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George Lapides, 2007

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Description: George Lapides, a sports journalist and native Memphian, began his career covering politics in the Memphis tri-state area. Inspired by the editor of the Press Scimitar and Commercial Appeal to go into journalism he explains the experiences that accompanied his move into sports journalism and the stories he covered during the civil rights era.

[0:00]

Daniel: Starting off, could you state your name?

George: George Lapides.

Daniel: Okay, and your current occupation?

George: I do a sports talk radio show — my 36th year of sports talk radio; I survived that long I guess. I'm told it's the longest running sports talk show in the country.

Daniel: We're gonna start off talking a little bit about your childhood. Can you tell us when you were ?born?

George: I was born on November 8, 1939, Memphis, TN, delivered by Dr. Phil Shrier, and grew up here.

Daniel: What were your parents' names?

George: My dad's name was Abe Lapides, no longer living, and my mother's name was Mildred Lapides — Mildred Heyman — H-E-Y-M-A-N — Lapides, and she's no longer with us. My dad was born in Belzoni, MS and moved to Memphis when he was in third grade, went to Snowden School not far from Rhodes College, Central High School. My mother was born ~~in~~ and reared in Memphis and went to Bruce School, Bellevue Junior High and Central High School.

[1:18]

Daniel: Just growing up, what neighborhoods did you live in?

George: I lived very near Rhodes for the first 13 years of my life. I lived at 2223 Vollintine when I was literally in the crib. I had shortly there after moved to 1016 Sheridan St., which is one block west of University St., which borders Rhodes College. I lived there until I was 13, and my parents moved into the White Station area of east Memphis and not in the city — city limits are the time; it was just east of Waring before you got to Perkins.

Walnut Grove was two lanes gavel. We lived on a piece of property that had been a farm.

[2:09]

Daniel: What was your childhood like? What kind of activities were you involved in?

George: My childhood —

Daniel: Any sports?

George: — was very normal to a certain extent. I was fortunate in one way that my father owned his own business and went to New York three or four times a year. He would always take my mother at least two times a year and stay for extra pleasure, and usually about once a year, I would get to go. Talking about as a six, seven, eight, nine, ten year-old. I saw the play *South Pacific* when it was first running in its first year on Broadway with _____Mary Martin and _____Enzio Penza.

[2:5255]

I had a great aunt — a great uncle and great aunt _____who owned a large sporting goods manufacturing company called Ben Lee, and they manufactured primarily boxing equipment, baseball gloves — baseball gloves that were _____used by the Brooklyn Dodgers and boxing equipment. If you go look at most _____libraries the boxing pictures of Joe Louis, the heavyweight champion, you'll see he's wearing Ben Lee trunks. That was after my Uncle Ben and my Aunt Lee. So I got introduced to sports at a very young age.

They also had a cousin — my dad had a first cousin in New York — who was a political science professor, and John Kennedy induced him to run for Congress against the then Mayor of New York, John Lindsey. Even though my cousin knew he wasn't gonna win the race, he — it's hard to tell the President of the United States no, so he ran in that campaign, and I participated. It sort of sparked an interest in politics for me.

[4:06]

That's really what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a journalist; I decided in the fifth grade I wanted to be a journalist living over on _____Vollintine St. The retired foreman at the press room

at the Commercial Appeal ~~_____~~ and Press Scimitar lived directly across the street. I'd ride with him some when I was in the fourth and fifth grade; he'd go pick up his retirement check, and he got me — I got interested in the newspaper business. So I was interested in politics because of my cousin, my dad's first cousin; interested in the newspaper business because of the gentleman across the street. I wanted to write politics ~~_____~~ when I first started in the business. That's what I wanted to be, and I really just wanted to be ~~_____~~. A Washington correspondent. I had zero thoughts of sports, none.

Daniel: Did religion play a big role in your family?

[5:00]

George: Not in particular. Family's Jewish, and we still are, but ~~_____~~ not a big role, not a big role. I'm not terribly observant. No, I mean I'm proud of being Jewish, but other than that, it does ~~_____~~ not play a big role ~~_____~~.

Daniel: Did any members —

George: Did lose some family members, too. Dad had a first cousin shot down in the Normandy invasion and is buried at Omaha Beach. I've seen the gravesite. The cousin that got me interested in politics chased Rommel across Africa, and I had other cousins who served in — my dad had first cousins who served ~~_____~~ ~~to~~ in World War II, so I've got an interest in World War II. One, I remember the war, and two, I had some family members who served.

