

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford

Date: 8/9/9

Interviewee: Eunice Marie Reed

Running Time: 38 minutes

Side One

COUNTER

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INTRODUCTION

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Eunice Marie Reed
Shelbyville Main Street
Oral History Project
Interview by Mark Meford
August 8, 1995

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Meford: Please state your full name.

Reed: Eunice Marie Reed

Meford: When were you born?

Reed: I was born July 29, 1926 in Shelby County, Kentucky

Meford: Have you lived here all your life?

Reed: I've been away from time to time but I've always lived here.

Meford: What are your parents names?

Reed: My mother's name was Blanch Rucker and my father was William Powers Payne, Senior.

Meford: Are you married?

Reed: I'm a widow now.

Meford: Do you have any children?

Reed: I have one daughter, Joyce Elizabeth.

Meford: What was your father's occupation?

Reed: He was just a laborer?

Meford: Did he live in Shelbyville?

Reed: Yes.

Meford: Worked in Shelbyville?

Reed: Yes

Meford: Did your mother do work other than housework?

Reed: She worked for a family here and of course she did ironing. That was the only thing going in the 30's and 40's.

Meford: Does your daughter still live in Shelbyville?

Reed: She is presently in Frankfort as a Director at Kentucky State.

Meford: So is she still in college?

Reed: No, she's a Director and has been there for 5 years since she returned from Mississippi and so that's where she works.

Meford: Growing up in this area, what do you remember about the downtown area? What are some of your early memories that stand out?

Reed: Well, downtown was where you had all your stores and things. I can remember that it was a lively thing and especially on a Saturday when just about everyone would shop downtown for the week. You had your department stores, Lincoln's, Lermans, Lawson's, Ruben's and then your grocery stores, A&P was one of the stores and Blakemore's. We had a shoe store there and a cleaners and then there was another cleaners there on Main Street. It was a lively place, as I said, all the stores were full.

Meford: Were they full all week or just on Saturday?

Reed: All week, but on Saturdays it was particular the day when everybody from out in the county came to do their shopping for the week. That was it and of course Saturday was pay day and that's when my people would shop.

Meford: Where the stores segregated generally?

Reed: Yes and that was the rule during my childhood. Of course, I've forgotten exactly what year it was that you could go in and try on shoes and things. But for the most part you ordered from the Sears Catalog or people at that time really made their cloths. My mother was a seamstress and any number of people here in Shelbyville were excellent seamstress and they just made cloths.

Meford: Was it because they couldn't buy them anywhere?

Reed: Well, that had a great deal to do with it but your shoes were the biggest problem. You really needed to go and try on shoes and that was the main things. At Lincoln and German they were, what do you call it, more liberal so to speak. I do remember going there shopping for shoes.

Meford: When things were segregated, where the ice cream store or the movie theater segregated?

Reed: Yes, they had what they called at that time, a balcony, where the Negroes were restricted. Downstairs was for whites only and that was located there..... somewhere in that neighborhood..... before you get to the Tracy Store, it is along in there.

Meford: When you went to the movie theater, were there signs up? I know, everyone knew but were there signs?

Reed: Yeah, you knew.

Meford: Were there signs?

Reed: You just knew that you had to go to the balcony.

Meford: Did the signs say "white only" or things like that?

Reed: Not that I can recall.

Meford: You don't remember seeing any signs like that anywhere inside or outside the movie theater or just anywhere in town?

Reed: No, I really can't. Other than, as I said you grew up with that and you just knew. I know that there was an ice cream parlor that on Sunday's especially during the summer and the winter you could go and get your ice cream and at that time, it was just a matter of going in and getting you popcicle or ice cream cone and coming out. There wasn't any sitting down for the Negroes.

Meford: Did anyone ever try to?

Reed: Not at that particular time.

Meford: Would they have been arrested if they had?

Reed: I really wouldn't know. I don't know of any incident. As I said, you just accepted that.

Meford: Was there tension between whites and blacks?

Reed: No.

Meford: Growing up, did the children generally play together or were they separated by geographywhites living on one side of town and blacks on the other?

Reed: Yes....yes. The section called Martinsville was all black and from this street here, Clay Street over to Kentucky Street was black. Then we had another black subdivision down in what they call Bradshaw Street. That was black, back behind what was at that

time the graded school and then further down on Clay Street. But here on this street we always had poor white families that lived at the end near the corner. It was a mixed street here and of course all this right side of Clay Street, it was homes, 7 homes when they built this warehouse that was been torn down.

