

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford

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Interviewee: James Kenneth Mitchell

Running Time: 25 minutes

Side One

COUNTER

- 000 INTRODUCTION
- 010 BACKGROUND: BORN 1939.
- 030 OCCUPATION: REAL ESTATE AGENT.
- 045 EARLY MEMORIES: MERCHANTS, VETERAN'S MEMORIAL PARK
- 119 WORKING AT LINCOLNS & LERMANS DEPARTMENT STORE.
- 190 FACTORS AFFECTING THE DECLINE OF DOWNTOWN BUSINESSES:
PARKING.
- 241 EFFORTS AT HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.
- 260 ANTIQUE MALLS.
- 325 CITY OFFICIALS INFLUENTIAL ON THE DOWNTOWN.
- 363 RELIGION IN SHELBYVILLE.
- 375 FUTURE OF THE DOWNTOWN AREA.
- 400 END.

James Kenneth Mitchell
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Meford: What don't you begin by telling me your full name?

Mitchell: James Kenneth Mitchell but most people call me Kenny.

Meford: When were you born?

Mitchell: 1939

Meford: What were your parents names?

Mitchell: Mr. & Mrs. Charles Mitchell. Laura and Charles. We grew up on a farm in Finchville.

Meford: Is that right? So is your father a farmer?

Mitchell: Yes. He developed heart trouble and he died at the age of 56. In fact, about the same age I am now.

Meford: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Mitchell: Yes, I have 5 brothers and 2 sisters?

Meford: Do any of these reside in Shelbyville or the Shelby County area?

Mitchell: Well I have one brother that lives down a round Long Run Park in Shelby County. But other than that, everyone has left the county.

Meford: Do you have any children?

Mitchell: Yes, I have three.

Meford: Do any of them still live in Shelby County?

Mitchell: No. One teaches at Covington, Kentucky, one teaches at Meade County, (that's my two daughters) and my son lives here in Shelby County, he works at the plastic company "Omega Plastics."

Meford: Is it a factory?

Mitchell: Yeah. It's a factory.

Meford: What is your occupation?

Mitchell: I'm a real-estate agent. I've been in the real-estate business for approximately 5 years.

Meford: What other kind of jobs have you been involved in?

Mitchell: When I left the farm in 1960, I went to work in a factory in Jeffersontown called Premiere Thermo Plastics. I worked there for about a year and was laid off quite a bit. Then I went to work for Walgreens drugs there in Hikes Point out side Jeffersontown and stayed there about a year and a half and then I came to work for Lermans Department Store in Shelbyville.

Meford: When you worked in Jeffersontown, did you live in Shelbyville?

Mitchell: No, I moved to J-town and my father-in-law worked at the Lincoln Store in downtown Shelbyville and he ask me to come up one day and work in the shoe department. I said I'd be happy to and I wanted to get back to Shelby County anyway. We lived in Jeffersontown about 1 ½ years and I moved back to Shelby County.

Meford: When you were growing up in this area, what were some of the early businesses you remember?

Mitchell: I remember especially, I guess this was between 5th and 6th Streets, they had Van's 5 and 10 Store, A&P was down there, Lee McClain was over A&P and of course, growing up on a farm we bought most of our cloths from the Lerman's Store and the Lincoln Store which later I became manager of.

Meford: A&P was a grocery store, what was Lee McClain?

Mitchell: It was a clothing factory. They are located just outside of Shelbyville. They are still in business today. They don't make as many cloths as they did at that time. They had problems with the parking in downtown area so they moved out several years ago. Another one that used to be my favorite when I lived on the farm was down on 2nd and Washington Street which was Bond's Ice Cream Store. They had all kinds of ice cream, they must have had 30 flavors.

Meford: Was there a plant and they made their own ice cream?

Mitchell: Yes, they made their own.

Meford: Just for themselves or could anyone buy?

Mitchell: You could go in and get banana splits or anything you wanted and they had it lined up in cans and you could buy 30 or 40 flavors. I never saw that much ice cream. Especially when you worked on the farm and you came in on a hot day.....it was excellent. We had the theaters downtown, we used to have, I guess it was between 6th and 7th Streets and it was called Shelby Theater and then down between 4th and 5th Street we had the Grand Theater. Those were a lot of my memories growing up.....coming into town.

Meford: What are some of the other places.