CUT [5:58:17]

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Daniel: Do you have any memories from your childhood that — particular moments that stand out about race relations?

[6:08]

George: Yeah, I do. My family was fortunate. We had a housekeeper; she was African-American. She probably had as much to do with rearing me as my mother did, but I know that I was taught by my parents that punishable offense to use the N word, and my mother and dad both would go to the zoo and tell me how horrible it was ~~_____~~ that there was one day a week set aside at the zoo for African-American people ~~_____~~ to visit it was

terrible and African American to go to movies and go to neighborhood because African-American people allowed in.

[7:03]

My parents, both of them, were what I guess today people would probably call them liberals, but they were both _____ — they both loved Franklin Roosevelt. They both voted for Adlai Stevenson both time over Dwight Eisenhower. I guess they were yellow-dog Democrats _____, but these days they're not. I don't think Democrats were thought of as conservative; I don't know if they are now, even. Some aren't. But race was discussed a lot at my house, the unfairness of segregation. So I grew up with that. I hope that helped shape d me some; I think my parents were very influential, my mother especially.

Daniel: When you were in elementary school, _____, middle school, high school, did you ever talk with your friends about race and those kind of issues?

[8:02]

George: I remember some friends using the N word, and it was so commonplace in the 40's _____, early 50's, and I would sometimes be ridiculed by my friends for calling them down for using that _____ one time back in — way back in grammar school — I remember some big guy, bigger than me, started pushing me around when I called him down for using the N word. Ended up bodily throwing me to the ground and sticking my head in a mud hole. I remember that, and I must have been in the second grade at the time, in Ms. Redding's class at _____ Vollintine when that happened.

I wasn't —

CUT [Silence 8:49 — 9:04 47:07]

Daniel: I was also gonna mention if you just look at me, that's fine. Okay, well, moving on, maybe talk about how did you get into writing? You said you're _____ really interested in journalism and into writing in high school?

George: Yeah, I did. I mean I got interested — the gentleman who is the retired pressroom _____ one floor one day took me up to the third floor at Memphis Publishing Company which published both

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the *Commercial Appeal* and what was the *Press Scimitar* but closed in 1983. He took me and introduced me to Cal Alley, the editorial cartoonist, so while Mr. Alley was talking to me — and I was in the fifth grade — I saw him sketching, and when he was all through, he could tell that I was interested in sports, like especially baseball at the time. When he was all through and when we were all through, it was time to leave, he tore off paper off his pad and handed it to me; it was a caricature of me with a baseball bat on my sh — on my shoulder getting ready to hit, and he had me left handed. I *am* left handed, and he noticed all of that just while he was talking to me. I was so impressed that he would be able to detect that I was left handed and knew that I liked sports that I said, "You know, I'd like to be in this business." I couldn't draw a good stick man, so it wasn't gonna be as a cartoonist. I said I wanted to be a newspaper person.

[10:1842]

So from the time I was in the fifth grade, I never wavered from wanting to be a newspaper person or a journalist. So by the time I was in junior high, I was on the Snowden paper. In the seventh grade then, we moved to White Station, and I was in the first graduating class at White Station. I was a senior there for four straight years; they added a grade a year, and in the ninth grade, that's all the grades there were. When I was in the tenth grade, that's all the grades there were, and when I was in eleventh grade; so we started the White Station paper, and I was on it all the time, an editor and one of the editors.

[11:2010:52]

Then in college I was an editor and the managing editor of the paper. Even before I finished college I got a job interning at the *Press Scimitar* three nights a week, and then as soon as I graduated I got a full-time job there. The early 60's, about the time James Meredith was integrating Ole' Miss. I've been a journalist except for about seven years in the 80's and 90's, although I still continued to do my radio show.

[11:5319]

When my newspaper closed, I became Athletics Director at Rhodes College, and then I left there to go into business as vice president and senior vice president at Fulton Property in Memphis. Stayed in that business for seven years or eight years, and a friend of mine at Channel 3 asked me if I'd come back

and go into TV. I'd never done TV, but I said, "Yeah, for I'll probably give you five years." ~~_____~~but I stayed ten. All the whole time I continued to do my ~~_____~~radio show.