Meford: Where did you go to school? You mentioned Bradshaw School.....

Reed: I went to the Shelbyville Colored School, it was on Bradshaw. We went there till the 9th grade and then went to the Lincoln Institute School.

Meford: Was that another black school?

Reed: Yes, that's down the road.

Meford: Down toward Louisville, is that right?

Reed: Yes, it's Simpsonville, 9 miles from Shelbyville.

Meford: When did the Lincoln Institute close?

Reed: I believe it was in 1966 or 67.

Meford: Did it close because of consolidation, the school consolidating?

Reed: It was during the movement of integration.

Meford: So it closed because of integration?

Reed: Yes.

Meford: That's a long way to go to school. How did you all get down there?

Reed: By bus. We had 2 or 3 buses according to the amount of children. They came from Waddy, Bagdad and all the surrounding little communities. They came through Shelbyville and got on the bus for the most part, everybody in Martinsville was here on this corner of 11th Street and they would pick up downtown and we'd go to Lincoln Institute.

Meford: All the black children in Shelby County went to the Lincoln Institute for high school?

Reed: Yes. One incident that I should point out about the school too it was an old fact that when you were going to school, we were instructed to go to Clay Street or Washington Street and you could not go up and down Main Street because that was the street that the white kids would be coming up. So that was interference there and we always had to go those two street to keep from coming in contact with the white kids.

Meford: Who would tell you that?

Reed: As I said, it was an odd thing, but it was just a known thing. The principle and teachers.....you were always instructed as what to do.

Meford: Was there animosity between the whites and blacks?

Reed: Not that I know of.

Meford: Do you know how any of the white children felt about that?

Reed: No, I really don't. We never came in contact with them. As a rule, I lived right next door to the High School here and I took care of a lady by the name of Ms.

Armstrong on the weekends and I would have to come down to 11th Street in order to get on the bus, because Main Street was two way then and it was just a known thing that you just learned to abide by the rules. We didn't have any conflict.

Meford: Was Main Street closed just for traveling or just the bus? Could you walk down it?

Reed: You could walk down at night. What do you mean? When we were going to school?

Meford: If you were just going to buy something,, could you go down Main Street?

Reed: You could go down the street then. More or less, you'd have your parents with you when you'd go shopping in town. But, I mean, every school day, that was your procedure, just to go up and down Washington Street or Clay Street.

Meford: Where did you go to church around here?

Reed: St. John and that is located on College Street.

Meford: What denomination or religion?

Reed: It's now known as the United Methodist Church.

Meford: Have you always gone to that church?

Reed: Yes.

Meford: Is it mostly black?

Reed: Yes, it's all black.

Meford: Has it always been that way?

Reed: Yes.

Meford: How many other all black churches are there in Shelbyville?

Reed: Well, you have the first Congregational Church, the Waddy Church that's located down there on Washington Street, 7th and Washington Street. Then you have the Bethel Church that's located on Henry Clay between 5th and 4th Street. Then the Baptist Church was located up here on 8th and Clay and you have the Holiness Church, at that time it was called The Church of God, Father McGee was the pastor there and was located on 6th and Bradshaw. Then later on you had another Holiness Church that was located along that street. That was the most segregated times of all was on church day. Everyone went to their regular church. It was a different atmosphere.

Meford: How did the church serve as a social center? Did a lot of social activities center out of the church?

Reed: At first it did. Right now we are in the process over at St. John's where we ran into trouble with the rehabilitation of that church and it's closed now. We are temporarily used as a dining room that is located at 10th and Martin Luther King and Union Street, that was our dining room and we are having to use that for the time being. We've been there since May.

Meford: How many people do you reckon attend this church?

Reed: We have an enrollment of about 70 people.

Meford: Do you have a youth program?

Reed: Yes.

Meford: Do the children attend regularly? Do they enjoy coming to these things? Is it like a meeting place for them.

Reed: Well, right now, we are in limbo with all those activities because of the changes. But I know there is one gentleman there that has a youth choir that has started this year and that includes children from all denominations and they have a very good response with that. Of course they just get together and go to picnics and things like that.

Meford: Was there ever anything like that when you were growing up?

Reed: Our church was the main center of activity when I was growing up.

