

SS044.mp3

Tom Beckner- Let's see...

Lewis Donelson- Am I recording?

Tom Beckner- This is Tom Beckner along with Carolyn Yellin and Anne Trotter in the office of Lewis Donelson. Today is June 29th at Mr. Donelson's office at First National Bank building.

Carolyn Yellin- I think just for the historical record it might be interesting to note that we have had to borrow Mr. Donelson's tape recorder, due to the fact that the turn of the century technology has failed. Our own tape recorder isn't working. This is terrible as you know it. I would like you to start Mr. Donelson as we usually do, we would like to have just a little background on you yourself. Where you went to school, what your (muffled) Your time in Memphis?

Lewis Donelson- Well I was born in Memphis, as a matter of fact my father and my grandfather were born in Memphis. Lived here all my life. Went to Snowden then (muffled) a year at Central and then I went to church school, while I was in Connecticut. Graduated there and came back and went to Southwestern. (muffled)...then to law school at Georgetown University in Washington. After (muffled) Washington and dealing with a federal judge and since then I have been practicing law in Memphis.

Carolyn Yellin- And had you run for political office before?

Lewis Donelson- No I had not. I had been very active in the republican party for a number of years, I had been campaign manager and helped the party out but I had never run for public office before. I did serve as a member of the POP committee which drafted the amendments to our charter which instituted the new government, And this is where my principal interest in city government began.

Carolyn Yellin- You very hard on that as I recall.

Lewis Donelson- Yes we had (muffled) on it and I was anxious to see the new government up to speed.

Carolyn Yellin- Well knowing we have, I wonder if this didn't have an affect on your feelings about the strike situation when it arose with a new city government.

Lewis Donelson- Well maybe a little. I didn't feel like the new government had a very good chance to get started before we had this griping so fast. It was a problem that could have happened to any government and I don't know that it made any difference that it happened to a new government.

Carolyn Yellin- Did you think that the (muffled) or for the council also?

Lewis Donelson- Well, I normally in the matter of dealing with a request or a demand of workers is an administrative problem which belongs to the mayor. But we got into the question of union dues check off and the (muffled) to recognize meeting with the union, and I personally felt it was a kind of council question (muffled). There was quite bit of difference of opinion on this subject within the council as you know.

Carolyn Yellin- Where you aware that there was any problem in the sanitation or in the public work division or where you involved at all with the manner other aspects of the government?

Lewis Donelson- Well, I was aware before I even ran that they had discontent and problems and they had tried to organize previously and that an injunction had been obtained to against them earlier to prevent organization and used to prevent a strike. But I wasn't aware of any immediate problem when the crisis began.

Carolyn Yellin- Not the injunction specifically it was to prevent a walk out from the job and there was nothing to prevent the continuing attempt to organize.

Lewis Donelson- Organize. Well the courts ruling in that earlier case (muffled) the city had no power to enter into an exclusive bargaining contract with the union. This opinion was signed by special chancellor himself. He (muffled). There was a little more to it than merely just a walk out as far as it was concerned.

Carolyn Yellin- Did you feel surprised that the question of unionization of municipal employees arose so soon or arose in this particular department? Would you have expected it here or elsewhere?

Lewis Donelson- Well I would have expected it here but I was surprised that I rose so soon.

Carolyn Yellin- Why would you have expected it in this particular department rather than other looking back now?

Lewis Donelson- Well, thinking back now this is the place where we had the most trouble. Had the most trouble, the only place where there had been some serious discontent up to that time was the fire department. I just felt like the organization of the public works people would be a much easier task and a much more responsive feel for that sort of thing than the fire department.

Carolyn Yellin- You didn't feel the hospital people?

Lewis Donelson- There had not been a whisper of that and I don't think it would have ever come up if it weren't for that. And I am not saying it wasn't necessary but I just believe that it was triggered by this.

Carolyn Yellin- The reason that I asked that is that thinking of other cities too and the fact that these things are on national news media and you will see a hospital strike or a teacher strike or fire department. Even with that sort of awareness that

people now have of what's going on elsewhere. In hospitals, thinking of that is particularly something that seems to be not unique in Memphis that there are constant problems.

Lewis Donelson- No doubt there are hospital problems everywhere. I just don't have the feel that (Muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- Now, one of the times that got me personally I began, or thinking back, whether I think back or whether I realize now, it came to me that there were problems for garbage workers. This is February 1st when the two workers where involved, were killed in this truck, an accident. Do you think, looking back now, that this was involved in heightening discontent.

Lewis Donelson- Oh yeah, I don't think there is any question about it looking back now.

Carolyn Yellin- Because the (muffled) only 12 days after.

Lewis Donelson- I think it would have bound to have helped to (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- And made it a more fertile.

Lewis Donelson- Well you look at what actually cause the walk out riots, really wasn't anything that caused the walk out they just wanted to walk out. (muffled) the incident they alleged triggered it was not in my mind in any way sufficient to justify a walk out.

Carolyn Yellin- That was the (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- Yeah.

Carolyn Yellin- Does the city not have a policy of workmen's compensation? Would the sanitation workers union end up paying if the families weren't reimbursed automatically.

Lewis Donelson- The city doesn't have a policy, it has group insurance but it does not have life. (muffled)

Carolyn Yellin- That group insurance have to be agreed upon by large group in a certain department in order for them to have this insurance available?

Lewis Donelson- No, but in having it they have to participate (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- Why this (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- Money.

Carolyn Yellin- Money.

Lewis Donelson- They want everything on a paycheck, no ability to look into the future.

Carolyn Yellin- How much does the group insurance cost per week do you know?

Lewis Donelson- I can't answer that question. Cost the city (muffled) but I don't know how much it costs the garbage worker.

Carolyn Yellin- But what I am wondering is what percentage of their weekly pay and is it the kind of group insurance that they number in the family and the amount of coverage or only just...

Lewis Donelson- It's life as well as hospitalization.

