

Jim Shaffer

Where: Charleston Broom and Mop,

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Location: 188 Alcan Ave. Charleston, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 30:36

## **James “Jim” Shaffer**

James “Jim” 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](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=O3lrgTn2hyM)

See the post on the West Virginia Folklife Program blog: <https://wvfolklife.org/2017/03/30/building-a-broom-by-feel-an-interview-with-james-shaffer/>

Read 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

BZ: Brennan Zerbe

00:00

(Small talk)

JS: A bundle that's a hanging right there where you sew the 12 brooms together to make a bundle...

BZ: Sure, ok

EH: Ah, I see. Alright. So I might ask you some of the same questions just so we can record it.

JS: Well that's fine, no problem, whatever.

EH: So could you tell me your name and where you were born and when you were born?

JS: I'm James Shaffer, I was born here in Charleston over in South Park to be specific, January 27, 1929.

EH: Okay. And how did you come to broom making?

JS: Well, I had quit school—actually I quit school at the age of 16—they kind of helped me out the door a little bit, you know. (laughs) And my dad told me when I quit, he says you'll have to give me one year on the farm if you're gonna quit school, before you can go to public work, which I did, and a year later I went to... there was 3 or 4 other people in the community working at Charleston Broom then, which was located over by the Capitol Building in town. So they told me there was an opening over there and I went over and went to work.

EH: So what year was that?

JS: 1946, February 1<sup>st</sup>.

EH: What work were you doing on the farm for the year?

JS: Just growing vegetables and taking care of the animals. We were farmers. My dad worked at the glass plant in Kanawha City. But basically we were farmers and grew produce as well as chickens and hogs and cattle.

EH: But farm work wasn't for you?

JS: Well, I didn't own a farm—it was dad's, and there wasn't—it wasn't a big enough year round farm for year round work. So, that was his stipulation and I gladly took him up on it. (laughs)

EH: So why did you settle on broom making?

JS: Well just the fact that I heard there was an opening over there. I would have went to any job, but these boys told me, they says, hey we got an opening over at the broom shop if you want to go up there and check on it, and I went in. The boss at the time, he says, well the job I got open, I'm supposed to have an experienced guy come in that... in a few days... he says you can go up and watch—his brother was operating one of the machines then. I went up there and watched him a little bit and told his brother what the boss had said, and he said, well here, go back here to this other machine, which was just identical to his and he showed me how to do it. And so, and went on back to his job, so I went ahead and worked on the machine and sewed a few brooms for an hour or so and directly his brother, the boss come up, and I said hey, Mack showed me how to do this job and I've been doing a little bit of it, I said do you want me to continue to work or do you want to call me when you need me? He said you just stay right with it. So I did! (laughs). That was 70 years ago.

EH: Wow. So you just picked it up like that or did it take a while?

JS: Well, it takes a while to get up to your speed. Sewing brooms, which I did, was piecework as well as assembling the brooms on the handle—it was piecework. You only got paid for each broom you throwed on the floor. If you stopped to get a soft drink or take a snack or something, you didn't get paid. You know, you didn't have no guarantee, just whatever your piecework counted up. First week I worked 4 days, 12 dollars and 60 cents. (laughs) and I was proud of it!

EH: Yeah, yeah! And then there must have been something about it that...

JS: Well, I tried to get out of it a lot of times. Things would get down when we was working 2 and a half 3 days a week sometimes during the summer. So I went out and put out applications. But when we were down and low like that, so was the rest of the valley, it wasn't just us. So I never was fortune enough to find another job! (laughs). Because anytime there's a day's work at the shop making brooms, I was there!

EH: So how many people were working there?

JS: There was about 18 or 20 of us at that time.

EH: Wow.

JS: We made 300 dozen brooms a week. I would average on a good full-time when we were going strong, I would throw out 50 dozen brooms a day at the sewing machine (muffled mic).