Mitchell: We used to have, of course I became interested in a lot of the stores between 6th and 7th Streets, we had Newberry's, Puckett's Men Shop, on the corner we had a pool hall where a lot of young guys could come and play pool. I never was a very good pool shot myself. I used to watch them play. We had a lot of stores between 5th and 6th. That used to be what they called the "core of downtown." On the corner where Liberty Bank is now, used to be The Bank of Shelbyville and then Mark Scarce, who owned Wakefield/Scarce Gallery, he had a jewelry store there for a number of years and then we had another ten cent store called Van's 5 & 10. A lot of these store go back several years. We also had Bakers and Caspers that was a hardware store and we had Smith McKinney which was a drug store and at that time they had a fountain and I guess just before you got to the Bank of Shelbyville, we had a Beagleys', and it also had a fountain. The guy who managed that store is now the manager out at Smith McKinney's in Village Plaza. Probably my two favorite stores were Lerman's and Lincoln's where I worked for several years. Then we have the Veterans Memorial park which is beside, which is probably one of my favorite memories of downtown, I have a brochure of it, I served as finance chairman to raise the money. It took about 50 thousand dollars, I never served in the armed service myself but I always felt that there was a lot to recognized. I had two brothers who served in Vietnam and both were lucky and came back. I don't know if you are familiar with this or not but if you look on the memorial it honors all those from Shelby County that gave their lives in WWI, WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. That's probably one of my highlights of being down town.....getting to be a part of that.

Meford: You memorialized this in 1983?

Mitchell: Yes and Ben Pollard who was a POW in Vietnam for several years was a guest speaker. His dad was the president of Shelby County Trust and he always felt that Ben was alive and I think Mr. Pollard died two days before he knew his son was alive.

Meford: Is that right?

Mitchell: Yeah, he came back home. I was glad to be a part of that. Another thing I was glad to be a part of, this was where the Memorial was, we had what was called a block house, it used to sit out in Main Street where people would watch for maybe Indians to come and they would shoot out those little holes. I'm a member of the Shelbyville Kawnis Club and our club took it on as a project one time to build a replica of that and it's now moved over to our county park.

Meford: Is this a replica?

Mitchell: Yes. That's over here in the park, The Shelby County Park.

Meford: There was one of those originally located in Shelbyville?

Mitchell: Yes, right in Main Street, in front of the court house.

Meford: Well tell me a little bit about Lincoln's and Lerman's while we on this.

Mitchell: Well, like I said, I came from Walgreens up here and my father-in-law said, "I'd like for you to work in my shoe department" and I said "I'd be happy to" cause I wasn't sure if I wanted to go to college or just what. One thing I said was that I don't want to be a store manager because I don't want to tell people what to do. That's just not my nature. So I worked at Lincoln's in the shoe department I guess off and on for about 9 months and the guy that worked next door at Lerman's, a lot of people never did know it but Lincoln and Lerman's was owned by the same people. The Lerman brothers and there was four of them. Back many years ago the Lerman's bought Lincoln's from the Lincoln Chain. We operated as two separate stores. My father-in-law ran on store and eventually I ran the other one. We were side by side, probably the two biggest competitors in town. We carried a lot of the same thing but most people did not realize that we were all the same people.

Meford: What were the brothers names? Do you remember them?

Mitchell: Yes, Nathan, Sam, Ed and Simon. They were super nice people. I got to meet all of them but Ed. Ed died before I started with Lerman's. Back to my story, I worked at Lincoln's and the guy who ran the Lerman's store became sick and they asked me if I would work over there for a while. If he got better and decided he wanted to work at the store, we had about 28 stores at that time, and he wanted to work at the Frankfort Store so he went to work in Frankfort and so they ask me if I wanted to take the store. I said, "Yeah, I'll take it for a while, till you decide what your going to do" and so my family came along, and to make a long story short, I was there 28 years and manager for about 27 years.

Meford: Can you describe the interior of these stores? How would they differ from a store that you'd go into today? A modern store that would sell those things?