Carolyn Yellin- And is it for the worker only or (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- That was the family too but not the life insurance of course, of course that was questionable referring to life insurance portions would take the place, so it would be something, it would provide for the worker in the event of an accident or sort where you don't have worker's compensation.

Carolyn Yellin- But the city has no at this time, now or today has no workmen's compensation for any employee who is injured on the job.

Lewis Donelson- That's right.

Carolyn Yellin- How do you feel about this? Or what do you feel, or how does this (muffled)?

Lewis Donelson- Well a private industry must have worker's compensation insurance, but of course private industry does not have to have (muffled) insurance but a bunch of private industry does have it. And we have a very fine (muffled) insurance program where the cost tot eh worker is extremely low. I forgot it but...

Carolyn Yellin- Was it based off on the amount that you take rather than on the amount...

Lewis Donelson- Well it was the amount that he takes is limited, he can't take but a certain amount and it depends on what classification he is in. But it is based upon the amount of service the city has. And of course the rate of the over all policy is something like 50,000 and the (muffled) very small.

Carolyn Yellin- So it wouldn't be beyond the financial means...

Lewis Donelson- No it would be a matter of maybe 50 cents a payday...

Carolyn Yellin- That is what I was trying to, if he knew, was he well-informed about it? Did he know this was available?

Lewis Donelson- Well they could (muffled) so yes, that they were well-informed, as a matter of fact these people who sold the policy of course wanted to get natural coverage and they went around and tossed all the people and put out brochures and handed them out and tried to get maximum coverage. What happened though is a very important thing. Shortly during the latter stages of this old city commission government. I don't know exactly when but someone suggested that it would be better for the sanitation workers to be under social security than to be retiring on a city pension plan. I don't know what the motivation was behind this but they then suggested that the workers could get out of the pension plan and get under social security.

Carolyn Yellin- Was this someone in the union or...

Lewis Donelson- I don't know where it came from, it is an illustration of what goes on and so on so forth. But what happened was that all, virtually all the sanitation workers got out of the pension plan for the reason that they could draw out \$200, \$50, \$75, just like that (muffled). They all took that money. But in the process of finding most of them dropped out of the other program that the city had and so the coverage was not what it should have been.

Carolyn Yellin- And this is again, timing was involved in the fact that things turned out how they did. Had it happened sometime earlier or perhaps sometime later.

Lewis Donelson- That played it differently. But I am sure those deaths which (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- Before we get on to the actual crisis itself I wanted to ask one other thing of you Mr. Donelson. We seem to be concentrating on a lot of financial aspects but I know that you are probably better informed in this area as this is one of your real interests. On the matter of employment am I right in remembering that you had very early on even before the strike or sometime during the strike had been interested in making Memphis a fairer employment practices city as far as city government?

Lewis Donelson- Yes, well I proposed that to the councilmen before (muffled) we would adopt a resolution to that effect. There was some disagreement but in the excitement and the pressure of getting a new government away, I had to give a threat of resolution, nobody else did and so it was postponed (muffled) sometime during the strike (muffled). We had discussed it and there was not unanimously but there was substantial majority agreement that we would do something like that. I reckon the only real disagreement we had was whether was we should do it during the strike or whether we should postpone. I felt like and still feel like it was a major problem that minority groups have (muffled). So I had suggested to several of the councilmen and we create this manpower division, in fact (muffled) one of the things that got me to it was these seminars Southwestern was having. Special seminar for the councilmen. (muffled)

Carolyn Yellin- This was a seminar on, incoming city...

Lewis Donelson- For the councilmen.

Carolyn Yellin- Was the mayor involved in this?

Lewis Donelson- Yes he was.

Carolyn Yellin- Why didn't he go? I know he was the only person that did not attend the seminar?

Lewis Donelson- He was in Florida.

Carolyn Yellin- Do you have any other thoughts on, that we should cover before we go on to the thing? I had a feeling that perhaps with an unfamiliar tape recorder we would record two sides.

Lewis Donelson- Always too fast.

Carolyn Yellin- Well let's go on to the actual strike. Do you recall how you heard that the strike had been done, or that a strike was imminent.

Lewis Donelson- I believe I heard it on a news broadcast first. I had heard that they were threatening to walk out, and then I heard they had met with Charlie Blackburn. I believe that, surely the council had no meetings during that period..(muffled). As far as I know though what I learned I learned from a news broadcast.

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled) Did you have a (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- No. Oh maybe. I don't, I listen to the news occasionally on the radio in the car on the way to work and going home. Frequently the television news (tape damaged)...I got in my car this morning and turned on this station and man it just blasted me out. My kid was using my car last night, I don't know why they listen to that station in the first place but why so loud. (Laughs) I am pretty sure that I may have heard about it in some discussion but I think I heard about it first on the news broadcast and we talked about it at the council.

Carolyn Yellin- Did you talk..

Lewis Donelson- Informally.

Carolyn Yellin- Informally. Do you recall or could you tell us what some of the feeling at that time do you recall? When you first discussed it what was the council feeling?

Lewis Donelson- Well the council feeling was the mayor would handle it.

Carolyn Yellin- And it would be settled quickly?

Lewis Donelson- Yes.

Carolyn Yellin- And by quickly, what did you expect? I recall that the New York garbage strike was then and it had been....

Anne Trotter- It had been settled.

Lewis Donelson- It had been settled yes.

Carolyn Yellin- After (muffled)...did you expect it to last longer than the New York garbage strike.

Lewis Donelson- No I didn't.

Carolyn Yellin- Had no notion?

Lewis Donelson- No, I guess I just wasn't thinking ahead like I should have been but I really felt like it could be disposed of without a lot of difficulty. That was my first reaction to it.

Carolyn Yellin- How did you (muffled) and at what kind of problem, labor management or racial?

Lewis Donelson- I regarded it as labor management.

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled)

Lewis Donelson- I don't do that today. The racial implications were entirely artificially created in my opinion.

