

James Shaffer, Charleston Broom and Mop

Where: Charleston Broom and Mop

Date: October 17, 2016

Location: Loudendale, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 41:06

This is the 2nd interview with Jim (as most people call him) and was conducted via video with West Virginia Public Broadcasting for radio and TV pieces for their show Inside Appalachia.

James Shaffer, b. 1929, of Charleston Broom and Mop, in Loudendale, WV is one of the last commercial broom makers in the state of West Virginia. He began making brooms at the age of 17 and at the time of the interview, still maintained a shop outside of Charleston.

See the short video produced in partnership with West Virginia Public Broadcasting: [“James Shaffer, Charleston Broom & Mop Company”](#) at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=O3lrgTn2hyM

and the interview with Jim, [“Building a Broom by Feel: Jim Shaffer”](#) by Emily Hilliard in *Southern Cultures* fall 2017, Vol. 23, No. 3: Things at <http://www.southerncultures.org/article/building-broom-feel-jim-shaffer/>

EH: Emily Hilliard

JS: Jim Shaffer

WVPB: West Virginia Public Broadcasting

00:00

WVPB: Right now, we are rolling.

EH: Okay. So just try to answer with complete sentences because I probably won't be in the tape when they edit it.

JS: Yeah.

EH: So, um, could you introduce yourself?

JS: I'm James Shaffer, owner of Charleston Broom and Mop Company.

EH: And how long have you been making brooms?

JS: 70 years.

EH: Could you tell me where we are right now? Just describe... sorry.

JS: We're at, uh, Loudendale, it's one mile short of Kanawha State Forest.

EH: And, um, how did you get into broom making?

JS: Well, I had quit school and there was a couple other boys lived in the neighborhood that was already workin' over there and they told me there was an opening. So I went over and went to work. And stuck with it. (laughs)

EH: And where was that?

JS: It was over right on the railroad track just between the capitol building and Laidley Field.

EH: Oh, pretty close to my house.

JS: It's now a state parking lot for Laidley Field.

EH: Could you talk about that first day on the job?

JS: Well, the first day on the job, I went in and talked to the owner or the boss, whatever and he told me that he had supposedly had an experienced man coming in to operate the sewing machine that he was, you know, that I was interviewing for, so, but he said, they had 2 of the sewing machines, his brother was operating one of 'em—course, the other one was vacant. And he told me, he says, go up there and watch Mack sew some brooms and see what you think of the job, so I went up there and watched his brother sew a few brooms and told him what had transpired between me and his brother and he said, well come on by

here at this other machine and I'll show you—let's show you. So he took me back there to the other machine, showed me what to do, so I stayed there and tried to learn—learning to make or sew the brooms for maybe an hour or an hour and a half and his brother the boss come up and says, "Oh what do you think about it?" and I says, "Well, it's a job! I says it's alright with, good with me." And I says, "Do you want me to go ahead and run the machine? Or do you want me to come back tomorrow or sometime?" And he said, "well you're here, you just go ahead and stay." So that was the hiring of the job. So I've been there ever since.

EH: How many people were working at the...

JS: It was about 18 or 20 of us that were working there at that time. Course, it was a lot of difference in the straw—you had to have as many people sorting and separating the straw, getting it ready for making brooms as you did people actually making the brooms itself. So, we had anywhere from 3-4 broom makers which was actually assembling and strawing of the handle and my job was to flatten the broom out and sew it to where it would be a flat broom. It was basically a round broom when they finished with it.

EH: At that time about how many brooms would you make today, er a day, and where would you send them?

JS: Well we basically'd make up to 300 dozen a week which is basically a tractor trailer load per week.

EH: And where would those go, where would they...

JS: Well, all over the Eastern United States—Ohio, Kentucky, New York.

WVPB: Can you do me a favor?

JS: Yeah.

WVPB: I like that answer, but can you say, "We'd ship 'em out to..." all the states, so that way we know.

EH: So I can get cut out of the tape.

JS: Okay. Okay, we'd ship 'em.