But I decided in the fifth grade what I wanted to do and said what I really wanted to be a Washington correspondent. I thought I was headed in that direction. Came back off of a trip with a United States subcommittee checking into Welfare abuses in the State of Mississippi, the editor of the paper called me into his office — came back, I'd been in the Mississippi Delta for two or three days. I don't know if I'd had a shower for two or three days. He called me into his office and he said, "How would you like to move to the Sports Department next week?" His name was Charlie Schneider, and he was the editor of the paper, and I said, "Eh, I really don't want to go to the Sports Department." He said, "Well, let me tell you what the deal is. I want you to go the Sports Department next week, and the following week I'm gonna make you Sports Editor, and this is what you're gonna be paid." It was a substantial increase over what I was being paid at the time, so I said, "You just got yourself a Sports Editor." Basically I've been involved in sports one way or the other ever since that, and that was 1967 I think. Maybe '8.

[13:4518]

Daniel: Maybe just going back to the beginning of your ~~_____~~, journalism what kind of things were you covering when you first started out?

George: Same thing every cub reporter does: Obits. I mean I covered obits and wrote obituaries, and covered the emergency rooms at hospitals, and the police department and crimes. Same thing every beginning ~~_____~~news side newspaper person does. Then I just sort of gradually, over a period of — I look back on it; it was a really short period of time at just three or four years. I became the Assistant Editor of our editions that went into Mississippi and Arkansas and west Tennessee, but as the Assistant Editor of those editions, it was my job to just cover the news in those states, and most of the news in those states emanated from either the Legislature or the State House, the government — the Governor's house — the Governor. So I got to cover Arkansas and went to Rockefeller for instance ~~_____~~with the Governor to cover elections, statewide elections in Mississippi, things that went on politically in the states. I did a lot of other type stories, too, whether it was with the Corps of Engineers on the Mississippi River or whatever. I'd say 70-80% of it was political.

CUT [15:14]14:48:05]

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Daniel: So were you covering a bunch of news about the _____ Civil Rights Movement?

George: Yeah, I was, especially in Mississippi where it was the hottest, frankly. The Senate subcommittee that was investigating Welfare abuses, the abuses were of the type that the Welfare money that was due to the people who were entitled to it wasn't being delivered to the people who were entitled to it. Most of those people who were entitled to it in Mississippi were African-American, and the big news in those years was this Senate subcommittee that came down and did a really exhaustive investigation into why this was happening. The senators who were on that committee were Joe Clark from Pennsylvania, Gaylord Nelson, who I believe was from New Hampshire — may have been from Wisconsin — and Winston Prouty, who was either New Hampshire or Wisconsin. I've forgotten which was which. George Murphy, former tap dancer/entertainer who was a senator from California — Reagan wasn't the first entertainer to be elected in California _____ or anything — and Robert Kennedy, who was senator from _____, New York.

[16:39]15]

We toured a lot of areas in Mississippi. There was — there were hearings in Jackson, and I covered those. They put a lot of people on the stand and interrogated them, trying to get to the bottom of the problem, and we toured all over Mississippi. Marian Wright, who's now known as Marian Wright-Edelman, was sort of our tour guide. She was head of the Mississippi NAACP at the time. It was on that trip where she met Peter Edelman, her husband, who was at the time Bobby Kennedy's chief legislative assistant. So they met each other on that trip and have been a real famous couple ever since then.

I never will forget one day that she was our tour guide. We were touring some tenant farms in Mississippi. She went and had Bobby Kennedy knock on the door of someone's house, and this older couple, African-American, answered the door. Marian had told Bobby Kennedy what their names were. I've forgotten the woman's name, but the gentleman's name was Sam Houston Smith. Kennedy knocked on the door — he didn't know that Kennedy was gonna come knocking on the door, and he looked at him and his eyes got just bigger than — you can't imagine how big his eyes

got! He said to him, "Why, why, you're Mr. Bobby Kennedy." Kennedy looked at him, and he said, "You're Sam Houston Smith," and then he called his wife's name, and they both just could have fallen down.

[18:2317:55]

There was another point on that trip where ~~_____~~we went walking through an area with some farms, children all around. They were ~~_____~~hungry tots, had distended stomachs. A horrible thing to see, and the only media on that trip were the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, the *New Orleans Time-Picayune* and me, and a reporter/photographer from each of the three networks at the time. There weren't — there wasn't CNN or Fox. It was ABC, NBC, and CBS. I saw Kennedy walk out the backdoor of the shack that they were in. We had pool ~~_____~~reporter go into the shack, and I wasn't the pool person at that time.