Carolyn Yellin- For what?

Lewis Donelson- By deliberate incitation of violence, (muffled)

Lewis Donelson- There wasn't any racial. There was no discrimination involved there was nothing of that sort. As a matter of fact the main problem with the garbage department, with the sanitation department was that it had been used as a way of rewarding faithful negro political support. Maybe that (muffled). In my mind it doesn't. They were over-staffed, and they were over-paid. Compared with other city employees, (muffled). Hospital less, still less. Really they were the favored people. They were the ones that had the best jobs. (tape damaged). I heard all that talk about how it is the best job, and it is the best job, but hell I (muffled) (Tape damaged) I was concerned by the fact that we had the mayor. We had the antagonism between the mayor and the negro community.

Carolyn Yellin- You were, but is the city council generally aware of this, did it come out...

Lewis Donelson- I would doubt that, I don't think there was any feeling. Well I had told a lot of them that our main problem was going to be the fact that there was this (muffled) between the mayor and that it was going to be a major problem in the

administration. Many of them called on the mayor and we persuaded him to (muffled). (Tape Break)

Carolyn Yellin- We left off we were talking about..

Lewis Donelson- I believe we were talking about the fact that you actually saw the councilmen were aware of the problem, the alienation between the mayor and the negro community. I don't know if they were real aware of it but we had discussed it. (Tape damage) Several of us had gone to see the mayor and encouraged him to appoint Mr. Horton to the hospital job. Which he had agreed to do. I really felt like the mayor was going to make a (muffled) if he tried to overcome Horton and he was a fair minded person and he is going to do what is right. (tape Damage)

Carolyn Yellin- Since you weren't aware of this(muffled)...

Lewis Donelson- Yes it goes back a long time, the real original cause of it was that the mayor , when he was on the commission before, opposed the integration of schools. I think he actually took the position that the city should not integrate the schools voluntarily. They should way to be forced to do so by the courts. H did not advocate (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- This was in the 1950's, the late 1950's?

Lewis Donelson- Yes that's right, the late 1950's. This they never forgot, while he had done a good job with a couple questions, they felt that he had what they called a plantation psychology, meaning an old master to take care of you.

Tom Beckner- The election in 1959 didn't help this any...

Lewis Donelson- Well I am not too familiar with it.

Tom Beckner- (muffled)

Lewis Donelson- That's right.

Tom Beckner- (Muffled) first negro elected to office and there was a great uprising between the white negro community and the campaign.

Lewis Donelson- Well I didn't realize that worked against him and maybe it did.

Tom Beckner- it may not have, I just wondered?

Lewis Donelson- I didn't think there was any , any division coming out of that but there was this commission.

Carolyn Yellin- Was this fairly widespread you think, or more among negro leaders in the community, is the negro community that well informed?

Lewis Donelson- I think back in those days it wasn't but I think after Ingram and his group took hold of it that it really got to be a very widespread thing. I think it was

unfortunate to me that the mayor did not campaign more in the negro community and really go down and try to meet these charges head on during the election which he did not do, he just wrote off the negro vote.

Carolyn Yellin- Even the primary, when it got into the general election, the run off rather between Ingram and Lobe he didn't attempt to go into the negro..

Lewis Donelson- Not really, whatever he did was completely helpless.

Carolyn Yellin- Did you think that was because of bad receptions in the negro neighborhood?

Lewis Donelson- I can't.

Carolyn Yellin- You can't really answer that.

Lewis Donelson- I can't really answer that, I just thought it was good point and the reason I was not informed of the mayor in the original first election was just because of the fact that I knew he would be the most objectionable to the negro community.

Carolyn Yellin- For whom did you work?

Lewis Donelson- Well didn't work for anyone but I personally voted for Bill (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- He is the present sheriff.

Lewis Donelson- Yeah, I voted for him because I felt like he had a chance to get in the run off and colonel Lane did not. I was right about that.

Anne Trotter- (Muffled)

Carolyn Yellin- This is where and I think that we should skip on to the real crisis event now. Did the mayor at any time that you know of go into the negro community and attempt after the strike had started and did he attempt to reach negro public opinion either through the radio stations or through the negro newspapers that would reach families of negro population. What were his communication lines into the negro community? Or what was the city council communication like?

Lewis Donelson- Well of course we had communication lines through our three negro councilmen and through our contacts we had but as far as I know the mayor had absolutely none and the immediate effect, well not the immediate effect but the quick effect of the strike was that he was isolated from the negro community completely and not only was he isolated from the negro community but he was surrounded by people who was antagonistic towards the community and antagonistic towards the needs of the strikers. I felt like all during the strike, the most tragic part of it all was he really got no feel of what the other part of the community was feeling and he would tell you look at all these (muffled) out here. 99 to 1 100Tom Beckner- of the people are behind me. I would say, you mean 100Tom

Beckner- of 60 Tom Beckner- don't you. And then, but this to his basic whatever you want to call it, segregationist tendencies were incited and enflamed by what had happened. By the treatment that he got, by the fact that he just made it a personal issue, it was a natural reaction and I think anybody would have gotten it but that is what did happen and all his goodwill that had been built up was pretty much wiped out in a few weeks.

Tom Beckner- How do you feel that he listened to (muffled) during this period?

Carolyn Yellin- That he listened to you.

Lewis Donelson- He surely didn't listen to me.

Tom Beckner- Did he listen to any of the councilmen?

Lewis Donelson- I don't think he listened to any of the councilmen he listened to those that said what he wanted to hear, but I don't call that listening. And as far as I know the only people he listened to and this isn't probably a nice thing to say on the record, He paid a lot more attention to a letter from Suzy (muffled) living out in Frayser than he did say to Ned Cook who probably (muffled). There is something magic about the little people who write letters to him, he just absolutely he had very strong feelings about this (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- How about the few people in the white community who wrote letters opposing or say the women who came to his office to express the fact that there was..

