

# Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

*Interviewer:* Mark Mefford

*Date:* 7-26-95

*Interviewee:* Laura Roland

*Running Time:* 25 minutes

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Laura Roland  
Shelbyville Main Street  
Oral History Project  
Interview conducted by  
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Meford: When were you born?

Roland: May 19, 1920

Meford: How long has your family lived in this area?

Roland: All their life. We've lived at Olive Branch. My father was raised up at Olive Branch. Do you know where Olive Branch is? You go out that road there and go on out.

Meford: Towards the highway?

Roland: No no. When you go to Olive Branch the road runs on through. You go over I64 and go on through to Olive Branch. From Olive Branch you can go back and hit Finchville, KY. You know where Finchville is, don't you? From there you can come on back to Shelbyville or go to Taylorsville or all through there. When you come back you can hit I64.

Meford: So your people come from Olive Branch?

Roland: Yes.

Meford: Were you born in Olive Branch?

Roland: No. I was born behind the old Masonic Home in Shelbyville. Do you know where the Masonic Home is?

Meford: No.

Roland: So you not familiar with this area at all?

Meford: No. Is it close to here?

Roland: Yes, just like your going to Frankfort on old 60 there.

Meford: What did your parents do for a living?

Roland: My father, he was a barber and a caretaker. After he became a barber he was caretaker up there at the old Masonic Home. After he left there he became a barber and janitor at the First Baptist Church and then he took care of the Farmers Tracy Bank in Shelbyville

Meford: Are you retired now?

Roland: No. I'm tired but I can't retire.

Meford: What was your occupation?

Roland: A furniture man. I repair furniture.

Meford: Have you done that your whole life?

Roland: No. I worked in Louisville for twelve years at Jacob Levi Brothers. They sold building materials.

Meford: Are you married.

Roland: Yes. I've been married for 52 years.

Meford: Is that right. Is your wife from Shelbyville?

Roland: Yes. She was born in Shelbyville.

Meford: Do you have any children?

Roland: Yes, I have one. He is 52, no, 51 years old.

Meford: Does he still live in Shelbyville?

Roland: He has these apartments out here. Lynn Acres, he has about 55 units out there. He and another gentleman.

Meford: You were born in 1920, so what do you remember about Shelbyville's downtown area and the Main Street area in the 1920's?

Roland: Well let me tell you about that now. I don't know too much as a younger man because kids in those days didn't run all over town. You could go down to the next corner but you had to be back at a certain time. It wasn't like it is now. I didn't know too much. After I got some age, I went through town but at 12 and 14 I didn't go to town much unless Poppa was with me.

Meford: So you were just allowed to run around the neighborhood?

Roland: Yes, right around here and around the corner. Kids didn't go up town like they do now.

Meford: You went up there with your Dad?

Roland: Yeah.

Meford: What did you go up there and do?

Roland: Well, he'd go grocery shopping you know.

Meford: Where did you all do your grocery shopping? Do you remember the name of the store?

Roland: At 5th and Clay there was a fellow by the name of McClain that had a store and after that the Logan's had the store and that's where we'd go. I'd get peanuts down there.

Meford: In the 20's, you were still young, did you go up on Saturday nights with your parents and go to the grocery?

Roland: Yes, on Saturday night.

Meford: After you got your groceries, did you stay and see a movie or anything?

Roland: No, no! Father didn't play that. There was too many...there was 9 of us.

Meford: Oh!

Roland: He couldn't afford no movie at that time. After I got up to be 16 or 17, I went to the movies. There wasn't no money to waste.

Meford: Did the whole family go shopping?

Roland: No, just a few. Maybe one of the girls might go, or maybe a couple of them. That was it.

Meford: So, when you were 16 you started to go downtown.

Roland: Oh yes, I could go downtown a little bit. Not too often. You had a certain time you had to be in.

Meford: What time was that?

Roland: Oh, you come in no later than 8:30 or 9 o'clock or father would meet you at the door and wanted to know why you weren't in! We didn't have no boys staying out till 2 or 3 in the morning. No, we just didn't have that!

Meford: Did you drive to the grocery?

Roland: No, we walked. We didn't have no car.

Meford: So did you take enough people to carry the groceries home?

Roland: No. This man delivered them.

Meford: Well that's all right. When you were old enough to start going downtown, what kind of things did you do for a good time? Did you go to the movies or what?

Roland: Yeah, we'd go to the movies.

Meford: What else did people do downtown?

Roland: We had a restaurant down there.

Meford: What was the name of it?

Roland: William Brown's Cafe. You remember it don't you? What they drove in those days son.....there were very few automobiles.....they came in horse and buggy to Johnny Court Day, it was the 4th Monday, I think it was every 3rd Monday, they brought the horses and traded horses down there. You don't know anything about Shelbyville, do you? It was right at 4th and Clay, there was an empty lot there and was there for years. That big tank that you see from here, that water tower wasn't there then. That came later. I can't tell you the exact time it came. They traded horses, knives, guns and everything.....Johnny Court Day

Meford: Was there much trading with money or did they barter?