[19:1718:50]

So I saw Kennedy come out the backdoor of one of these shacks and go in the backdoor of another shack, and I kept wondering, "What's he doing?" I finally just — I wasn't the pool reporter, but I said, "I'm gonna go to that shack and look through the front door and see what was happening." So I went to the front door. Kennedy had on a beautiful gray, dark, pinstripe suit. You know he was wealthy; it had to be expensive. The floor in this little shack was filthy. It was absolutely filthy, and he was sitting on it. He had this maybe 18-month old baby sitting on his lap wearing a diaper. The baby had been eating — I don't know — like dried beans or something off the floor. The baby had a distended stomach, and just tears pouring down Kennedy's face. That made a heck of an impression on me.

[19:1549]

I just thought that everything my parents had taught me, what I had seen on that trip, everything I — anything I could possibly do in limited ways that I could do ~~_____~~.it I mean. I didn't have a lot of leverage, but I was certainly gonna do what I could do to — "even things out" is not the right terminology, but to be a better citizen about the civil rights problem ~~_____~~.that we had going.

CUT 20:21:22

Daniel:

Did you become involved ~~_____~~?in the movement?

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[20:~~55~~25]

George:

Yeah, I did. I did in the late 60's. We changed our form of government ~~i~~~~_____n Memphis from~~ commission ~~_____forum~~ to what we have now, City Council. A friend of mine — a lifelong friend of mine — and I lived next door to each other. It's my wife's law partner — one of my wife's law partners, and there was a City Council race going on, and we were in a mixed district, half-white, half-black. Maybe I think it was 50% white, 40% — 56% white, 44% African-American. There were some candidates running. We knew some of them personally, we weren't ~~_____enthralled~~.

There was one guy running who we didn't know; his name was Fred Davis. We did a little checking, and at the time he worked for the county government in not a big position, and we knew he was in the insurance business, too. I think that was his primary business, the insurance business.

[2221:~~04~~34]

Turned out he was African-American, so we said ~~_____well~~ ~~we're going to~~ meet this guy; we don't like the other candidates. So we called him up and told him we'd like to meet, and Dad walked away saying, "There's never been any African-American elected to high — any high office ~~in Memphis~~ — any office." We said to each other we'd do what we can to get him elected. Came back to him and we said, "Tell you what we'll do. We'll go out and try to raise you some money, we'll strategize for you." He didn't have — he had a — he didn't have anybody with experience in politics — not that we were. We'd done some limited stuff in some county elections and city elections. We basically said we'd run the campaign for him. He said okay.

[22:~~54~~23]

I can remember taking — trying to raise money for him in Memphis, and I wasn't getting to first base. I did know the editor of the Nashville *Tennessean*, the *Tennessean* ~~of Nashville, John~~ ~~Seigenthaler~~~~_____~~. I called Sig; he was friends with Bobby Kennedy, and that's sort of how I got to know and maintain a relationship with the Kennedies. I drove Fred to Nashville and told him about what we wanted to try to do in Memphis, which was to get Fred elected to the City Council, and before we left there, we had \$4,800.00. He called around and raised — got some friends,

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got — and in the late 60's, that was a nice amount of money, and we basically used that money to run Fred's campaign on. So we left it with Nashville money — I don't think I've ever told this story publicly. I *know* I haven't told it publicly. I think Fred has; I've heard him tell it publicly once or twice.

Fred was elected, and we did — I did — we did some things that were a little different in the African-American areas, residential areas. We put up posters and signs that had Fred Davis and his picture, and in the white areas, we put up signs that just had his name, Fred Davis. It was a nice, WASPy sounding name.

[24:0942]

We just put up Fred Davis hoping we'd get 5-10% who'd vote for Fred by mistake, and plus, we were near Messick School at the time, and there was a part over there by Messick — which was an all-white school — called Davis Park, and we were thinking maybe some people would mistakenly confuse Fred with Davis Park. It just turned out he got about 10% white vote, which I'm reasonably confident at least half of it was mistaken, that they didn't know, and he got elected.

I think to this day, there are people who will tell you that he later was just a volunteer member of the Park Commission after he retired from Council. I think to this day, Fred will tell you that — there are people who will tell you — that Fred was as good a City Councilman as we ever had. He was certainly the best City Councilman I think we've ever had. It had great citizens — Dale Patterson and Rev. Netters were _____, also on that, Downing Pryor, Louis Donaldson, Jared Blanchard — most people _____ politics around _____ will tell you that it was probably the best City Council we ever had because the people were really on there only — they didn't have the political aspirations. They just wanted to be good citizens. They didn't aspire to higher office, although one eventually — Wyatt Chandler — became Mayor. But none of the others had aspired to *any* higher office. They just, they wanted to serve in more or less a volunteer role.