Lewis Donelson- It seemed to make no impact on him what so ever. Now his argument to me was, look here some 500 and some odd letters supporting me and 3 letters or 5 letters or 8 letters denouncing me. It shows what the people want. I said to him, I didn't think you were elected to count letters.

Carolyn Yellin- What did he say? What was his reply to that?

Lewis Donelson- He said well I just think that you ought to know how the people think. I said well Henry I know how the white people feel, but I think (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- Now as you became aware with the fact that the mayor in this day was not reachable. How did you feelings change about the situation about he implications.

Lewis Donelson- Well what changed me about the situation was something that had happened past a little before that. Of course there (muffled). He had been very active in the civil rights matters here. As a matter of fact many members have left our church because he makes him one of my good friends calls them grating sermons. (Laughs) Grating sermons. The ones you don't want to hear you know. But he never was sympathetic towards the strike because he had never really been in the presence of a union leader acting as some of them do as Champa did, he was down there that night. He was just utterly horrified, and it has really changed a lot

(muffled). But in any event there was that wave of sympathy for the mayor following that. And then following, let me get a little time schedule...

Carolyn Yellin- Where is our short form we brought? Here is the short form it is easier...

Lewis Donelson- yeah well Sunday the 18th of February, the council met in a private meeting at my insistence. They had all sworn they weren't going to have any private meetings. Except that I hadn't. So we met at Fred Davis' house.

Carolyn Yellin- Do you recall who was present at that meeting?

Lewis Donelson- Everyone was present except for Billy Hammond. And we voted 11 to 1 to authorize G.O. Patterson and Jim Neders to go to the strikers and propose a settlement which would given them a 10 cent raise immediately and another 5 cents on July the 1st. Patterson called and talked to some of his contacts and they said this would be satisfactory and they would not require any union recognition or any dues check off. But in the vote the majority of the 11 insisted that the mayor agree to this. So Downing went and got on the phone and called the mayor and told him what we were going to propose and we could settle the strike on this basis and the mayor would not agree to it. So then I got on the phone and talked with the mayor and I said Henry, we are perfectly willing to have you publicly disagree with us and even denounce us for settling the strike, and take the full blame for it if you will just tell these people that they voted for this resolution that you don't care. But he wouldn't agree to that.

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- Well his reasons was that we were going to beat this thing. That there wasn't going to be any problems and that it was his responsibility and not ours that he doesn't want us to get involved and he would and could take care of it himself. And that was, we broke up without making any further decisions and unfortunately Wroth arrived the next day, or that day I guess and the thing began to escalate.

Tom Beckner- Rapidly.

Lewis Donelson- Rapidly.

Carolyn Yellin- So at that point...

Lewis Donelson- So at that point I realized it was going to be a bad situation and it was going to be trouble and I also realized that Henry really was in my opinion out of touch with reality in this situation.

Carolyn Yellin- So did you feel that, were your feelings in frustration, concern...

Lewis Donelson- Well my feelings were more concern than frustration, I could, I mean at that point I felt like Henry could be right and I could be wrong. That really

there was serious question at that point as to whether it was a council matter and just wanted to look at it and I tend to look at it from a legal point of view, constitutional point of view or whatever you want to call it. It really was his problem or it seemed to me to be his problem at this point. Because they really weren't making an issue of this union recognition as a matter of fact the first time I talked with Jerry Worth, he wasn't.

Carolyn Yellin- (Muffled) You never just talked to him by yourself?

Lewis Donelson- Never, to Champa.

Carolyn Yellin- Did Worth ever come in and talk to the council.

Lewis Donelson- Yeah.

Carolyn Yellin- What did he say the big issues were?

Lewis Donelson- The big issue was the check off.

Carolyn Yellin- He said so in certain words.

Lewis Donelson- In private conversation with me and in private conversation with the whole town.

Carolyn Yellin- How did you regard that did that seem to be the main concern was the due check off?

Lewis Donelson- Well I have been practicing law for a long time and so it was no surprise to me.

Carolyn Yellin- Your field (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- I have done a lot of labor work in my life,(muffled) it wasn't a surprise to me. And he was perfectly aware, I mean he knows the problems, he is perfectly aware of the difficulty of getting an immediate raise the fact that it had to go through the budget procedures, all that he was quite aware of.

Carolyn Yellin- I guess what I am getting at is did you increasingly see a union claim that this was necessary for their continuing existence as a union. Without the dues check off they wouldn't have really have been supported?

Lewis Donelson- I don't know how to answer that. Put it this way, sure they are going to be stronger if they have the check off, I don't know. And no matter whether the man has to walk two feet or just stand there and hand the check from one to the other, they are going to be stronger if he doesn't have to travel (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- I would like to get, (muffled) was it ever suggested that Lobe turn any of this over to the labor law here in town. I understand they took (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- Well he hired Sam Winetrodd to advise him. Sam was a good man in town.

Carolyn Yellin- Would he listen to him?

Lewis Donelson- Not, he would listen to him from a legal point of view but not from a power point of view. All he wanted was him to tell him how he could accomplish what he wanted to accomplish, and also of people get mad at us. A lot of people got mad at me for representing the man who had the airport limousine. Well it is our job to try and get something for those people, that is what they hire us for. It is not our job to pass on them whether what they do is right or wrong or anything else. I think that was Sam's attitude, he had his own opinion and I am sure he expressed it on occasion, I don't know. It would be interesting for you to interview him.

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- I would be glad to talk to him he used to be one of my partners.

Carolyn Yellin- Thank you.

Lewis Donelson- He was on the legal matter, he was as closely?

Lewis Donelson- He was there...That's right he is labor law.

Carolyn Yellin- Was the mayor depending on his advice as much as city attorneys?

Lewis Donelson- No I don't think so, not nearly as much, but I think that Frank Gianatti was depending on Sam's advice as far as the legal aspects were concerned, I will put it that way.

Carolyn Yellin- Was there a wavering up-reaction among city councilmen that you were aware of. Where some people beginning to change their feelings about it?