Meford: What kind of things did you all do?

Reed: Well we had Sunday School, you know and we took trips, picnics and would have social affairs and of course we had a choir groups and would participate with all those things that go on in church.

Meford: How has the church changed over the years? Have there been many changes in the church?

Reed: Yes. St. John's was at one time the largest church we had. The largest amount of people in Shelbyville (black church). It was pretty active. You had a real good congregation then for a number of years. The church started going down I guess or splitting in the 60's. That's when we had one pastor there that decided he wanted to build a church and come out of the conference. Well, our church split. During the mean time, we lost a great deal of our members from that because a lot of our people moved out of town. We're still hanging in there but it's not the same. Every year during Christmas and Easter, it was a meeting place for everybody in Shelbyville to come to that church, all the blacks, and the Mayor of the City would come and give you an address and fill you in on what was happening and so forth. That was every year at 5 O'clock in the morning on Christmas and Easter. There wasn't even standing room. Everybody would come to church at St. John.

Meford: What kind of changes have you seen in the downtown area?

Reed: It's gone down, you really don't have to much down town now. It's not like it was when I was growing up.

Meford: When did it start to slow down.

Reed: Well I know when I came back here from Cleveland, at that time I worked for Lawson's Department Store, and that was the largest department and furniture store in town and I worked there for a while and I used to help out Mark Scearce around at the gallery. That was seasonal work. I would go and clean the silver. You just don't have anything downtown. Not like you did when I was growing up unless you are interested in antiques.

Meford: What caused it? Do you think something like Wal-Mart on the other end of town.....

Reed: The shopping centers. It's a good thing in a way that the shopping centers opened. You know for a while everybody was going to Louisville to shop anyway.

Meford: Is that right.

Reed: Oh yeah.

Meford: How did they get there? Did they drive down?

Reed: No, you'd ride the Greyhound Bus and go do your shopping.

Meford: Was that in the 60's?

Reed: Yes, in the 60's, if I remember correctly. All during those years.

Meford: Where else did you work besides Lawson's?

Reed: I did a lot of day work around here. There wasn't any jobs and you either nurse or would cook for the most part and that was it.

Meford: What kind of stuff did you do at Lawson's?

Reed: I cleaned the furniture room, kept everything cleaned up.

Meford: What kind of changes have there been in transportation in the down town? Is it easier to get around now or is it more difficult?

Reed: Now, the Greyhound Bus no longer comes through Shelbyville. I think they may have a taxi and I don't know if it's still in operation now or not. Now see, that was another thing, we had taxis.

Meford: What was the name of the taxi service?

Reed: Hinkle's Taxi. There were very few people that had cars. You didn't need a car.

Meford: Would you just call a taxi?

Reed: Yes, if you had to go any distance. You walked all over town.

Meford: Do you remember how much it was for a taxi to get across town? Was it expensive or reasonable?

Reed: It was reasonable. It had to be. The average weekly pay around here was anywhere from 3-5 dollars a week. So it had to be reasonable for you to use it. You very seldom ever used a cab.

Meford: Did you carry your groceries around when you went grocery shopping?

Reed: Yes, a lot of people had little carts or wagons that they would use when they went shopping. You could always get your chicken "on foot" down there at 7th and Henry Clay. You didn't buy chickens like they are prepared now. We had a fish market down on Main Street where you would go and get fresh fish.

Meford: What was the name of that?

Reed: I can't remember the name of that fish market. One of my brothers worked there for years and the Chamber of Commerce, at one time, was located in that very same building. You could go in there and get all kinds of fresh fish.

Meford: In the 30's, 40's, and 50's, were there any businesses owned by blacks?

Reed: We had the Saffel Hospital, that was black, then we had Will Ellis's grocery Store that was located there on the corner of High Street and Martin Luther King., then we had over here in "Cabin Town" I had an aunt and uncle that ran a restaurant and a grocery store combination. The restaurant was only open during the tobacco season and it was one of those restaurants where they had breakfast, lunch and dinner for all of those marketing people that came in here from the south and all their help, they were both black and white and they would eat at the restaurant. The other times of the year, it was a grocery store where you could get eggs, bread, milk and incidental things like that. For the most part, they made their money from the restaurant. It was called "Baxter's Restaurant." Down on Henry Clay Street, we had three places of business down there. One place was called Fincastle Restaurant that was owned by Wilma Brown, and another little restaurant further down on this side of that church, I forgot the name of that, we just called it the little restaurant. We also had barber shops, we had Roland's Barber Shop, and Richard Purdy had a little barber shop, John Payne had one over in Martinsville and an older man by the name of Stewart, John Stewart, used to be a barber. Those were places of business that I remember

Meford: What do you remember about desegregation?

