

Shelbyville Main Street Project

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

Interviewer: Mark Mefford
Date: 8-2-95

Interviewee: Bill Shannon
Running Time: 30 minutes

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Side Two

FEEDBACK

BILL SHANNON

INTERVIEW

August 2, 1995

Interviewed by Mark Mefford

Transcription by Susan McMullan Groves

Full Name: Bill Shannon, William Lee, for full, but I go by Bill most of the time.

When were you born? 1919.

Tell me your parents names: R. L. Shannon, Jr. and Nancy Stout Shannon.

How long has your family lived in Shelbyville or in the Shelby County area? The business started... the funeral business started in 1865. My great-grandfather... he was in LaGrange but my grandfather moved to Shelbyville about 1900. So, the family has been here for a long time.

Your family has been in the funeral home business for a long time, haven't they?
Yes. I'm a fourth generation and my son is the fifth.

Has this always been your occupation? Yes. I've done a little bit of high school teaching and first aid work... Red Cross work.

What did you teach in high school? What? *(laughing)* Well, I taught a little bit of everything but mostly, I guess, it was trigonometry and geometry... some biology... I was kind of substituting when some of the other guys weren't available.

Are you married? Yes.

You mentioned you had a son. Do you have any other children? Oh, we had eight children. The oldest was killed in an automobile accident in 1976.

How many of your children worked...you mentioned your son works here...in the funeral business? He's the only one in the funeral business, yes.

How long have you lived in Shelbyville? All my life.

Have you always lived in the downtown area...the Main Street area? No, I was in a subdivision across from the fairgrounds for awhile and then we moved to our present location at 1120 Main Street in 1953.

Where were you living when you were growing up and when you were in school?
When I started, I was living upstairs over the funeral parlor at Eighth and Main Street. We had a small store-like place at that time. It really wasn't a funeral home. There was a

nice apartment upstairs and my parents lived up there. When I was 12 years old, my dad built a house across from the fairgrounds where Dr. Gravett now lives and, uh, we moved there when I was 12 years old. So, from that point on... until my folks died in '76....

When you lived on Main and Eighth do you have any memories of the downtown in particular? Well, yes, quite a few. My grandparents lived next door between there and what's now the Armstrong Agency. At that time, they had a yard down on the street. The thing I remember the most is Fourth of July... we used to set off firecrackers and roman candles and all down there right on Main Street. But you couldn't do that today!

Was that a city wide firecracker thing or did you just...? No, it was kind of a family thing. We got together and did that.

Did a lot of people live in the downtown area? At that time, there were more living there than now. There were apartments in almost all those buildings.

What would go on in the downtown area during the week? Would people come in to trade or did they wait till the weekend or was there much business in the downtown area? Well, Saturday was the big day. I started working for Briggs Lawson's clothing store... he had a store there on the corner of Sixth and Main Street and Saturday and Saturday night was the big thing.

So you worked at Lawson's store...dry goods store? No. Not the dry goods store. This was Brigg's clothing store... Briggs Lawson. Well, he was the brother of Jack Lawson and Stanley Lawson who ran the other store.

What kind of clothes did they sell? At Brigg's? Oh, suits. A man could come in and fix himself up! Have you talked to Briggs yet? No. Well, you need to talk to Briggs. Well, I've been trying to get a hold of him. He's kind of the historian right now of Shelbyville. I enjoyed working with him... it was a pleasure. He had pajamas, underwear, neckties, some suits....

Do you have any idea how much of suit of clothes cost at that time? Oh my, I think fifty dollars was a big amount.

Were they sized suits or did you make them there? I think he carried a few but most of them we had to tailor on occasion. They made appointments to go down and get measured. So, I guess they were kind of tailor-made for the customer. He used to sell a lot of hats, too. That was a big thing.

Did people wear hats around during the week or just going to church? Oh, all the time. Anytime you went to town you put your hat on!

Was it fashionable or to keep the sun out of your eyes? Who knows!

You mentioned the Fourth of July and having a good time, what other kind of events did you and your family come out for...special events or to do something special?

Well, I remember going up to the corner drugstore which, at that time, was where Brigg's store was later and they had a soda fountain in there and cherry sodas were their specialty. My grandmother couldn't get around too well so somebody would drive her up there and I'd get to go along too and participate. That was always a treat! Traffic was very minimal. The biggest change in Shelbyville...even in the last five years... continually has been traffic.