Lewis Donelson- Well I think that our feelings as a council, well yes, there was a point that we met on the night of February the 18th and we all began to feel that this thing had gotten serious and it needed to be settled. Patterson and Neders and Davis had made us aware of the fact that it was getting worse and worse over time and it could get completely out of hand that it could be rapidly converted into a racial issue and that now it could be settled on a financial basis entirely and that it should be done, and this was our attitude. But always we had this problem. If there had been no mayor we would have settled it that night. We would have settled it several times after that but we never could get a majority of the council that was willing to defy the mayor.

Carolyn Yellin- So what reason do you think, too politically...

Lewis Donelson- Well I think that is not fair to comment on other people's voting's. I was willing but...

Carolyn Yellin- Did, for instance, were you getting any (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- All the signings were back him up 100Tom Beckner- .

Carolyn Yellin- Even after the (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- The boycott was beginning to take over, I got a couple of calls from Ed Mark and he began to tell us how it was hurting and all. But that was shortly before King came into town.

Carolyn Yellin- If we, do we have enough time left on this tape for (muffled). Talk a bit about the public works hearing and the meeting at the auditorium.

Lewis Donelson- Well..

Carolyn Yellin- Your own involvement.

Lewis Donelson- Of course I was on the committee and Fred Davis was presiding. I remember telling Downing when he called me and said we were going to have a hearing that I thought it was a mistake.

Carolyn Yellin- Why?

Lewis Donelson- Well, frankly I didn't feel that Fred would be able to control the meeting. Fred is a fine young man and really seems genuinely motivated for the welfare of the community than any of our three negro councilmen. But he is immature he is volatile he gets very nervous under pressure.

Tom Beckner- A little bit parliamentarian.

Lewis Donelson- That's right and I think he was totally unaware of what a difficult situation he was getting ready to take on. I didn't feel that it would accomplish anything and I have always felt on things like this unless you know what you are going to do in advance, you are making a mistake to go in there, so we didn't know what we were going to do in advance. While Downing and I were anxious to see the strike settled, Downing wasn't willing to defy the mayor and I was, and I kept telling him, until you are then there really isn't anything to be done. And you just going to antagonize it, he said that it helps take some of the pressure off and we need to get communication to the workers themselves. I thought this argument had maybe some truth. I thought maybe we could just talk to them instead of just the pother people. At that point I had never met Champa or Worth or T.O. Jones and I had been very smally involved in the strike, I sat on the sidelines and having that first meeting I was the one that suggested that we ought to meet, it was getting a little out of hand and maybe this could be settled if we could meet privately. Because I felt like one of the reasons the thing got out of hand was that Henry would not meet with union people privately and I don't think he would negotiate with the union with the newspaper present. (muffled) Newspaper people don't associate with the union or with the reporters present. They will be advocating it for you but they don't advocate it for themselves. So we went ahead and had the meeting and we made another mistake and I can't say that I didn't participate in this 100Tom Beckner- .

One of the aims of course of the meeting was to try to get an opportunity to hear from the strikers themselves instead of hearing from self-appointed leaders. We began to meet and there was just a handful there and there wasn't a single garbage man present. Jones, Worth, well Worth arrived after this point right away, but Epps, Lucie, Champa, and some of the others, Lawson the rest of them. David insisted that we wanted to have them come in because that was the purpose of the hearing. So they went out and we waited for them and they all came in just a hoard of them, filled up the council chambers and aisles and everything else. And immediately became apparent that this was a mistake, asking for any of them to come forward to speak. The whole thing we never heard a word from a single one.

Carolyn Yellin- Why do you think that was?

Lewis Donelson- Well, I didn't think it was the commentary on the old feeling of grammatacy. The fact that they don't feel able to get up and represent themselves. Plus the fact that they didn't care for these schools, and that they were not to say anything per instructions.

Carolyn Yellin- So you feel it was actually a combination of both of these?

Lewis Donelson- They aren't capable of really (muffled). They were more capable than they think they are and they would have been listened to more perhaps than they thought they would have been.

Carolyn Yellin- If there leaders said, you can't speak for yourself, they are going to believe it.

Lewis Donelson- They are going to believe it. That's right. There leaders were right, none of them were able to present the whole problem of the issues in a clear way but I think they could have given us a feel of their attitude which we never got, except (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- They could have gained sympathy for themselves that they weren't aware that they had gained a more sympathetic hearing...

Lewis Donelson- That's right, than they did get. Of course then that meeting went on most of the day. (muffled) It got completely out of hand. (muffled) got into a shouting match with Zeke Bell and he...

Carolyn Yellin- Was that really a personal confrontation?

Lewis Donelson- Yes.

Carolyn Yellin- You thought that was almost as (muffled) for the negros present rather than for the citizens...

Lewis Donelson- Actually until Bell arrived the meeting was reasonably orderly. Now I don't know what this meeting is between Bell and Davis but it was obvious that it was quite personal. Well when he got away with it then the whole tone got

worse. (muffled) He actually came up and led the cheering section, they would shout and carry on. It was really ridiculous and they wouldn't say one word they sat just as quietly but Epps would jump up and he would say hello, whatever eh would say they would all....(Muffled) Some of the other councilmen came it, it was Jim Neders, Fred Davis and myself, time to time Downing was there for awhile, Gwynn was there for awhile, Bob King was there for awhile, t hey came and went. We went up several times to the mayor's office to discuss with him. That was the case actually when we had the interchange about the letters. Then we met Pryor...

Carolyn Yellin- The interchange about which?

Lewis Donelson- About the letters.

Carolyn Yellin- The letters..

(muffled)

Lewis Donelson- You see at this point we met prior with Lowe and Worth and Powell and well (muffled). But in any event at that point Worth said that he would agree to settle on the basis of using the credit union for the check off. And without a contract and without any recognition of a union except a letter saying this is what they wanted to do. I think at that point he agreed to 8 cents raise and (muffled) we would consider additional raise, oddly another 7 cents in July. I went upstairs at that point and we adjourned the meeting and they were out eating their sandwiches and all that stuff. I get with Henry and try to get him to agree with this.