EH: Sorry. So at that time were you just working the sewing machine?

JS: Yes.

EH: And other people would do the...

JS: We had 4 sometimes 6 guys making brooms, which you see me do there at first, and then we had a bunch of you know, 4, 5, people separating the straw—we bought it in raw form, the way it grew in the fields then. And sorted it, separated it, graded it, and all of that. And same thing with finishing brooms. There was 2 or 3 people painting handles and trimming the brooms and cutting the ends off and bundling 'em up and things like that. And every feller had his own job to do. Some of them maybe had 2 or 3 jobs to do. But in my case, I had the one.

EH: At that time, where were you getting your straw from?

6:35

JS: Mostly Texas and Oklahoma and Colorado. We were big enough then, we'd buy a boxcar load at a time. Same thing with handles, we'd buy a boxcar load or a tractor trailer load with 40,000 handles at a crack. And the brooms were always, run anywhere from 38-44,000 pounds at a purchase. I just ordered yesterday and this morning, I ordered 500 handles (laughs) and I think about 5 or 600 pound of straw. (laughs)

EH: Wow.

JS: And you know, it's just a different world. As far as brooms is concerned.

EH: And where would you sell? Where you just selling in the state?

JS: No, we sold quite widely from Chicago to New York, New Jersey, as well as Ohio and Kentucky, Virginia, North and South Carolina. But that's... everything's changed so much. The biggest change, I think really, is the freight. If you ship anything, make brooms and ship 'em out, the freight company charges you almost as much for shipping' em as what you get for the product furnishing the straw and labor to make it.

EH: Mmhm. Wow. Were you always making them the same style, or has the style changed?

JS: No, the style hasn't changed. We make slightly different styles, but the style you see right here now is 99% of what we made in the heydays.

EH: Oh. That's a good broom pun!

JS: (laughs) We also make little toy brooms and whisk brooms.

EH: Oh really?

JS: This is the toy broom and this broom's the same thing, you just cut it off and nail a cap to hang it up by. I've got a few of them back there.

EH: I think my grandma had some of those.

JS: Yeah. And it's obsolete now, you can't sweep a car out, it's got a thing along the door, you have to have a vacuum cleaner, you can't sweep without... maybe a pick-up truck you can, but...

EH: But you need it for some things!

JS: Well yeah, I still sell a few of them, but mostly around industrial places like the phone company or places like that—they have one in their truck as a tool. Suddenlink I'm sure carries one, to knock the snow or dust or whatever off. The small one is handy and will do the job.

EH: I needed one the other day cause someone threw a rock through my window.

JS: Yeah

EH: And there was glass all over my counter and my mom said, well don't you have a hand broom?

JS: Yeah (laughs)

EH: I needed one! (laughs) But what makes a good broom? Do you see other brooms and you can tell that it's not a good broom?

JS: Well, yes. It's a... you buy you straw in grades and of course it's not all broom corn. A lot of them are made with other fibers. And a lot of times they'll make #3 fiber, and I've been experiencing a little bit of that today in a bundle I put up there on the table. It's—it was... it was the only bundle out of 10 or 12 bundles in the bail. And it wasn't too awful bad, but it's got some sprinkles of some bad stuff through it. It's overripe or there it's brittle. It don't have the flexibility. And yes, I... course any store I go into I look to see what broom they've got in their rack. If they've got a broom in their rack. And of course I grade it! (laughs)

So, and the...I guess not... I was going to mention, you know, a store brand.

EH: You can!

JS: But I really shouldn't do that.

EH: (laughs) Well, so a lot of brooms have the synthetic fibers or something, do you think that doesn't sweep as well?

JS: Oh no, it doesn't sweep nearly as well. It's nice looking. It has the appeal of the looks and so there's a lot of them sold, but it doesn't have the sweeping quality. And it's the amount of straw—a lot of it that they sell... the size, the bulk size of the broom with straw... if you get too little a bit of straw in it, it doesn't have the sweep. Well, naturally, better... the more straw you have in it, the better it sweeps. You have that many more little bristles touching the floor.