WVPB: Look at me please.

EH: Just look at me.

WVPB: You responded to me- just look at Emily.

EH: Just pretend he's not here.

JS: Oh, okay (laughs) I don't hear ya too well. (laughs)

WVPB: Yeah, I'm not here at all, just look at Emily and...

JS: But we shipped probably half of what we made to other states, which—ship in to Kentucky, Louisville, Nashville, all over the Kentucky area, actually Ohio we'd ship 'em, all the way up to Cleveland and even Chicago, Cincinnati, we shipped into Pennsylvania somewhat, and New York, even up in Connecticut. Ah, we shipped brooms to Macy's in New York for years, as well as a couple other large department stores. That was during the war years when you could sell any brooms you could make pretty much. The big stores as well as the grocery... grocery stores and hardwares were always the prime customers. But it'd kind of pride you a little bit to ship to Schwartz's in Cincinnati or Macy's in New York and what not like that.

6:03

EH: How have you seen that change?

JS: Well the change has been in the usage of brooms—straw brooms, uh, they course they have so many, instead of sweeping sidewalks and outside garage areas and everything, they use the gasoline blowers now to blow the dirt and dust away. Same thing in the house with these new laminate floors they have, they're so slick that they've developed dust mop type things for those sweeping the house and things, those that have those floors and there's an awful lot of them. So broom industry is fading out. I suspect another 5-7 years you won't find a straw broom in the store. The plastic fibers and those dust things for the slick floors.

EH: How do you feel about that?

JS: Well, that's just a natural occurrence if you can find something better, they're gonna go do it—I have no objections to it. If it wasn't for Lions Clubs selling brooms as their fundraisers, I wouldn't have a business today. Saying... you know back 20, 30 years ago or farther back, we didn't sell hardly any Lions Clubs—it was all wholesale distributors. But Walmart, Kmart, and Kroger's have took all that over now and you don't have any mom and pop stores to buy from the wholesale distributors, so they all went out of business.

WVPB: (Gives direction to audio guy)

EH: Could you tell me how you started your shop here?

JS: Well uh, back in '86, course I had always planned on starting a shop up of my own. But I'd stayed with the company over there 'cause they owned the real estate where they were at and they were trying to sell the real estate. And as you know to sell an empty vacant building is not too good price wise, so I stayed with 'em to help 'em sell their business, which they never did. And in '86 I had a slight heart attack and it kind of scared the people that owned it at that time—of course, they never did have anything to do with operating the factory per se—that was always left up to me. I run it just like I owned it for 10-15 years. But they got afraid that my heart attack would do me in as far as working was concerned, so they decided to close up all they could and so at the same time, I'd already built this building for this purpose on a deal that were... uh, glass company up in Fairmont was gonna buy the broom shop over there and turn it into a restaurant. And it was gonna be a broom factory restaurant. Back at that time there was a lot of that done. Uh, depots and different things like that were turned into restaurants. So I was

well-prepared—I didn't miss a day from the time they stopped over there I had my machinery and everything over here and was set-up and ready to go.

EH: So at that time you were the only employee at the other shop?

10:08

JS: No, there was 3 other employees. I worked the other, 2 of them for a while out here, but business dropped off enough that I didn't need them—I just worked them part-time. And was lucky enough to have somebody experienced that I could call on—wish I had them now! (laughs)

EH: Yeah, so what is gonna happen to the shop and to the...

JS: Well, when I finally give up on it, I guess it'll just die. I don't know uh, a lot of people at the Lions Clubs kind of worry about it, some of them have even considered trying to run it on their own and but, it's... nobody's come up. It's just not a profitable enough business to stay in unless you're in my position or you're Roosevelt's sending you that Roosevelt check every month—social security. (laughs) That's your living and this is spending money here.

EH: So have you taught any apprentices over the years?

JS: I've taught a lot of people to do the job or make brooms and whatnot but none of them have ever stuck with it.

EH: Could you tell me what makes a good broom?