[25:3710]

I think there were some other things that I guess I'm proud of. I think a hired — I'm not 100% sure, but I think when I was Sports Editor I hired the first African-American journalist to be in the Sports Department at the *Press Scimitar*. There weren't any

African-Americans on the — at least as reporters or anchors on any of the TV stations, no other African-Americans working at either newspaper at the time. The only African-American journalists at the time that I knew of were either at the *Tri-State Defender* or at WLOK or WDIA ———— African American themed radio stations. I think the sports writer ———— was the first African American.

CUT [226:245:58]

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Daniel: ———— ?Wow, do you remember how late that was?

George: In the 60's, late 60's. All of that took place in the late 60's. I was at Old Miss briefly during the riots during the James Meredith situation, actually as just a journalistic gofer. One of the ———— scripts Howard top war ———— ,reporter, I was just being his eyes sorta ———— seeing things, I think and s ———— telling him about it. I was literally a cub reporter at that time. *Just* starting. They just needed as many eyes as they could to see what was going on, and I just would tell him, and he'd write about it.

[27:0626:40]

Daniel: What was that like?

George: Scary. Darn scary. I was right by one of the Memphis radio station's vans at the time. Somebody blew it up, and I thought I was gonna blow up with it. It scared the livin' stew out of me. I mean to see coeds, these nice coeds from nice families at Old Miss throwing rocks and everything ———— see 'em through the windows. It's hard to believe that could happen just — it still blows me away today. Thank heavens my children went to public schools all through grammar school and junior high and high school. They're diversified schools, and I think that's helped them in their lifetime.

[28:0027:34]

Daniel: Were there — when you were working as a ———— political journalist in the 60's, were there any other major civil rights events that you covered or that really stand out in your memory?

George: Well, there were — off and on, there were quite a few of them in Mississippi, some in Arkansas, not as much in west Tennessee that I can remember, but I remember lots of gubernatorial elections that

I covered ~~_____~~ slots — several, two or three in Mississippi where race was always an issue, and it was which candidate could out-conservative the other candidate. The first time William Winter ran for Governor in Mississippi, he was branded by the *New York Times* as the most liberal politician to ever offer himself for state office in Mississippi. So that meant that he was gonna lose, and he did. But he later came back — 'cause he was really good — he later came back and did win the gubernatorial election, but you couldn't call anybody a liberal in Mississippi — then *or* now — but then it was even worse I think. That cost William Winter the election. I covered those campaigns. It was always interesting to see who could sound more racist than the other candidate — try.

[~~29:19~~28:53]

Daniel: Were you ~~_____~~ in Memphis in ~~in~~ during the sanitation strike?

George: Yes, I was, and I was in Memphis also when John Kennedy was assassinated, got called into work that night to cover that. I was in Memphis the night Martin Luther King got assassinated, and even though by — I'm trying to remember — even though by then I was already in sports. So that was '68, so I was already in sports 'cause I had some experience prior to when John Kennedy was assassinated. I was called into work that night, arrived there; I was the first of the editors to get to the paper, so I sort of had to take charge in the newsroom as the sports editor for a little while even before the city editor got there. He got there a little bit after I did. He took over, but I had to make sure all the reporters were in the right ~~_____~~ places.

[~~30:21~~29:55]

As far as just the sanitation strike, I was not involved ~~_____~~. I was at the newspaper and I could see what we were covering every day, and I know that it was lively as the dickens — much more lively than it usually is in the newsroom — because so much was happening so fast. I happened to be friendly with the Mayor of Memphis at the time, Henry Loeb, even though I think he was — to know Henry was to know how stubborn he was, to know how — he had tunnel vision about lots of things. I hate to speak about Henry ~~_____~~ because he is not alive anymore. He does have family members still. I liked Henry a lot, but he was really wrong about to not negotiate with the sanitation workers. I don't think that Henry was an overt racist, but he sure came across as one during that.

[31:2630:59]

The images of some of the Memphis ministers on television
——it was on the Walter Cronkite, Huntley, Brinkley,
especially of Rabbi James Wax literally yelling at Henry Loeb
about his stance. Henry had grown up at Temple Israel where
Rabbi Wax was the senior rabbi. To hear him yelling and see that
on television — to even see it on network television — was rather
dramatic to say the least.

CUT [31:33:03]

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Daniel: Did you ever talk to him about ——his position, have you
ever expressed your——?

[32:0531:38]

George: Henry would always tell you that he was right; that was just Henry.
Even after Henry wasn't Mayor, I'd go to Forest City where he
moved and just visit with him. He got very sick, and I'd see him
——some after he got sick for the years that was pretty I
guess ——feeble blew my mind that Henry
——was feeble because he came across as such a virile,
all-man type of guy.