EH: Yeah. Do you have a question?

BZ: I do. Do any of the men that you knew when you first started working on brooms—do they still live around here or do you know any of them?

JS: There's one that's 99 years old—he's over in Lick Branch and he lived over there when I worked over there. Me and him worked side by side for 40 years before I moved out here. And I worked him some for a few years after I worked out here. But he finally gave up the ghost.

EH: (laughs)

JS: (laughs) He keeps telling me every time I see him—he'd love to make brooms...

EH: Really?

JS: But he doesn't come out! (laughs) I even took him a machine, like that one over there—that's the job he always did. And I always... I took him a machine, set it up on his back porch for years and hauled him the broom straw and brought my brooms back that he made—he did that one step of the brooms and we worked that way for years.

BZ: Did you say he gave up the ghost?

JS: Well he gave up the ghost of working or making brooms.

BZ: Oh, I've never heard that.

JS: Oh, okay. You know, if you're around long enough you hear a lot of those things that you never heard!

BZ: Right I think I would!

JS: Yeah.

EH: So, all the equipment. Well, maybe you could just walk me through. We saw you do it, but maybe you could just walk me through the process.

JS: Well your broom winder is where your brooms start. It chucks the handles into a drill chuck type of thing, and all it does is turn the handle at your demand as you lace the handfuls of straw onto the handle. It has a wire feeding through it with tension on the wire to bind the straw good and tight and your... you have 7 different handfuls of straw to apply to that handle for each broom. And once you get it done, then it moves onto the sewing machine which... you're making the broom basically in kind of a round form and the sewing machine, it has a big vice on it where you press the brooms out flat and then wrap a string around it a couple of times, and you use the excessive string where you've wrapped around it for the machine to lace it back and forwards through the broom, which is your sewing process. And as a rule, you put 5 bands of the sewing—there's occasionally you only put 4, occasionally you put 6. But 99% of 'em... and selling the broom basically if the person or company knows anything about brooms, they'll want a 5-tie broom.

EH: Why is that?

JS: Well, that's just always been the best standard of the broom. And that's the bands you have on there, it's 5 ties. A lot of them used to make, and still do, 3 and 4 tie brooms. A buyer that knows anything about it—that's his first thing: "Is this a 5-tie broom?" If not, he doesn't want to see it! (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

JS: Well, you know, if they're a quality store.

EH: Right. Yeah. Do you... are there stores that know still?

JS: I don't think so. If you were selling Kroger or Walmart or someplace like that, maybe they would and we used to sell Kroger. We used to sell Kroger right outside of Cincinnati, as well as Kanawha City—at the same time, as well as some other pretty big accounts.

EH: So this equipment, especially the sewing machine—they probably don't make that anymore. So what happens...

JS: The Chinese are making them.

EH: Really?

JS: It's an exact copy of the one you seen me working here. This is... it's been passed along and finally pawned off on the Chinese.

EH: And do you know anything about where that machine was made?

JS: That machine was made in Baltimore, Maryland.

16:33

EH: Okay. And what do you do if you have a—it breaks or you need it to be repaired?

JS: Well, I was fortunate enough or once again smart enough that I accumulated a lot of parts and still have a lot of parts for it. Occasionally, something larger will break. I haven't broke anything that needed...that you have to have it welded back together. But in my 30 years here, I haven't had to do that.

EH: That's good.

JS: But you can't buy any parts for it.

EH: Mmhm. That's what I figured. So when did you take over the business?

JS: 1986 was when I took over here.

EH: And was it just you at that point?

JS: Beg your pardon?

EH: Was it just you then?