JS: It's the quality of the straw that you use and of course, placing it in there at the right part. The tip of the straw is, uh, the very best of sweeping quality and a lot of people cut the ends, after they make a broom, cut the end off. When we... we do too but I don't cut... very little of it off 'cause the tips of the straw—the least you cut off the end of it, the better it sweeps.

EH: When you go to a store, do you look at their brooms and size them up?

JS: Every one. I take one down and inspect it close for a lot of different parts—to see where it came from, for sure, who made it, and how they made it, what they made it out of. So...

EH: Do you want to have that rephrased?

WVPB: Yes.

EH: Can you say, um, "When I go to a store..."

JS: Oh, okay. When I go into a store, I always check the broom rack to see what broom they have in the rack and how it's made, the quality of it, the quality of the straw they're using in it, as well as the price and everything.

EH: How does a synthetic broom compare to one of your brooms?

JS: The synthetics, plastics or all doesn't compare to a natural corn broom at all. The sweeping quality of it.

EH: It just doesn't pick up as much?

JS: It just doesn't pick up as much, right, it—you have to sweep the same spot 4 or 5 times to move the dirt or dust, whatever it might be, as you do with a corn broom.

EH: And why is 5 bands the standard?

JS: Well I really don't know why 5 bands is standard—it was that way when I got here! (laughs) But there's, it really depends on the size of the broom, and more than the 5 bands of sewing on it, it's the number of stitches that's in each band. Uh, a lot of places will only put 7-9 stitches in each band and I always put anywhere from 9-12 in each band. But it keeps it from falling apart as you're using it and flexing it.

14:33

EH: Could you tell me what the different models of brooms are that you make?

JS: The...

EH: The different models? You have like the heavy duty...

JS: Oh yeah, well like everything else, you have to... you need a variety of whatever you're offering or making and of course you make some lightweight brooms because some of the smaller frail women or older women can't handle a larger one. And once again we started building them larger when they started increasing the uses of driveways and patios and things outside sweeping, the men would want a heavier duty broom.

WVPB: Can we just redo that question please?

EH: Sure.

WVPB: I went to a wide shot and I want to remove this t-shirt real quick... (small talk)

15:52

EH: Um, ok so could you tell me about the models, the different models of brooms?

JS: Well some of, you make some of the smaller brooms out of a little shorter straw, then of course, 4 bands of sewing, uh, well you see a lot of them in the store today with 3 bands of sewing! I don't approve of that, I don't think I've ever made an order for anyone with 3 bands. I have used 5 and 6. But, it just... matter of personal opinion to me is that sewing of the broom is... makes durability longer if it's sewn tight enough that it doesn't in time flex and come loose to where it flips instead of sweeps! (laughs)

EH: So you look down on a 3-band broom?

JS: Well sure! Whatever product you're into, anybody else don't come up to your standards, you don't approve of it! And I've always been one that didn't think I should go and meet that cheaper built item. I always depended on quality and word of mouth for advertising.

EH: Could you tell me about the different types of brooms that you make?

JS: Well I make small whisk brooms for sweeping cars and even machinery—a lot of machine places use the hand whisk brooms to sweep their machinery off and then we make toy brooms for children. You see a lot of them more so now—you see them in restaurants and things like that, cause they go along with a little toy broom and dustpan to pick up stuff during the day. Uh, then as I say we make a few light-weight or what we call medium weight brooms for the elderly and then your regular household broom, and then the heavy duty. I do make a few even extra heavy duty for roofing companies that sweep the gravel on the roofs, the gravel roofs. They sweep and spread the gravel with a broom that's real heavy. Heavy duty straw.

18:35

EH: Um, Oh I had a question that just went out of my head. Um, who have you made brooms for? Have you made them for special occasions?