Again, as wrong as he was — and he was *really* wrong — and
maybe he was racist; I don't know. But I still liked him; I just did.
But I mean I think that if he had negotiated with the Sanitation
Union, there would have been no need for Martin Luther King to
come to Memphis, and if there'd been no need for some to
Memphis, I'm not saying that James Earl Ray wouldn't have picked
him off somewhere else — he probably would have. It wouldn't
have happened here.

[33:0432:37]

Daniel: Sounds like you were involved in some liberal causes
——and helping out and talked about your ——
——helping out with the political campaign and some civil
rights ——stuff with your--.

George: I about always voted with liberals.

Daniel: Okay.

George: I tell you, but I've voted for some conservatives, too.

Daniel: Well, did that ever — and you worked for the *Press Scimitar*; did that have a reputation as a liberal newspaper?

George: More so at the time than the *Commercial Appeal*. The editor — the long-time editor of the *Press Scimitar*, Ed Meeman, who I — I think I — I don't think; I know I was the last person he hired before he retired. He was known as a liberal editor. The *Commercial Appeal* at the time was known as much more conservative even then it is now — or *than* it is now; I don't think it's very conservative now. But it was much more conservative.

[34:0033:33-]

Mr. Meeman was friends with people like Edmond Orgill, who was Mayor, Lucius Birch, close friends; and they were all involved in lots of social call it issues and civil rights issues. They were on the right side, and so was Mr. Meeman, much more so than other news people. Although we didn't have anybody African-American working for us, so there was a little bit of contradiction.

Daniel: So when you're out covering things and you're telling people you're ~~from the Press Scimitar~~, did you ever have — that ever create problems ~~with anyone?~~

George: No, never created. Not ever.

Daniel: What about — did you work —?

George: Now, most of the time — you've gotta realize most of the time I was at the *Press Scimitar*, I was sports.

Daniel: Okay.

George: Probably six years in news and 20-some odd years in sports.

Daniel: Well, I guess during the 60's and then maybe the 70's, you were working in sports *and* news. Did you ever — well, ~~those time specific time frames~~. Did you have much interaction with African-American journalists who were working for other newspapers when you were covering things?

[35:0534:36]

George: Well, there weren't many — hardly any, except for African-American-owned newspapers like the *Tri-State Sentinel/Defender*, nor were there many women. _____ I expect of course by then, by the 70's I was in sports, so the only people I would — news people I would come in contact with, by and large except for those at my office, were sports writers or columnists, and almost all of them were white. Almost — 99.9% into the 70's were white. Ralph Wiley, who was from Memphis but at the time was working from _____ as a columnists, he died way too young, I think of cancer, went to Melrose High School in Memphis, was probably the first African-American sports writer of note that I knew. At the time he was in Oakland, and he later became a well-known author, too. Wrote books, and he was terrific. So it was very gradual _____ for African Americans that you got to know.

[36:4635:52]

About in 1983, my newspaper closed, and I left the newspaper business. I was out of it and out of — out it except for doing the radio show, and that's just a — that was just me. So the only African-American journalists I came in contact with were in press boxes and places like that. _____ By the 80's there were not a lot, but there were a number of African-Americans _____ there. By the 90's, it was pretty — not totally integrated, because it's still mostly white in sports. Mostly white, but not all.

CUT [37:0036:33]

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Daniel: I had some questions I wanted to ask kind of about once you became a sports writer. When you first moved into sports journalism, was sports in Memphis completely integrated or like _____ ?it, you know?

George: Just starting to integrate.

Daniel: Maybe what were — may could you tell me a little — like was there a baseball team in Memphis at that time? What were the major sports teams that you know of _____?

George: Well, we covered University of Memphis basketball, which started getting big in the 50's — all white teams. I can remember Herb Hilliard, who is now an officer or executive at First Tennessee Bank, was the first African-American player at the University of Memphis. He was a non-scholarship player to begin with.

[37:~~54~~24]

Moe Iba, the son of a very famous basketball coach, recruited lots of African-Americans, the first African-Americans to play ~~_____~~, to play and star for the University of Memphis for Larry Finch and Ronnie ~~_____~~, Robinson played for ~~_____~~ Jean Martin's teams in the early 70's ~~_____~~. But they had been ~~_____~~ they had been recruited by Moe Iba, who was Bartol's predecessor probably in 1970, but by the time the Memphis team played UCLA for the national championship, the team was at least half African-American if not more.