JS: Well yes, it was just me. I'd worked for them over there. And of course things were slowing down and the people that owned it, they didn't know anything about it. I had run it for years as if I owned it, you know buying, selling, making the brooms and hiring and firing—all of that. And in 1986 in the spring, I had a small heart attack and that scared 'em into quitting. Well, they didn't have nobody else that they could... take over to manage it and do what I was doing. Cause I was a mechanic for the machinery as well as all the everything... maintenance on the building and... (laughs) roofs and all! (laughs). SO they got kind of scared then and decided... they'd been wanting to quit for a few years. Back in '72 or 3 we had a guy that put a big down payment on the building over there and the company was still operating. He was gonna buy it and turn it into a restaurant like they do some of the railroad stations and things like that. And it was to be called The Broom Shop Restaurant with some of the machinery and brooms hanging around and decorating the inside of it. And I was to take over then. But it didn't happen so it went another 10 or 12 years before they finally decided, we better quit now while we can! (laughs)

EH: So then you bought it?

JS: No, I didn't buy it. I bought some of their material, but I had my own machinery setting back I'd bought years before. And I built this building for it, 10 years before. That was back when Rockefeller had this guy gonna buy it for a restaurant. I built the building and... because the guy told me, now when I buy it I can get this deal finished—you'll have 30 days to get out. So I jumped in and built my building and got it ready and everything. Then it didn't happen for 10 years or so. (laughs)



EH: (laughs) But you were ready.

JS: Oh yes, I was ready.

EH: So what keeps you doing it now after everything has changed?

JS: Well the need for something to do as well as the need for a little bit of ready cash to go out and eat on or something like that. See there's no retirement from the broom industry, all you get was social security and I never done—I never made enough money to draw the maximum on it. So you know, I've done alright for myself, you know, but working these extra 25, 30 years has kept me in spending money. Roosevelt sends me enough to live on every month.

EH: (laughs)

JS: (laughs) I had to throw that in!

EH: Good old Roosevelt.

BZ: Gotta love him, huh?

EH: So how many brooms are you making, say, a week?

JS: A week? Probably 20 dozen.

EH: Okay. That's a lot!

JS: Down from 300 dozen.

EH: Still a lot! From one person, that's a lot.

JS: Well it is, that's a good steady pace.

EH: So you're basically out here all day 9-5?

JS: Yeah, well I'm here from 9-4. Except when I'm going—yeah transporting my granddaughter to school if she's not going to school, I'm here anyway.

EH: And when you're out here by yourself, do you listen to music?

JS: Oh yeah. Listen to WQBE all the time!

EH: And what's that?

JS: It's country and western! (laughs) That's what I grew up on! That and gospel.

EH: Let's see... do you have any questions?

BZ: Not anymore, I had my one.

EH: (laughs)

JS: One's gone.

BZ: One's gone.

22:04

EH: Well I guess you know, have you taught anyone? What's going to happen...

JS: I've taught a lot of them to do it, but they didn't stick with it through the years, I taught a dozen people to actually make brooms—I've had 50 or one hundred that went through doing the odd jobs and things of this job. But none of them ever—it was too hard of work. It's not very hard work, you have to work constantly. If you don't make a room and throw it on the rack or the floor, you don't make any money. You know, you get paid for what you do instead of how many hours you're here.

EH: Yeah. Do you know of other broom makers in the state or in the region?

JS: There's no other ones in the state. I've heard there was a couple little places up in the Pittsburgh area. And there's one at least a couple of 'em down in North Carolina. Illinois still has a few shops. I don't know how many of them are really still making brooms. Most of the shops went to buying Mexican brooms and reselling them instead of making brooms. Most all of them are doing that to some extent, they may make a few of their better brooms. And import the rest of them from Mexico. Mexico grows all the broom straw and they have adequate supply of handles and of course cheap labor so they're the competition.

EH: Yeah. I see that you have a lot of different styles up here (pointing at wall with whisk brooms)

JS: I used to work a lot of arts and crafts... and that's their craft brooms. That's just a few left over from 40, 50 years ago. I used to have brooms in the Smithsonian Institute. Anaheim Museum in Anaheim California which is a big museum I'm told! (laughs)

EH: Yeah, I've never been there.