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled)

Lewis Donelson- Well I, yes. I think we, he got a full fort and he knew what was going on down there. I described it to him and it was going to get worse it was going to be turned into a racial issue. This could be the settlement and it could be over and we can move on to other things. That after all he really had no problem with the credit union and they can do whatever they wanted to. That's when he, I guess the rumor was in the paper about the secret meeting and the council was wanting to settle the strike at this point, so he had all these letters advocating that we not settle it and we don't give in and we hold the line so on and so forth. That was when we got into the discussion about how many letters he had. But he would not agree to anything and so we went back downstairs. I sit stiffly and we all walk back through the crowd, They wanted to go down and sneak in the back door.

Carolyn Yellin- Who would that be the security people?

Lewis Donelson- Yeah the security people. But I am not sure the Fred and (muffled) walked through the crowd or not anyway I did. And then I got into a discussion with one of the ministers I forgot who it was. He was telling me that I was (muffled). I didn't understand about the (muffled). Then we had another session with them and I, somehow or other we came up with the bright idea they were going to camp all night and stay there forever. That we had two negro councilmen that they could

vote to agree to recognize the union and give the check off and so forth and I can vote against it and they could all go home. So then we discussed whether they would go home, Friday we were there and we did that. (muffled). I told Worth and Powell that the motion resolution was adopted it would not be passed by the council. The best we could get out of the council was this resolution pretty much which we passed the next day and talked about and began to draft at that point. So after much discussion and many meetings and conversations and so forth why we were all set to pass that motion and actually the three members the put in the request to me was Fred Davis, Billy Hammond and myself. Jim Neders was sitting in for Billy Hammond at his request just as we were getting ready to vote. (Muffled) Of course Billy had (muffled). Go on home, leave.

(Tape break)

Tom Beckner- This is side 2 of reel 1 of June 29th with Mrs. Lewis Donelson. I think we are ready.

Lewis Donelson- So (muffled) left and we explained to him what the situation was and then we voted. The two of them voted to make this recommendation and I didn't vote at all which caused me a good deal of trouble later on.

Carolyn Yellin- In what way?

Lewis Donelson- Well everybody asked me why I abstained and so on and so forth. But of course at that point I had told Worth that I was just not voting, and that was on that basis to say we need to go home. Although I had say even though I said I wouldn't vote I can tell you know that I can vote for it tomorrow and I can also (muffled). And they knew that when they went home. Then the next day of course we had agreed that we would call a special meeting for the next day, and we met the next morning and spent all morning working on the resolution. Jared and I drafted the resolution.

Carolyn Yellin- This is the full council?

Lewis Donelson- Full council. And we had a ballot (muffled) mostly because of the argument that it wasn't the council's business that we ought to stay out of it and we ought to say nothing and the mayor was opposed to us saying anything. Finally we came up with a resolution which we took back up to the mayor and his response was (muffled) and a compromise it was. The fact that we recognized their right to form a union would take action on certain issues (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- I wanted to put in the resolution a wording which would indicate that the use foot he credit union for a check off would be accessible, but I couldn't get this through the council they were very opposed to it. And he came in (muffled). We also had a strong discussion about whether we should allow the men to make any further presentations to the committee. I think we made a mistake here, and I was one of those that felt like it was (muffled). Security people very strongly feel they were.

Carolyn Yellin- Were hey appointed by the city? City police, this didn't involve county?

Lewis Donelson- Right. (muffled). We went down there and asked the resolution and walked out.

Carolyn Yellin- I want to stop just a moment. If you can recall when you arrived was the (muffled) packed as you walked in?

Lewis Donelson- It was.

Carolyn Yellin- When you looked out did you see any (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- (muffled) There was people standing in the back.

Carolyn Yellin- Did you have a feeling there were not (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- (muffled) some animosity it wasn't a friendly crowd.

Carolyn Yellin- (Muffled)

Lewis Donelson- I never felt (muffled). Even though they were telling me not to go down and walk through the crowd I didn't see a reason, and I didn't mind walking through the crowd.

Carolyn Yellin- Do you think that Holloman (muffled) inflates this over the security angle and inflates things a little bit.

Lewis Donelson- Well, I don't think his main thing, I think he is just overly cautious but I don't think he is (muffled), I wouldn't say that at all but I thought he overly cautious. I advocated the mayor going down into the community and trying to communicate knowingly. But in the meeting, I had the feeling when we left that we were making a mistake not to stay, although we had agreed that we would not.

Carolyn Yellin- Why, if you can I just want to recreate why you thought that way?

Lewis Donelson- Well they had listened there quietly the crowd had been very orderly. They had been no type of (muffled) We had a good, better atmosphere. We had some that might even share they had a little more respect for. Which might have helped the situation a little bit. We had started in (muffled) We were retreating from that position. Whether it was right or wrong, we were into it.

Carolyn Yellin- In other words the original reason for having the public works hearing has now been...

Lewis Donelson- That's right.

Carolyn Yellin- Obsolete.

Lewis Donelson- That's right, we had reversed our thoughts in effect. I think, I think a number of the councilmen were quite frightened by the whole situation, I think they believed what (muffled). It was a scary situation. It wasn't any fun, I don't remember a harder day and there were trying days (muffled). I never felt physically even when they were talking about turning down the city (muffled), I never felt (muffled) maybe I was but I never felt that way.

Carolyn Yellin- I want to go back into something that happened that day at the public works meeting.(Muffled).

Lewis Donelson- Back up quite a bit, I thought that Bell's performance was atrocious. He is a Presbyterian and I am a Presbyterian I felt (muffled). I don't mean to indicate that but I was embarrassed.(Muffled)Talking about relieving himself on the floor, and vulgar unbelievably vulgar.(muffled)That was the beginning of the dialogue because I got awfully mad with him that day, and I got mad with some of the others too. I felt quite a bit of anger.