Is it from the industries or what? I think so...probably so.

It affects the downtown area too? Oh yeh. I think so...probably so.

I think kind of most industries are down by the interstate, aren't they? Is there a lot of coming in and out of town? Well, one of our biggest needs is a place to go that winds around the city.

Put a bypass around the city? Yes...uh-huh. Around the west end particularly.

Has there been any talk about putting one in? Oh yes...uh-huh. There's been talk about it yes. Of course, it took twenty or thirty years to get the one out here on the east end!

Is there opposition to build the bypass? I don't know of any. It's just the matter of getting the money, I reckon. If they wait much longer...with more development, we're just going to have more cars.

So there wasn't much traffic when you were...? No, there wasn't much traffic.

What traffic there was, was there automobile or...? It was automobile.

Did you all have a car? Uh, my folks did, yeh. Then we had several cars in relation to the funeral business. Had an old coach and a couple of old...I think they were Plymouth's at that time...old seven passenger cars. Had a big, uh, what they called a _____ hearse...it was built with an Auburn motor. We had about four or five...five vehicles, at least, and we had a garage directly behind there at the so-called funeral home at that time. We lived directly on the corner of Eighth and Main Street.

Is the structure still there? No. It's gone. The garage is still there. Now, it's Sharon's Flower Shop.

Where did you go to school? Went to Shelbyville High School and I went to grade school in the northside area. Shelbyville High School and then to Washington University.

How many people were in your graduating class in high school? Do you remember?
Right at 50.

When you went to high school, what did you all do for a good time? After school or on weekends either one? Well, I was involved in all kinds of sports so my folks said that you were supposed to not play with girls too much! But, we did! We had a lot of good times. There were three or four couples and we were all good friends. Ah, we'd take off and maybe go to Mammoth Cave one weekend and uh, the place down here at Evergreen Inn where you could go and dance down in the Middletown area. We'd take short trips around.

Did you all stay in the downtown area much to do things? Well, there were a couple of places downtown at the time. The names have changed over the years...Hallenbach's was an old place there to go in and sit around and drink cokes...loafing...and there were several places like that around town. Clyde Hall's later on was a good place and young people gathered there. Even one or two places started a place where you could go upstairs and dance...but I can't remember where. Over in Lerman's or Lincoln's...in that area over there. I can't remember the name of it now. It was Blue something-or-another.

What sports did you play in high school? Oh, football, basketball, tennis.

Did those draw a crowd to the games? Well, looking back at the games they weren't too big crowds. **Pretty big at the time, huh?** (*Laughing*) But, uh, not comparable to today's crowd. But, we drew a crowd cause we had an outstanding football program at Shelbyville High School. We won the Central Kentucky Conference a couple of years. Bruce Daniel was our coach and he was a great individual. He just died recently. He belongs in the Athletic Hall of Fame. I've applied to get him in but I haven't got him in yet. He was a great leader and coach and principal of the high school, too.

How did the Great Depression change the downtown area? I don't remember too much about the Great Depression except I remember everybody owed everybody. I know particular people owed on their funeral bill. I know that. We had to wait to pay our bills...the grocery bills even. There were several grocery stores around town. Blakemore's was one of the big ones. You borrowed credit and paid them when you could sometimes. That's the thing I really remember the most is that people had to wait on everybody.

Were there a lot of places that closed down? That I can't remember. I was about...about that time dad decided to build his house up in the west end across from the fairgrounds. I think he got it built for \$15,000 and that was a lot of money back then. I think he paid on it for thirty years, so, I was 12 years old when we moved up there. Things began to get better after, you know, 1935.

How did people make a living in 1935 that was different from before the Great Depression? Well, most in Shelby County were mostly farmers and things and they were still able to raise a lot of their food and things. That made a big difference. A lot of them had a hard time cash-wise but they could continue to live and eat well. So, that wasn't too much of a problem.

The farmers would bring their crops in and would they ever, uh, sell them for services or take them on trade or...? Sure would...sure would. A lot of people...a lot of farmers would come in and... particularly egg farmers... would bring eggs in and sell door to door. You know, things of that nature... some fruit and vegetables, too. They would bring them to your door.

But most of the farmers came to Shelbyville to do their trading? Yes.

They didn't go to Louisville or Frankfort or anywhere else during the Depression? Oh, I don't know.