JS: But I used to be pretty widely spread. I used to work a lot of arts and craft fairs—Bob Evans Farm in Gallipolis, Ohio, Cedar Lakes up at Ripley—I worked it for 17 years—a special exhibitor up there, making brooms on the spot.

EH: Cool.

JS: As well as a lot of other of the larger arts and craft fairs—Lewisburg, Logan, I don't know—don't remember them all right quick.

EH: Yeah. Have you ever been contacted by you know, someone who needed a historical broom for a film or a museum or a project?

JS: Yes, yes. I did quite a few of those. Witches' brooms

EH: Any in particular?

JS: Witches' brooms and different things of that type. What was the... what was the boy thing...

EH: Harry Potter?

JS: Yeah! I made one or two for the local... art... what do you call them...

EH: Like a local...

BZ: theater?

JS: Yeah, the theaters, I couldn't even think of the one over town...

BZ: Parkway?

JS: No, not the... the one that has the choir and things up there on Broad Street. Charleston Hospital General... right beside the General across the street there, what is that...

EH: I don't know.

JS: That's a shame.

BZ: Not the Municipal Auditorium?

EH: Clay Center?

JS: No, no—it's the one...that does the arts, the choirs, the big choirs, the fancy choirs and has...

EH: Clay Center?

JS: Yeah, Clay Center! They were putting on a Harry Potter thing and different things like that. They've come to me a few times. I don't remember specifics. I don't really pay that much attention to it, I just do whatever they want, and go with that.

EH: Did you ever make a mop?

JS: Yeah, I make mops all the time.

EH: Okay.

JS: I've got a few dozen laying back there. It's made on the same machine.

EH: And what kind of fiber do you use for that?

JS: Well, I use the old fashioned fiber, just about like this hanging here—it's a white blend of polyester and it's primarily cotton but it has some of the synthetics in it. It's the waste from textile mills that they redo and sell. It's done in Humburg, Tennessee. That's where I buy mine—there's other outlets but most of them don't want to sell because I buy too small of amounts. It gets down to that.

EH: Yeah, I'm sure that's been a change too.

JS: Yeah.

EH: How do you feel about the change in how stores are buying?

JS: Well, I can't really blame them, they gotta buy whatever they can present to the public that will turn over faster. A good broom will last you anywhere from 1-5 years. These plastic brooms and these swishers and things that they clean floors with now will last you a few months. So the turnover is the difference. If you make a good product it will last you for years.

BZ: Is there anything wrong in that quick turnover?

JS: Well, that quick turnover is what makes them their dollar, you know. If you got something that's turned over 100 in a year and you're making 10 cents off it, you got one that lasts 5 years and you're making a quarter off of it, 10 cent one is gonna pay you more money and keep turning over and keep people coming back. It's not that they just come back for the one broom, they want to come back every 5 years, they coming back every few months—the buy a broom, they buy something else. You know. That's the name of the game to keep you coming in and out of the door.

EH: There isn't really an incentive to make a good product.

JS: Yeah.

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

JS: Well, not really other than just the fact that little things like this have been a great pleasure to me because of the fact that it gets me a little notoriety out there and well, gets me a few visitors to stop by and say hey can I come by and watch you make a broom?

30:00

And to me that's the pleasure of life. I'm not trying to make a living, I'm just trying to make a little extra money and spend my time. So, if I spend my time demonstrating how to make a broom to somebody, I'll make a nickel or so on the broom when I sell it, and then I have the pleasure of meeting and talking to a lot of good people.

EH: Aw nice. Thank you. Thanks for having us.

JS: Glad to. (laughs)

EH: Well I might take a few more pictures if you don't mind.

JS: Yeah. Do whatever you need.

30:36

END OF TAPE