The football team by then, the quarterback was Lloyd Patterson at the University of Memphis, and they had lots of African-American players, but it happened quickly starting in the late 60's.

[38:24~~54~~]

But prior to that, I grew up going to baseball games at Russwood Park; the only African-American baseball players I ever saw were playing in the Negro American Leagues at Martin Stadium. I remember the team the Memphis Red Sox, and as a kid I would go with four or five of my buddies, and we were about — I don't know — 12 years old, 13 years old. We'd go into the games; it cost a quarter to get in the games. We'd be the only white people at the games, and we bought the cheapest seats, which were out down the left field line towards the bleachers, but there some older African-American gentlemen who would see us and knew that we were the only whites. Maybe they were being protective; I don't know. Maybe they *thought* they were being protective, but they would run us over and let us sit with them right in the good seats right behind home plate. There was a place right out in front of Martin Stadium that sold the best barbecue chicken sandwich I've ever tasted.

But we'd go see them; we'd see great ballplayers who went onto the major leagues and were among the first African-Americans, but that was in the 50's. There weren't many African-Americans playing in the 50's. Jackie Robinson was the first in '47, and then Larry Dobie, and Roy Campanella, and then a bunch of players with the Dodgers.

[40:1239:40]

Again, because my — had relatives in the sporting good business in New York and they made baseball gloves for the Dodgers. In 1949, I was at the Dodgers/Cardinals game with my cousin and my dad's cousin, and my dad and me and had a two-hour rainout between the Dodgers and the Cardinals — or rain delay. So my cousin took me down to the Dodger clubhouse and knocked on the door, and outfielder Cal Abrams came out , who we knew, got me and took me in, and before I knew it, I was sitting on a stool next to Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese for about an hour! It was for — I don't know — I was like ten — for a ten year-old boy who liked baseball to be sitting in a major league clubhouse with — Don Newcomb would come over and say hello. These were the Boys of Summer teams that Roger Kahn wrote about. That was the thrill of a lifetime.

[41:0640:39]

Daniel: Do you remember what you talked about with them?

George: I don't know. I was so starry-eyed, I couldn't tell you what we talked about. All I know, it was raining, and we got back to the hotel at 2:00, and my mother was furious 'cause we hadn't called to tell her why we were gonna be back at 2:00 in the morning and there'd been a two-hour rain delay. She was worried to death about my dad and me, and my dad's cousin who was from New York — why we got back to the hotel at 2:00. She was *really* mad. I mean I didn't think — I was worried. We were gonna go see *South Pacific* the next night, and I was worried she was gonna ground me or something.

CUT [41:17:04]

Daniel: Going back to you talked about how University of Memphis sports started to be integrated right around the 70's. Do you remember what that change was like to — were you covering those games at the time?

[41:5932]

George: Yeah, it was really — I suspect it was — when they first started integrating. I suspect — well, I can remember hearing some ugly words from the stands, but that — you know, once those guys were wearing the Memphis uniform and helping them win games, I think people — it didn't much matter. Besides that, the Atlanta Hawks in the NBA — the St. Louis Hawks in the NBA — used to play nine or ten games a year in Memphis right after the Mid-South Coliseum was built in the early 60's. Of course, the NBA by then was at least 50% black. So it wasn't as if Memphis was

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unaccustomed to seeing black athletes participate with white athletes, and once they became the University of Memphis guys, and then the University of Tennessee played a football game in Memphis every year, too — at ~~Cr~~Klump Stadium and then at the Liberty Bowl — and they were the first team in the Southeastern Conference to have African-American players.

[43:0242:37]

Lester McLain was the first African-American player in the SEC — a wide receiver from Nashville — who I think played in '68 for Tennessee. I remember writing a piece that he integrated the scoreboard at Grant Field in Atlanta, that a Tennessee at Georgia Tech game he scored a touchdown. I don't think any African-American had ever scored a touchdown on that field — Georgia Tech's field. That was the lead in my column that Lester McLain had integrated the scoreboard.

I think that — I think by the time that Larry Finch, Ronnie Robinson, and Larry Keenan, and Wes Westphal, and Billy Buford, and all those guys were playing, nobody much cared if they were white or black, just as long as — they only cared if they won or lost.

Daniel:

Did you ever talk to those players in the first years and see — did you ever talk to players who are early in integra —?