Reed: I worked with that.

Meford: What did you do?

Reed: Well, after the decision came down that it was illegal, I was the one here in Shelbyville that agreed that we should form some type of organization to help guide us through this movement. At the same time I was involved with the black church. I used to go to conference every year and we trying to bring the churches back together. It was in

1968 and we decided to go into the white conference for good and that's the reason why it's called the United Methodist. I called a group of my friends and we organized the Shelbyville NAACP.

Meford: Who were your friends that helped?

Reed: Well, Netlee Harris served as my secretary for a number of years, Anna Sullivan was also a secretary. Then Willie Fleming served as chairman of the redress committee and Thurman Coleman who is located at the First Baptist Church in J-town, he was the vice president and at that time and the pastors from all the churches. It was more or less elderly people at that time. They were the ones that really supported it and after we were established and organized that's when we made contact with the school board. We ask them about the plans for integration.

Meford: Did they give you a plan for integration?

Reed: We had quite a few meetings with them and it was a hard thing to do. You see, here in Shelbyville, you had three schools involved. You had the black school, the white school, and then you had an independent school Lincoln Institute. We had 3 different categories we had to work with. I still have all the papers and correspondence that we did with the school board. We finally came to some agreement.

Meford: Did you have any resistance by any city officials or just people in general?

Reed: The city was a hard nut to crack! You've got your type of people that don't want changes.

Meford: How did the resistance to change happen? Was there violence?

Reed: No, we didn't have any violence.

Meford: How did they express their resistance?

Reed: The children that wanted to attend school, did. Now you had some black kids that started to school and decided that they didn't want to go to the white school so they continued to go to the colored school. The children, at that time, ran into difficulty, the ones that attended the white school. You had a lot of problems with them but it was just one of those things that you accept and overlook. We taught our children better than that. I had one nephew that started out the very first year that they integrated and he went through the 12th grade. It was just what you a child to do. They had hard things to overcome.

Meford: Besides the schools, what other things do you remember about integration?

Reed: The swimming pool.

Meford: The same things?

Reed: Yes, we had difficulty with that. The year that the pool was built, many people don't understand that either, for years over in Martinsville was the city dump and that at the corner of 11th and High Street and the city dump burnt constantly (smoke, rats, and everything). I always laughed and said that when the rats, the fires and bugs start going west that they decided they had to get rid of them. All up in the west end was white and during the mean time they built this school and a swimming pool. When they finished building that and with the money left over they cleaned up the dump and got rid of the dump. They was our end of the deal. The got the swimming pool and we got rid of the dump. That was just the general feelings of the black people.

Meford: Do you vote regularly?

Reed: I vote all the time. Every time.

Meford: When was the first time you voted?

Reed: What year was it? You vote when you are 18 so it had to be in 1936 or in 1945.

Meford: Do you remember anyone in particular that you voted for? Any politician that you felt passionate about getting elected or not getting elected?

Reed: In the city? Yes, I was all in agreement with Dr. Porter, he ran for mayor. My daughter and myself, we worked with the Combs, that was the Governor. There is just any number of them that ran that I have supported. I served with the Democratic party at that time. I always gone, up until the early 70's, I've attended all the Governor's meetings when they'd have a luncheon. During that time I was also working with the church and the NAACP and the Homemakers. All that tied in to keeping abreast of what's happening. That's another thing.....I've worked with the Homemakers during the years they integrated. I was the last president that served with the tri-county committee which was Shelby, Franklin and Scott Counties.

Meford: Did that integration so pretty smoothly?

Reed: Yes. It was something, as Christians, we felt that had to be done. We felt like it was up to us to come forward and do it as smoothly as possible.

Meford: Do you have any other memories about Shelbyville that are significant.

Reed: No.

Meford: Well, that's about all I have and I know you don't feel well.

Reed: I think it's the change in the atmosphere plus my resistance is low from all the travel.

Meford: Well, I hope you feel better.

Reed: I will.