Carolyn Yellin- Well I was back tracking because I wanted you to contrast the way you felt..

Lewis Donelson- I felt no anger in the other meeting and I felt some concern that we didn't stay and let them have a few words and I think this was probably a mistake looking back.

Carolyn Yellin- You felt there was a change in the feeling of the crowd as you left.

Lewis Donelson- Yes. One of my young lawyers was down there and he said that when we left you could tell the crowd they got very very angry and it turned into an ugly meeting. He said he felt personal fear for his safety at that point. He was out in the crowd and he looked around and he didn't see another white face anywhere.

Carolyn Yellin- He felt a little.

Lewis Donelson- They said down with the white, he said yay!

Carolyn Yellin- He became a union organizer.

Lewis Donelson- Yeah that is right. We all walked out and of course the police escorted us back over to the city council got us into the city hall and we left and went home.

Carolyn Yellin- Did you ever think that was (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- Yes.

Tom Beckner- (muffled) cut off the power or take away the microphone.,

Lewis Donelson- We made that in advance.

Tom Beckner- The council did? Do you think this annoyed or cause some annoyance?

Lewis Donelson- I am sure it did yes, (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- Did you see that happening at the time.

Lewis Donelson- This is all part of my feeling as we walked out that we had cut off the power and the whole thing was over with and (muffled) because they don't need any power, but you know they don't need any microphones in their, it was just part the whole picture that I thought in retrospect had things to say.

Carolyn Yellin- Even at that point you began to have this feeling that even in cross reference you felt immediately (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- Right.

Carolyn Yellin- When did you know that (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- No I was still in the mayor's office and we heard about it on the walkie talkies.

Carolyn Yellin- And so you had a police report, was the mayor getting reports off the walkie talkie?

Lewis Donelson- At this point of course the mayor had not only become completely isolated from the (muffled) committee he was completely isolated from everybody. He had the full bodyguards around the clock and I think down at city hall there was sad commentary.

Carolyn Yellin- There is what somebody said to (muffled) Was it the mayor's walkie talkie or was it one of the bodyguards have this or somebody from security detail.

Lewis Donelson- They were the bodyguards who had them and were on duty at that point.

Carolyn Yellin- But you were listening to the mayor's walkie talkie.

Lewis Donelson- Right we were all sitting in his office following what was happening.

Carolyn Yellin- It was obvious then...

Lewis Donelson- (muffled)

Carolyn Yellin- Was there a difference in the report that came over the police radio and the report that came in on what the general public was listening to on their radio? Did you have more details from the police report that yet a different picture was painted.

Lewis Donelson- No, not at that point. But I must say I heard they had a confrontation down there, (muffled) called him and said he had to use mace on a few of them (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled) This was all the preparation or was it a decision made on the streets. (Muffled)

Lewis Donelson- Not at all, we never were consulted about what the police were going to do we were informed when (muffled) but they didn't ask us for any advice and we didn't offer any. I didn't feel that we had any to give.

Carolyn Yellin- Do you feel this disturbance was a (muffled).....really did become a civil...

Lewis Donelson- No I don't feel like that was a turning point at all, I really feel like the turning point was Sunday night February the 18th.

Carolyn Yellin- Is that, that is, you said that earlier.

Lewis Donelson- That was the turning point and everything had happened after, and of course talking to Worth I could see on Thursday the 22nd he was pretty unfamiliar with the situation. He frankly admitted, that he was losing the strike and he was really begging for just a few bones.

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- Yeah I saw the rest. He really indicated that you know I was confident. I told Henry this that afternoon that if someone whether councilmen or myself of anybody else could sit down for a few hours private and we would get in the check off of some form from the credit union. That we could settle things for a modest amount of money and no contract and no union recognition in the word. What really to that extent he had no idea what a mess he was getting into. I had some conversations with Worth after that day, but regardless to me at that point he didn't get the full racial implication at that point.

Carolyn Yellin- Worth didn't?

Lewis Donelson- Yeah at that point. Because he had only been here 3 or 4 days and he didn't realize the power that he carried. He was thinking of it in terms of a labor (muffled)

Carolyn Yellin- In your role or have you ever had this kind of a notation (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- Not that I know of. I don't think he has ever had one where there was really any real racial overtones.

Carolyn Yellin- I have to ask this one question very much beside the point, and is just out of curiosity. Did you know anyone that you know of ever suggest that maybe one way of taking the racial implications out of this was to hire some (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- Well yes.

Carolyn Yellin- Either before during or since the strike, during the strike (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- Yes a few blacks were hired during the strike.

Carolyn Yellin- And they stayed on as collectors.

Lewis Donelson- No, I think that everyone that was hired during the strike is now gone.

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- County, departmentish or quick.

Carolyn Yellin- It is interesting the allegations (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- As far as now there aren't any.

Carolyn Yellin- We ask some of these questions I should explain Mr. Donelson, because the city (muffled) There were many (muffled) this is for the historical record we are trying as responsibly as possible to (muffled) we wish that we hope that our research has reason to become widespread at this time. This evidently was one that was (muffled) in the negro community (muffled). I didn't mean to interrupt your chronology.

Lewis Donelson- Well I think that color that Friday afternoon session and the...

Carolyn Yellin- I would like to interrupt for one other question, this again is another sort of question we might have asked before we had researched....we ask these turning point questions because we have these exceptions that many people consider that February 23rd was a turning point.

Lewis Donelson- I think in the minds of councilmen they didn't realize it was much more serious at that point but I think most of us looking back on it now would say that the real turning point was that Sunday night meeting.

Carolyn Yellin- Well I want to ask one other question then. (muffled) Maybe your February 18th turning point answers this but it is still a matter of curiosity to me. That since the antagonist of the negro or the racial, the focus of this antagonism was the mayor. And yet this point which brought about what many agree and this is on both sides, it was a city council action which was involved in this, this particular meeting in the auditorium.