Mitchell: Basically, we had, our fixtures and things were the old time counters, flat counters. We laid things on them and as the years went on, we modernized quite a bit. Today the stores downtown are called, I think, The Shelbyville Antique Mall. We kept the store apart for several years and when my father-in-law retired, we put the two stores together and it was called Lerman's Lincoln. That was about 7 years before we closed them. We only had one nephew left out the Lerman's after so many years and he was 62

years old and he wanted to put his money on CD's I guess, and so he just hung it up. We tried to sell it to other people. It's hard to sell small chains. Downtown used to have a lot of independently owned people like Lawson's Department Store and they were family owned and eventually they went out and Briggs and they were individually owned. A lot of stores, clothing stores, downtown were closed. It used to be that we had a lot of clothing stores, drug stores and all that stuff. Times have really changed. Someone told me, I guess about 15 years ago, that downtown Shelbyville will probably wind up being lawyer's offices and antique malls. I said, "No way." But that's the way it is today. Most of your businesses are moving out, which is not all that bad.

Meford: What are some of the factors that influence the businesses to move to the edge of town or close down?

Mitchell: The biggest "beef" I always had was the downtown parking. Most towns are like that. We went through the stage of taking parking meters out and once we did that a lot of people that were working in the downtown area, not necessarily merchants, but other people in the offices, would abuse the downtown parking. It was hard. As I look back not, a lot of the merchants, if we'd got on the ball and tried to secure some of the parking ourselves, it might have been different. Rather than trying to get the city to provide force at that time.

Meford: What were some of the other factors?

Mitchell: Independent merchants, you know, you can't offer what a lot of places would. Just like, I think when the downtown started going down was when Wal-Mart came in and you know they offer variety and it's hard to compete like that. They have a lot of buying power.

Meford: Do you think when Wal-Mart opened that people realized how much it was going to change Shelbyville?

Mitchell: Yeah, I think so, yeah. I think some of them, the merchants, really got scared and probably hung it up before they had too. I don't remember exactly how many years we stayed on after Wal-mart came but it was some of the best years we had.

Meford: Is that right?

Mitchell: Yeah. So, I think, if you stayed in there and tried to be competitive and tried to do some things. The only advantage that Wal-Mart or a big store like that would have over downtown, they're so big that they could hire more people, be open more hours and things like that. That's what people are really looking for when they shop (nights, Sunday and things like that). Small merchants, you know, unless you just want to work his life away, just couldn't spend that many hours.

Meford: When did Lerman's close?

Mitchell: We closed in 1989 I believe it was. Lerman's, here in Shelbyville, I think we had been there probably 70 years in the same spot.

Meford: That's a long time.

Mitchell: We had a lot of people and we did a lot of thing. People came I and they didn't have enough money, we'd help out on that and we'd offer discounts and things like that. We just had people come back. Grandfathers, fathers, and children would come in and I see a lot of them today. Being in real-estate, you see a lot of people but not like what I saw in the store and that's the part I really miss, seeing a lot of the people.

Meford: Did you know most of the people you did business with there?

Mitchell: Yeah, oh yeah! In fact, after I left there I worked part time at The Shelby County Trust Bank for about 3 years while I started in real-estate and they'd always say, "You cashed that check and didn't even look on the computer" and I'd say, "I don't need to look on the computer. I've been doing business with these people for years and years." I did have an advantage over everybody else. We knew who we could trust. It's had to do now days.

Meford: Beside a lot of businesses closing, what are some of the other changes in the downtown area?

Mitchell: Well, I haven't kept up with the downtown. They are trying to revitalize, doing the sidewalks and things like that and put in benches. I did serve on a committee while I was there on Shelby Development Corporation, trying to do some things in town. We had some special promotions and things. Just what it takes to get downtown back and thriving, I don't know what we can do. I think it would be kinda hard to do. If you get the right person with a lot of ideas, you never know what can take place. I know Bobbie Smith and she's trying to do a good job to promote the downtown. I think she will. Exactly what it takes, I don't know.

Meford: Do you think there will be retail merchants in the downtown again? Like there used to be?

Mitchell: I doubt it, I doubt there will be. I think you still don't have enough parking for retail on a big scale. Once they're out, it's hard to get them back down town.

Meford: When did the antique malls start popping up?

Mitchell: I think it was probably about 10 years ago. I don't know how many are downtown now but there's several.

Meford: You may not know this, but do they do a good business?

Mitchell: I think they do. I think they do excellent business. When I drive through, I see them coming in, unloading, taking in and bringing out. I think they do.

Meford: Being the former manager of a downtown store, what are some of the other changes you've seen besides the stores closing? Were there any other changes that went on?