Roland: Well, yeah. You saw some money and traded horses. You could buy horses. Some of them ole boys had money under the rug. The bank didn't know nothing about that money, they had it under the rug. Them ole boys would put it through.....that ole horse trading.

Meford: Was that called County Court Day?

Roland: Johnny Court Day. That's what they called it. I believe ever 3rd Monday or 4th Monday, I can't remember exactly.

Meford: Was it year round or just when it was warm out? Did they do it in the winter?

Roland: Yeah, they done it all winter and summer.

Meford: Do you go to church around in this area?

Roland: Yeah, right on College Street. No that's an old church. My sister can give you all the details on that. She has everything written about that church, when it was first started and everything.

Meford: What's the name of it?

Roland: St. John's Methodist Church.

Meford: Did a lot of social activities center around the church? Did you do a lot of things socially with the church?

Roland: Yeah they had what you call, let me see, what they called peace trials and things like that. Then they had home coming in those days. All the people out of town came home.

Meford: Other than the county court day and church activities, what else did.....

Roland: Well they had ball games, but they don't have them to much now you know. All these ole boys had a team. Frank, you had a team too?

Meford: Who used to win?

Roland: It was even. They'd win one or two, we'd play at least 4 games year. They used to have a football team here and they used to play the Mondanes, a team out of Louisville, you've heard of them, and Shelbyville had a dog gone good team then. It was just a Sunday thing they had going. The ball games. Shelby Lee Moxley could throw a ball so fast! But at that time a black man couldn't get on the big times. It was way back there. He was a good one and played with some of these little so called "Pro" teams in different places in Kentucky. Everybody wanted him to pitch for them. Oh yes, left handed and he could throw almost as high as this porch. Couldn't nobody hold him but Charlie Shields. He was a bad ball player.

Meford: Well did anything happen in the downtown area around Christmas? Any holiday festivities?

Roland: Yes, in later years, it came with a parade you know. They had a Christmas Parade from the fairgrounds on into the court house. A band and Santa Claus on the sleigh.

Shelbyville used to have another team. A white team down at the park, lets see 4th, 5th, 6th at 3rd Street. Back there by the creek, there was a ball club. Kidd Casper had one, he ran the hardware store, and they played every Wednesday. Everybody would go to the ballgame. They had a good team. Let's see, I can't remember most of the boys names. I know Ted Chastman was in charge. All the merchants would buy each ball player's suit for advertisement on the back of the shirt. There was a little something to do. They were going pretty good. It was a lively little town in those days. I remember a boy named George Harris, I'll never forget it. He was on the back of this black boys horse so he could see the game. There was a big wide board fence and you had to get up high.

Meford: How did the depression change the downtown Main Street area?

Roland: In what respect?

Meford: Well, was there the same amount of trading as there was before?

Roland: Do you mean about county court day?

Meford: Yeah.

Roland: They got away from that and went to automobiles. See? Everyone had an ole Chevrolet or Model T ford and that kinda eliminated drivin the horse and buggy unless you

had them to show at the fair. Just ridin, they wasn't using them. They had old Model T Trucks and old Internationals. It just washed the poor horse out except for the race horses or show horses at the fair.

Meford: Where did you go to school?

Roland: Shelby School on Bradshaw.

Meford: Was that a High School?

Roland: No, it went to the tenth grade and then you went to Lincoln Institute.

Meford: Are either of those schools still open?

Roland: No, no,no, no, no! They closed those schools and went to bussing the children to the High School.

Meford: Did many people come downtown from out in the country?

Roland: Yeah! The Main Street was so crowded on Saturday nights. Every farmer in Shelby County came to town on Saturday nights. They had horse and buggy!

Meford: So they rode a horse and buggy into town and then they got a car.

Roland: They didn't have no where else to go in those days. They would come in and talk about the crops and fishin. Now they had a pool room on Main Street. The restaurants would stay open until 10 or 11 o'clock, that was in the horse and buggy days.

Meford: Where the county roads in any kind of condition?

Roland: They wasn't A-1 shape, some of them were. U.S. 60 was good but these back roads was rock. You didn't have asphalt in those days, just a rock road.

Meford: When they became paved, do you think it increased the traffic to downtown?

Roland: For congregating downtown? In one respect, yes it did. When they became asphalt and concrete.

Meford: Was there a railroad to come through here?

Roland: Yeah! We have two. A "Southern" over there and "L&N" over here.

Meford: Were they freight or do they carry...