JS: Well yes, I've made them for about every kind of special age that you can. Anywhere from what now I'll probably in the next week or two get an order for witches', witches' brooms. Which, I've made a few before. I don't make 'em per se and try to go out and sell 'em—I don't do anything that way, I wait 'til the customer comes to me and requests something or other. But I made a, a, I had a customer out in California years ago that I made a lot of lightweight household brooms, they were made for a big grocery, of course similar to Big Sandy here. And they offered brooms as well as all kinds of little novelties which they used to decorate their store with, which weren't furniture, but they offered that stuff for sale along with their furniture. (Clears throat) Excuse me.

EH: What does a witch's broom look like?

JS: Well, it's just a round broom a lot of times, I have black straw to make it out of, paint the handle black, with black straw.

EH: Do you use a curved handle?

JS: No, I used to do a lot of the curved handles and doing arts and craft brooms, but I don't do enough of the witches' brooms. I have a few of the curved handles around somewhere right now leftover from many years ago.

EH: Yeah, so I saw at Pyle Hardware you have a black handled...

JS: Yes, they carry a black straw black handle broom. They're the only ones that carry it. That's partially because I can't buy the black straw anymore. I've got some left that I bought years ago.

EH: And is that just aesthetics or is that for a different purpose?

JS: Well it's for just for appearance more so than anything else, but the dying of the straw does make it last longer, it just doesn't wear as fast—I don't know what it is... I guess the dye slickens the straw where there's not as much friction on it.

EH: Are there changes in where you source your materials from?

JS: Yes, big changes there. (laughs) I have to keep hunting for outlier places to buy. Today there's only 2 places in the US to buy broom straw—you can buy handles a lot of different places, but the straw I either have to get it out of South Carolina or San Antonio, TX. Used to get it, used to get it a lot of places: Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Columbus, Greensboro, North Carolina, uh, even back further Kansas and Oklahoma. But since all the growing of the straw now went to Mexico... and a lot of the less brooms made and the less straw, the less places that are probably enough to stay in the business.

EH: You told me off the tape that you used to, um, farmers used to bring in their straw, could you say that again?

JS: Back years ago there used to be local farmers—broom corn will grow anywhere, it just doesn't grow good-looking quality here. The fog and dampness of the air causes it to be kind of speckled red or brown in color and that just doesn't go over that well in today's market. What the dry conditions in the western states as well as Mexico, it grows a lot clearer, greener straw. It doesn't sweep any better, but it looks better.

EH: Could you walk me through a typical day here?

JS: Well, a typical day, you just come in and look around and see what you need and which broom or which mop, or whatever you need, you decide from what orders you got and what stock you got, you decide what size you want to, what product you want to produce that day and gather up the straw which takes about 4 or 5 different grades and links of straw to make a broom, so you know, whether you're working with a little short broom or a household broom or a heavy duty, you have to gather up the straw and the handles to match that and go to the tying machine then and start tying them. Usually I'll tie—if I've got an order for 3 or 4 dozen that I need, I'll tie that many or if I've got it for 10 dozen, I'll tie that many brooms onto the handle with the wire and then when I get that quantity made up I'll go to the sewing machine, then press 'em out flat and sew, and finish 'em up, bundle and package 'em to go out. So your day varies according to how many, what orders come in or what orders you have. In the last year or so, I've not been able to build up any stock, but I haven't had to make anybody wait very long either. It's like the order I have for Kanawha, Kanawha City Lions Club, I have one or two of those items made up, but mostly I'll have to make 'em. As... I'll make whatever grade, how many household brooms they want, I'll make them and then sew 'em and finish them up and then I'll go back and make the next size, whatever they need. And work with it that way. Try to keep it in order of the way the orders come in.

25:50

EH: What's the highlight of your day?

JS: I don't have a highlight of my day—every day is the same. I get up, and get my breakfast and come to work and do whatever I need to do. Uh, so, I don't have a highlight of the day. It's... it's all in a day's work as they say.

EH: What keeps you doing it?

JS: Well, you gotta have something to do! And you know I feel great all day every day, so I have to do something. If I wasn't here making brooms, I'd maybe be over at McDonalds making hamburgers or something! I mean, you need to keep yourself occupied and busy if you're able to, and thank goodness I've been able to pretty much all my life.