Lewis Donelson- Yeah but that was the resolution the...through the things back to the mayor it indicated that the council was to be cut off as the possible source of

relief for the thing and to that extent it still wasn't directed against the mayor and of course you know that (muffled) was very thoroughly informed and the (muffled) council voted to settle and the blame came back to him again.

Carolyn Yellin- Well it was the feelings of anger and frustration built for...

Lewis Donelson- Primarily directed for the mayor.

Carolyn Yellin- I would like to ask you about your feelings about this other civil rights portrait (muffled). Did you regard this as escalation when people were brought into the city?

Lewis Donelson- Yes. Really those people, their impact was small that morning. It just escalated the thing (muffled). Of course what I find at this point was that Lawson came forward as the leader and started on February 22nd. (muffled) I never felt that Ruston (muffled) So I may be wrong.

Carolyn Yellin- Well gather feelings that Wilkins brought in because it was a last attempt to...

Lewis Donelson- Yes I think the coming in of Dr. King...(Tape break)

Lewis Donelson- Yes but I thought what happened after the February 23rd thing was they made a deliberate decision to turn it into a racial question, and they began to work it up more and more and more. And from the strike's point of view it was failing, of course I really feel like we would have beat the strike but it wouldn't have been the same for the community...It's not the same since Dr. King got shot and I don't think it would have been a good thing for the community.

Carolyn Yellin- That they had not failed that was sort of their trump card in a way of (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- They pretty much admitted it, Worth admitted it he was dead (muffled)

Anne Trotter- May I ask you, it is going to sound maybe like an odd question. Where you all surprised that in this period of violence that there was no more violence in ending the strike than there was. There was littering, garbage dumping, and those who tried to stop the trucks on Democrat, but where you surprised that the young militants in the community were kept under control, or did you ever think about it?

Lewis Donelson- In fact (muffled) ..

Carolyn Yellin- Sorry again to interrupt your chronology but was their discussion either officially or unofficially whether there were black power groups involved in this, that involved some link to black power groups and others.

Lewis Donelson- There was discussion of the issue yes. (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- And you still feel that (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- I really don't think those people played and made their loaves (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- Do you think they played more of a role in Memphis than they would have in Memphis. Like this period in..

Lewis Donelson- They played a bigger role than they had ever played before but I think it was a lesser role than it would have been in any other city.

Carolyn Yellin- That is what I was getting at, so you feel that there are.

Lewis Donelson- They gained strength,

Carolyn Yellin- They gained strength but at that time the black power was a minimal..

Lewis Donelson- I had been on the community relations committee for 12 years and it was always fantastic to me that you could make an agreement (muffled) and it was always carried out. Black power people never (muffled). We went on 12 years and we never one time had them say they were going to do something and they didn't do it. But this was a time when it wasn't that way, you didn't (muffled) That he could assure you that what he said was going to be done.

Carolyn Yellin- He could not assure you?

Lewis Donelson- That's right he did not attempt to assure you.

Carolyn Yellin- Did you feel this was...(muffled) Do you still felt that he was in such control that he could at that time (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- He could have made a much stronger guarantee but I don't think he really was able to guarantee, however he did on one of the days they were down there in the council. I guess that was when they were all arrested. He got the nerves to leave peacefully.

Anne Trotter- The night when the teenagers were outside right? And they were arrested and taken from city hall to jail to be booked.

Lewis Donelson- I don't know about it and I (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- March 5th? The night they announced (muffled) they were arrested for the sit in at city hall and that was the night that King announced he was coming back to march...

Lewis Donelson- That's the night March the 5th that is the night that is right. And between that night, between February 23rd and that night seems to me that I met several times with various groups privately sometimes with Downing sometimes

with Jared Sometimes with both of us, all three of us with Lawson, Dr. Price, David King with (muffled) we tried to work out an agreement.

Carolyn Yellin- Now you mentioned one (muffled) Do you feel that you were a group within the city council that was more immovable to a settlement?

Lewis Donelson- Yes I think so... The difference between Jared and myself is, well I was the first one that was willing to go against the mayor and then Jared became even more strong far more than (muffled) Now he has gotten into the way he was willing to go against the mayor, although (muffled) Was not willing to help the council defy the mayor. But he, we were really more active in getting together the (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- Would you regard Mrs. Awsumb as this kind of person, (muffled)...

Lewis Donelson- She was the most likely prospect, to improve the, well I guess the two of them are the most likely prospects but Gwynn was much more adamant on issues than I felt she needed to be. (Muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- Because she had strong feelings about unions.

Lewis Donelson- That's right.

Carolyn Yellin- (Muffled) or with feelings about racial matters because she went to describe her, I was describe her as...

Lewis Donelson- She certainly is not a segregationist and I consider her views on racial matters and mine are very very similar, but her views on unions (muffled). I had said on two occasions that I could deliver a city council majority counting on Gwynn's vote and I wasn't able to get it.

Anne Trotter- I think she was really good at (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- That was the thing.

Anne Trotter- (muffled).

Lewis Donelson- When Gwynn was elected (muffled). Most people who knew me knew that I was liberal on the integration thing and I had been working on this a long time. But the general public didn't because I had been associated with the republican party and I (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- (Muffled)

Lewis Donelson- No they don't. In any event we had numerous meetings in this period, I can't remember it was before or after the March 5th meeting. It was just the March 5th meeting that I had the confrontation as I recall with Zeke Bell that you asked about. (muffled) We had an obligation (muffled) (tape Glitching) I found that in the first meeting and in subsequent ones if you give them an inch the first thing was it was going to get out of hand and that is what happened to Fred he was trying

to (muffled) and the first thing you know he was getting (muffled). I was still made at Zeke Bell from the morning before so I am sure that helped. (muffled). Then they tried to get me to meet with Bell...(Tape End)