do anything (I noticed that a lot of it is historical district), do you try and recreate the old, are there any restrictions?

Minnis: When we go into a historic district, and we have to replace a sidewalk, we have to, through a city engineer or myself, deal with the historic board. We have to run it by them what we're going to do and get their approval as to how we are going to do it and how they want it done. Of course we have to do that along with the residence also. We have to show the residence why we are doing this because a lot time they want to change the structure and there is control on what the have to put back. We try to cooperate. In fact, the job their doing now is in the historic area.

Meford: Is it over by the Shannon Funeral Home?

Minnis: Right. We have to put it back like it was with the improvement of the sidewalk itself.

Meford: Put it back without the cracks?

Minnis: Yeah, without the cracks.

Meford: Well, that's about all the questions I have. Is there anything you'd like to add or anything I haven't ask you about?

Minnis: No. The only thing.....I just wish I was a younger man. I would like to see some of the things we've started fully developed. Shelbyville has been a very, very good place for me to work in the past six years. The residence are very nice to work for. You know when you have a community that doesn't give you a lot of "hassle" and you can get along without having a lot of news media down at your department or something of this nature, then you must be doing all right and you must be giving service and that's what we try to do. The residents are will receptive of the services that we give and we appreciate the minimum complaints we get. I have worked in some areas in Louisville where that's not necessarily so. Shelbyville and Shelby County, along with the residence and the administrators of the other departments, I can only say that it's been nice working with them.

Meford: I sure thank you for your time here. I know you have a lot of things going on and I appreciate you taking a half an hour to talk to me.

Minnis: I appreciate you coming.