EH: So I noticed this picture on your way that says “NRA Code Boom Industry”—could you tell me what that is?

JS: That was the original regular working regulations, uh, setting wages, setting, uh... how many hours you could work or where overtime started if you're working excessive hours. And the minimum wage, setting the minimum wage. That was done back under Roosevelt—have to mention him again. (laughs)

EH: Are you a Roosevelt fan?

JS: Kind of, yeah! (laughs)

EH: And why is that?

JS: Well, I don't know, he did a lot of good things, uh, I don't think anybody could ever do anymore for the elderly people—he allowed us to get old by not, you know, by having it so we could slow down and not work as hard in our later years. Most people go ahead and quit at 65 or 70, I just never was in a position I felt like I wanted to do that.

EH: Could you say, um, something with Roosevelt's name in it so... “I'm a fan of Roosevelt...” or whatever. Because you just said “he” instead of...

JS: Yeah, Franklin D. Roosevelt, as far as I'm concerned, was the best leader and will always be the best leader that the country's ever had.

EH: And so he recognized when there was an actual broom industry?

JS: Well he recognized all industry. He put out special—I used to have the printed instructions and laws, bylaws and regulations for that NRA sign but when I moved out here from Charleston, it disappeared. Somebody took it off of the wall before I, I was busy doing other things, and somewhere or other it disappeared off of the wall.

29:10

EH: Um, what do you listen to while you work?

JS: Country music! Country and western.

EH: And do you have a favorite artist?

JS: No favorite artist, just the older the better. Match my own time of growing up.

EH: I'm gonna look through my questions to make sure we've gotten... um, so are you the only... are there other broom makers in the state of West Virginia?

JS: No, there's no others in the state, other than the ones that make craft brooms at these craft fairs and things like that, they don't make anything to sell to the wholesaler or the Lions Clubs or anything.

EH: Can you say that again... "I'm the only broom maker..."

JS: Well I'm the only commercial broom maker making commercial brooms in the state. There's a few that make some craft brooms for wall hangings and things of that type. But all the other shops have give up. There used to be 4 or 5 shops here in the Kanawha Valley that made brooms to sell. We were always the largest of 'em, but there was one on the west side, one in Nitro, one on South Ruffner, uh, there was another one or two in the state. Clarksburg had a pretty good sized one at one time, but they've been gone for 20 years or more probably. They finally went bankrupt. You either go bankrupt or you just off and quit. (laughs) There's not enough profit there to stay.

31:22

EH: Um, I know you do it in stages but how fast can you make one broom, would you say?

JS: Well basically, for one broom in just normal work, I don't mean trying to break a record of making one broom, but probably 8-10 minutes.

EH: So how many do you make in a day?

JS: Well, I make probably 30, 35. Up until the last 3 or 4 years, I'd make 50 a day. But time changes everything whether you realize it or not.

EH: And I noticed your lunch box—what do you eat for lunch?

JS: I bring whatever we had yesterday for dinner. That's my lunch. I don't bring sandwiches. I don't average bringing a sandwich once a month. It's always beans and potatoes or meatloaf, I think's what I got today, so. And fruit—I eat more fruit than I do anything else. I eat probably 3 to, at least 3 to maybe 4 fruits per day.

EH: That's your secret!

JS: (laughs) Well, I don't know whether it's a secret or not, but it works! It works for me!

EH: Um, let's see...

33:00

How much do you sell your brooms for?

JS: Well, it varies. They, household broom sells for basically 65 dollars a dozen and the heavy duty broom sells for 85 dollars a dozen. Whisk brooms are like 40 dollars with them and toy brooms.

EH: Do you know how much they sell them at Pyle Hardware?

JS: Yeah, Pyle Hardware sells 'em, I don't know what he sells 'em for. I know he has 'em and when I go into his store, I don't have to check his rack—I know what he's got so I don't go look and see what he's selling 'em for. I try not to tell any of my customers what to sell their brooms for, I just tell them what I charge for 'em.