You mentioned traffic wasn't too bad then, were the roads...what kind of roads were there going in and out of Shelbyville? What condition? How many? The biggest change in the road system probably was made when US 60 was rebuilt. For awhile we had to detour around going to Louisville or going to Frankfort either one while they were rebuilding US 60. Of course, it was also... I don't know if anybody has mentioned this or not... but there used to be the inner urban that ran between Louisville and Shelbyville. The tracks ended down around First Street. There was a barn down there that they kept it in and it came right up Main Street and went on out in front of the fairgrounds. At the time, there was a big hill there in front of the fairgrounds and there was a bridge going from the road over to the fairgrounds and the inner urban went underneath the bridge. That was that way for a long time until they rebuilt 60 and kind of discontinued the inner urban.

So, that was when the inner urban shut down? I can't remember exactly.

About what year was that going on? It would've been after my father built his house... I would say late '30's.

Do you remember...was it just called the inner urban...was it privately owned by a corporation...did it have a name? That I don't know but the terminal was downtown Louisville. It was either on Main Street or Jefferson... I'm not sure which. They had a barn down there so they'd run regularly between Louisville and Shelbyville.

Did it follow US 60 where it is today? Pretty much. Sure did.

Was it electric? Uh-huh. They had the live wires up above.

Do you know how much it cost to get to Louisville and back? Oh gosh, I think less than a dollar. I can't remember exactly.

How many cars ran on it at a time? Did it just have one car? Usually one... and maybe two sometimes. Usually just one.

How many times a day do you reckon it ran? I think going in to Louisville there was probably two trips a day... maybe three. Going back, the same thing. I know there was always one leaving down there around getting off time around five or six o'clock. It would leave there and get here at seven or seven thirty... something like that. A lot of people rode that to work.

Did these people live in the downtown Shelbyville area? Well, some did. A lot of people had their places close by... whether they were right there on Main Street or not. There were some apartments upstairs.

These people that were going to Louisville to work, were they professional people or were they laborers? What kind of people were going to Louisville to work? I think they... at that time, they were more clerk's than the professional people. I had an uncle I know that lived down there and he commuted back and forth to his parent's home up here. He had a room down there... he was a bachelor. So, I know he rode it quite a bit. Anytime my grandfather or mother and father needed to go... shopping or whatever... they'd get on it in the morning and come back in the afternoon.

Was the car enclosed so they could use it in or out? Yes it was enclosed. As well as I can remember it! If you get ahold of Briggs he'll be able to correct me!

What kind of changes have you seen in the downtown area...as far as the appearance of it? Some of the buildings were allowed to go down a little bit over the years. Now over the past few years they've been fixed up a little bit. The types of businesses have changed tremendously.

What kinds have disappeared? Well, there were the five and ten cent stores, uh, on Main Street for many years and Mark Searce had a jewelry store there for many years... I guess his started somewhere in the '30's or '40's. And, uh, then there were two or three department... Lawson's store and then Lerman's or Lincoln's. Smith-McKenney's was on the corner there by the park. The banks were there, of course. So, it has changed a lot.

What kind of businesses have replaced some of those? Mostly antique places... which has been a blessing really. They have those malls down there and they draw a lot of people in. That's good. There was another place there that was kind of fixture and that was Poe and Ruff's... that was the name of the company. They had a place next to the courthouse. They had all kinds of hardware and things of that sort. There was another big store in the mid of town on the opposite side of the street... Wadlington's. They were

a hardware store and they'd been there for many years. So, you had a couple of soda fountain type places... loafing places... I mentioned a couple of them earlier. Then there was Rothschild's... a big clothing store. They were the prime clothing store even when Brigg's was in business on the corner. Brigg's was a newcomer and started up and then later on when the Rothschild's died off and wanted to sell, why, Briggs moved up to their store.

What year about did city services such as the post office and fire protection, the police force... what kind of changes have gone on in the Main Street downtown area there? Well, let's see... let me address each one of them individually. The police force, of course, was smaller at the time. Chief Jones was the chief for many, many years. He was very knowledgeable. In other words, if some crime took place he had a good idea of who did it. So, he knew practically everybody in town and was very valuable from that standpoint. Uh, the police were always very, very cooperative... especially at that time. There was one we called Fotsie all the time... Fotsie Connor. Every time we had a funeral he was going to be there and be sure the traffic was taken care of and assist in any way he could. The police still help us... at funerals... they lead it through with their cars. Not quite the personal touch it used to be but we appreciate what they do. Louisville, for instance, I think has cut out all that. They don't give police escorts unless it's a special situation. So, fire... I don't remember too much about it. The fire department used to be up there in the square... fountain square... and uh...