[44:0543:38]

George:

Yeah, I talked to Larry about it a lot. Larry was under great pressure not to go to the University of Memphis because he was African-American, to go to Kentucky or somewhere else. Not that he was the first African-American, pretty much a foregone conclusion that he was gonna be a big, huge star 'cause he was a great in high school. He was fabulous, and yet he wanted to stay home , and he wanted to go and he wanted to put the University of Memphis basketball , on a bigger map. and he did all that. I did talk to Larry about it.

[44:5527]

My wife was the first white teacher at Melrose High School where Larry went. She even had Larry — maybe or Larry's sister — in homeroom maybe , in the 9th grade, so I knew a lot

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about the Finch family through my wife, actually. She taught French at Melrose; this is before she got a law degree. I knew about the Finch family before most people did.

Daniel: Did he talk about that pressure?

George: Not about the pressure, but he talked about wanting to be — wanting to contribute and have something to do in helping race relations, and I sure think he did. He and the big cat, Ronnie Robinson, they both did, because they were at the time the favorite sons here, worshipped by just about everyone because they were both so nice, such good guys and players. So Larry had such an electric personality when he was a player and Ronnie was a big, huge guy but so gentle, so nice, and so soft spoken. Everybody liked him. Larry was the outgoing, flashier guy; Ronnie wasn't, but people liked him a lot.

CUT [46:18-45:52]

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Daniel: What do you think it is about —? sports? I was looking at some of the professional leagues; they integrated before the 60's. What do you think —it is about sports that allowed race to become integrated? The desire —

George: The desire to win. Strictly the desire to win. —Branch Rickey saw it in baseball, that there were all these great players playing in two negro leagues. "Why should they be playing there? Why not play with us?" I don't think he thought it was fair. I'm trying to remember, I think Buddy Young was the first African-American to play in the NFL.

[47:07-46:38]

I don't remember for sure who the first African-American who played in the NBA, because they actually probably integra — I think they integrated when the NBA started. The NBA didn't start 'til 1946, so it didn't come along until much later. Major league baseball started in the 1800's, and the NFL started in the late 20's. The NBA's comparatively a Johnny come lately. Of course the NHL didn't have any black players, 'cause they were all Canadian players, and there weren't really African-Americans living in Canada at the time. There were only a handful of African-American hockey players then. There still aren't many African-Americans living in Canada, where most of our hockey players come from, if not Eastern Europe.

Daniel: Do you see a big difference between race relations in professional and college sports now and maybe in the 70's — in the 70's and the 60's?

[48:1147:44]

George: Well, obviously there are many more African-Americans competing and participating in sports than there were in the 70's especially, but there are many more African-Americans practicing law now than there were in the ~~_____~~ 80's practicing medicine than there were in the 70's, and many more African-Americans in investment banking. I guarantee you there are many more African-Americans working at Merrill-Lynch and Goldman-Sachs and Morgan-Stanley now than there were in the 1970's all over the country. We're a different country, thank heavens, in many respects now than then. We've made at least an attempt at being open — more open minded.

[49:0148:35]

Daniel: Is there anything else that you'd like to say that I didn't ask you ~~_____~~ about memories from the 50's and 60's? ~~_____~~ Especially from civil rights, anything else that I didn't touch on?

George: No, I still have vivid memories of going into Goldsmith's Department Store, and of the Lowenstein's Department Stores, all the stores downtown and seeing the drinking fountains that said "white" and "colored." Unforgettable ~~_____~~ going to, as I mentioned earlier the zoo wouldn't allow African-Americans in except on one designated day ~~a _____~~ week. That the theaters and movie houses downtown ~~_____~~ and African-Americans if they were allowed in at all, they had to sit in the balcony.

[49:5729]

I tell my children, who are both in their late 30's now, that was their city; their city was like that when their dad grew up, and they just, "How could that have been? ~~_____~~ How, how? ~~Our~~ Our city have been like that?" Our city was like that, New Orleans was like that, Atlanta was like that, Orlando was like that, Charlotte was like that, Nashville was like that, Birmingham, and Little Rock. I mean every city south of the Mason-Dixon Line was like that, and lots of them north of the Mason-Dixon Line. It was a lot more subtle, but it was just as racist. I mean it's a ver — I mean

the Boston Red Sox have never had many — to this day — that many African-Americans on their baseball team, and lots of people think that's because Boston is as racist a city as there is. If you grow up in a city where there's a dividing line, it's gonna. If you're oblivious to it, you've really gotta be oblivious to a lot of things.

[~~51:05~~50:40]

Daniel: Thank you so much for your time and help.

George: If that helps.

Daniel: ~~It does. Thank you.~~ It does. Thank you.

[End of Audio, ~~51:50~~44:47]

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