EH: And who are your main customers these days?

JS: Well my main customers are Lions Clubs and I don't have a bigger one than, you know, enough one... in their groups. So, uh... a lot of them will just buy a couple dozen at a time. Some of them will buy maybe 10 dozen at a time or even 15, but once again, they're, they usually just buy once a year. Some of the ones a little closer will buy one or 2 dozen and buy them 3 or 4 times a year.

34:43

EH: Do you have advice to a young person who is interested in broom making?

JS: Yeah, don't do it! (laughs) There's nothing wrong with it, but you got to have an income other than your broom making, you just use it as a substitute for, as your... go along for spending money or something like that. You know, unless you work for other people, you can't manufacture brooms one on one and sell them and make a living. You have to have other people working for you and you make part of your living off of them and whatever you can manage to make and work on your own.

EH: Could you tell me about the mops that you make?

JS: Well, I make string mops. Uh, it's what I use mostly is cotton and nylon blend and they use, uh, leftover material from the textile mills and things like that and remanufacture the string for mop string.

EH: And you said you're making more and more all the time—why?

JS: Well, because they're, they other companies have ceased making that type of mop and that size of mop and they're going more into mops that you don't... what I make you have to ring it out by your, by hand when you're finished using it, and they're making ones with uh, gadgets on them that you don't have to touch the dirty string of the mop to wring it out, it has some kind of a squeegee built on it that you can wring it out that way.

EH: Do you guys have any questions?

WVPB: Nope.

EH: Well is there anything you'd like to add?

37:00

JS: Well, not really just the fact that I appreciate the Lions Clubs and anyone else actually that stops by—only downfall I have of making brooms here is, being here by yourself all the time. Sometimes I'll go a week without somebody walking through the door, but it really doesn't bother me a whole lot, but I do enjoy company.

EH: What are your hours?

JS: From 9-4 o'clock.

EH: Monday through Friday?

JS: Monday through Friday, yes.

WVPB: Can you rephrase that, say, "I work usually..."

JS: I'm open now from about 9 o'clock in the morning to about 4:30 or 4 o'clock of the evening and I work Monday through Friday. I try to take Saturday's off for just to loaf with the family or loaf.

EH: Could you just introduce yourself again and say your name, how old you are, and um, the name of your business?

JS: Well I'm James Shaffer, most people call me Jim, I'm 87 years old and I'm the owner of Charleston Broom and Mop Company here in Loudendale, only 1 mile short of Kanawha State Forest.

WVPB: I have a question. So you've been making brooms for 70...

JS: 70 years.

WVPB: 70 years? Do you ever think that maybe, or did you ever wonder like, about doing something else? Wonder, what if I had done something else?

JS: Yeah, a lot of times we would, when there was work. A lot of times in the earlier years when I worked for the company over town, I, we'd get over stocked with brooms and maybe only work 2 or 3 days a week. Well when that happened, I went out a lot of times and tried to get jobs other places, but as a result of it, when we were down and only working part-time, seemed like everybody else was too, so I never, I never was, I don't know whether I was fortunate enough to get another job or unfortunate enough. I never decided which was—I've been content and happy with what I've done so maybe if I woulda went somewhere else, I wouldn't have been as happy with my life.

39:36

EH: Do you have other hobbies?

JS: Not really, never had much time for hobbies—it was always work, work, work, that's basically the only hobby I've had is working. Just like my spare time I built this building, I built the house next door for my son, uh, back many years ago. I built the house I live in. Uh, and did that in my spare time. And so there's always more than enough to occupy your time.

EH: What do you find yourself thinking about when you're making brooms every day?

JS: Everything! Just the world situation, maybe what I might get into this weekend or there's just nothing in particular that runs through your mind day in, day out, it's just a general lifestyle that you live and what you might do.

EH: Do you have anything else you'd like to share?

JS: Not that I can think of.

EH: Alright!

JS: That's not unusual. (laughs) It don't think as good as it did.

EH: Well thank you very much.

JS: You're quite welcome.

41:06