Was it full time? Yes, it was full-time at that time... when I was growing up.

Was there a volunteer force? I think most of it was paid. I don't know how much volunteer force we have now. It really came in to being later on. Police and fire... what else did you ask about?

The change in the post office? Oh, the post office. The post office used to be there on the corner of Seventh and Main for many years. It was difficult for many people because of the steps so when they built the new post office they didn't put any steps. That made it easier on a lot of people.

Back in say the '30's, '40's and '50's, was the mail delivered by a carrier... by foot? If you walked up to him would you know him personally? Do you know your carrier today? Yeh, uh-huh. Of course it's kind of an odd thing. We have a post office box but we have to have another mailbox outside here because all the mail doesn't get delivered to the box. If it's addressed wrong... if it's a street address... the carrier has to carry it up here.

Have you always had a box up front or did they always just have post office boxes? Well, the box... most of the boxes were on the front porch. Ours was on the side porch here... even today. Haven't changed much.

Are there any city officials...mayors or city officials that stand out in your mind for any reason? Oh, we've had a lot of good mayors. Paul Schmidt was an excellent mayor. Mr. Matthews was the mayor for a good long time.

Do you go to church in this area? Yes. I go to the First Baptist Church.

Have you always attended that church? No, actually I grew up in the Methodist Church of Shelbyville... Centenary United Methodist Church and when I got married my wife was a Baptist. So we ended up going... we wanted to raise our family in that church. I've been a member for some time.

Where is the church located? First Baptist? Just across from the fairgrounds. Right there on US 60 West.

Do a lot of worship activities center around the church...social events and things like that? Some yes, uh-huh. We have ball games and basketball, softball. We had an old fashioned ice cream supper just the other night.

A lot of the churches are in the downtown area. In the '30's, '40's and '50's were the churches the center of social activity in any way? Oh, yes, they were.

Has the role of the church changed in the last 40 years? I don't...not that much really. A lot of the programs in the church have varied some. For instance, we used to have larger evening services... Wednesday night services. Some have discontinued that. We still have that at our church. But, oh me, the mission churches are still mission churches, I believe.

How has the business...the funeral business changed since a time when you can remember? Well, I grew up right in it... living in the funeral home in the early years... so I was around it for a long time. And then I got older and would help on occasion... whatever I could do. Um... what's changed? The biggest thing... when I was first getting in the business was that we sometimes did preparation of the body... the embalming... in the home... in the individuals home. So, we had paraphernalia in a suitcase so we could carry all of our equipment. We'd take it with us and go in their home. It's simple now for people starting in the business. A lot of funerals were held in the residence. Or at least the body would be left there in the residence. We didn't really have... there wasn't any real funeral home in town as far as that goes in the early years. So, uh, the body was usually kept at home or then taken to the church and have a service... most of the time. Some of the time we would have the service at the residence or I would take the body to the church for the church. That's been the biggest change in the funeral business. The embalming procedures have improved a lot because of improved chemicals. Things have been made a lot easier by the funeral home, I think. It's a place for people to come.

When did you all move into this location on Main Street? We moved here in 1941. And we've added on a couple of rooms in 1955 and then we added two more rooms and the entranceway and the lounge downstairs in 1965.

Where are some of the local cemeteries around here? Do people usually buried here in town? Most of them go to Grove Hill Cemetery which is on 53 south. Turn by McDonald's and go out. There's another small cemetery in between here and Eminence... Shady Lawn. That's changed hands several times, I think, and it's on good footing now. A lot of the, uh, churches have small cemeteries. The other two main cemeteries would be Bagdad... which has a real good cemetery and Simpsonville. So, Grove Hill, Shady Lawn, Simpsonville, Bagdad would be the central places.

When you were still working for your folks and you all would travel to the cemetery either from a residence or from your alls place on Main now, back then did people...did traffic pull over and stop? Oh, yes. You almost had to... the roads were narrow.

Well, if the roads weren't narrow did they do it anyway out of respect? Yeh, they started..been doing it....

TAPE ENDED---SIDE B

THERE WAS NOTHING ELSE ON THE FLIP SIDE OF THE TAPE

(Transcription done by Susan McMullan Groves on January 8, 1997)