Roland: Oh no passengers, just all freight. It used to be a passenger L&N called George Washington that came through Frankfort. That was the last one that was over there. I forgot the year it went off. The George Washington. I remember, now you don't see it anymore, I remember when the railroad men would cut the weeds along the railroad tracks. They had steel drivin men that laid railways. They had a square plate that held the track down to this long tie and they sang all along. You'd here them sing, I've done forgotten it. A crew went out every morning. They had a foreman and they worked in the rain and if it wasn't to cold, they worked. If it was zero, they wouldn't put a man out to work in that.

Meford: Do you remember any of the words to the any of the songs they sang.

Roland: I've heard them sing "John Henry was A Steel Driving Man", that's all I know. A man lived hard in those days. Now they have a truck with a bed in back and it's got these arms that comes out and they brrrrrm.....brrrrrm, and they put those plugs in.

Meford: How long do you think it took some of these farmers, when they drove, to get here or rode horses?

Roland: What the distance was?

Meford: No, how long did it take them? An hour?

Roland: Well it depends on how far they lived. Three miles or four miles, some of them came in the evenings. I'd imagine at 12 o'clock they'd quit working and they'd go to the house and eat supper, some of them ate in town. Some of those guys had some mighty fine horses in those days brother. Pretty buggies, yeah!

I'll tell you a joke one time. There was a fellow who used to live right down, two houses below where he's painting. They called him Pappy Wakefield. He was going home one night and he'd been in a spent all his money in town and they had toll gates here then. He had a son by the name of Hackley or Stanley. Yeah, Stanley, he had two boys. He got up the gate the man said "all right". He said, "I don't have a quarter" or fifteen cents or what ever it was back then. He said "I've got to get home and milk in the morning"

Meford: Back in the forties, where there any businesses owned by blacks?

Roland: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We had a fellow on 6th Street by the name of Madison Biggin, he owned a used clothing and he repaired cloths, and did alterations. Then we had a gentleman by the name of Johnny Martin on this end of town, at Martinsville (that's what they called it) he ran a grocery store. Then we had another one, I can't think of his name, Rob.....he came out of Louisville and started a grocery store. Rob Price, I think it was. Yes, Rob Price. Then we had a fellow by the name of Willie Baxter, my wife's uncle, he ran a restaurant over here by the warehouse. And then they had another fellow by the name of Will Ellis, a black restaurant owner over there by the warehouse. That's back in the 30's, back in them days. There has been alot since then. Now lets see, there is a black under taker here and then we've had some black barbers. There was a black man that was called a "stucko" man. You've seen them put there hand in a bucket and put it on a house. He was about the best I've ever seen. He was really good. That building down



below me, down on 4th, he done that when I was a little boy and there is no crack no where now. He done it with a scaffolds, he was up on a ladder like, mixed up his mortar and took it up. He put a screen on that wood and then he'd doop.....doop.....doop! How he done it, I don't really know, he was really good. Then we had alot of concrete fellows then. We had some carpenters in those days around here. Others businesses, I can't recall.

Meford: Did blacks and whites mix for business? Did whites come to your father to get a hair cut?

Roland: No. Not in those days. My father cut all the old Mason's hair at the Mason's home. My father is in business, he's a barber. I told you that didn't I.

Meford: Socially, did whites and blacks mix? Like at the movies?

Roland: Socially? No.....no.....no.....

Meford: Was there a balcony?

Roland: Yes sir and that's where you went. When integration came, you could sit anywhere you wanted.

Meford: Looking back at downtown and Main Street now, what do you see at the biggest changes that have happened over your life time.

Roland: Such as?

Meford: Oh, everything. The appearance of it.

Roland: Yes the appearance, they've given it a new face. All the stores have. They have build some new buildings and some new banks. They have remodeled some of the banks. They didn't tear them all down. It's nice downtown. It's now a big town but it's a nice little place.

Meford: Are there generally the same type businesses today that there used to be?

Roland: Yes, they are the same kind of business, just about. Now we've had some new kinds of business. There are more antique shops downtown then there was in those days. There used to be Lerman Brothers, Lincoln and across the street. Then there was the old Science Hill girl school. There was girls from all over the United States that came here and that is an old landmark. Real old!

Meford: These days, downtown is not the center of activity is it?

Roland: No.

Meford: When did it start to shift? When did downtown become less important as a meting place.

Roland: When the shopping centers came in on the outer edge of town. That's when the crowd would move. They moved out to shop.

Meford: When did they build those?

Roland: Back in the 70's.

Meford: Do you think even in the 60's there were people going downtown on Saturdays?

Roland: No. They didn't stay no longer that 5 o'clock if they came to town. But, back in the 30's, they would congregate. But this is a nice little town. I can't see nothing wrong with the town. I wouldn't dare to say because it's just what you make it. If you want to run wild, they'll treat you are an animal. If you get yourself in the right mind, you won't have a bit of trouble. I never have. I've never been in no jail. I've been on the grand jury but I've never been to jail. Well, I might go tonight, I'd better knock on wood.