Mitchell: Well there probably were but I can't think just off hand.....I think one thing, the buildings used to be in better shape than they are now. It seemed to me like that most of the land owners took more pride than they do now. It's not to say that they aren't in good shape, I just noticed that the one we had, Lincoln's windows were broken out and we used to get up there and caulk and paint and keep them all fixed up. It doesn't seem to be that there is as much pride down there, but that could just be me. Maybe I'm just biased. I think when they took the parking meters out that was a good thing. The city was always worried about them losing money but it did increase business quite a bit.

Meford: Who was responsible for taking the parking meters out?

Mitchell: The city council at the request of the merchants. But as I look back, there was probably a couple of lots we should have worked on a little more ourselves. We had a lot on Clay Street and of course we thought there would be free parking but the city put meters on that and it really hurt. If we could have left that free, I think that would have helped. It just seems like most of your downtown businesses are spreading out. I don't know if we'd done something different, if the retail would have stayed or not.

Meford: So you think the downtown area is spread out to much?

Mitchell: Well, kind of because we build Governors Square and now it's on the decline and one just takes away from the other. So we might be spread a little thin but Shelbyville and Shelby County are really growing.

Meford: Is it growing into town?

Mitchell: Well yeah.....both ends.

Meford: What about in the middle?

Mitchell: Not really. But I really don't know what you could do to revitalize your town. I used to say when I was a store manager, "once you let the horse out of the barn, it's gonna be hard to get him back in." I kinda believe that to a certain extent now. Like I say, there are revitalized downtowns. I worked over in Lawrenceburg for a couple of years and there wasn't a vacant building in the whole downtown. It's not what you'd call "booming" but it's thriving.

Meford: You said that the City Council took the parking meters out, can you remember any of the names of the people on that council or names of other city officials that did something drastic to the downtown area?

Mitchell: Well, I think Ray Hardesty was one of the Councilmen that was very interested in doing that. Harry Long, his son is a dentist here and Jesse Puckett, I think he was mayor then, I think Jesse has passed on now. I can't remember them all but City Council was always very supportive of the downtown merchants. Of course the Shelby County Fiscal Court was too. Most of the projects that we tried to do, like the tobacco festival and Christmas Parade and stuff like that, they were always very supportive.

Meford: When did those kind of things end?

Mitchell: Well the Jaycees still do the Christmas Parade and the Kiwanis Club had the last Tobacco Festival. It used to be a really big thing. It would go on all week and then we had the downtown merchants used to have what you called "Farm-City Week" where we would have free refreshments, discounts and things and we'd run all week. To a certain extent, we still have a little of that in November.

Meford: Are there any other civic organizations that have influence on the downtown area?

Mitchell: The Shelbyville Kiwanis Club, which I've been a member of for a guess 29 years, we are responsible for maintaining the Veterans Memorial Park. Keeping it mowed and shrubbery out. I think the Jaycees do projects downtown. At one time the Kiwanis club painted the park benches in downtown and we painted all the signs. We still do that some.

Meford: Do you go to church here in town?

Mitchell: Yes, for years I went to the first Baptist Church and now I'm a member of the Living Waters Church. It's nondenominational and we also have a Christian School there. This year we have 220 students. Kindergarten through twelve. That's where my wife is a secretary at.

Meford: What do you think will be the future of the downtown? Do you think it's going to be lawyers and antiques malls?

Mitchell: Well, that's kind of the way I look at it. But you know, like I said a while ago, if you get the right person, who knows, they might start opening up different retail shops, I think they've tried different restaurants down there and they've had a hard time and

some have done good and some didn't. It seems that we are spread out but there's a lot of people that are still interested in downtown. If somebody comes up with the right idea.....I don't have it.

Meford: Are there any other memories that we haven't talked about?

Mitchell: No, other than a lot of people came in the store. I've watched a lot of them grow up and helped a lot of them. I think with the down town area, you had a lot of merchants that really cared. A few years ago when there was a fire, they helped. I know we made many, many contributions down through the years, probably hundreds and thousands of dollars.....Wal-Marts people do that now but you don't have as many businesses to draw from and I think that hurts. Most of the ones that are left are very supportive.

Meford: I think that's about all the questions I have. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me.

Mitchell: Well, I'm glad to do it.