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Phillip Perel, Memphis City Council, 1968

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William Sader- This is William Sader and Selma Lewis interviewing Phillip Perel. Phillip could you give us a little of your biography?

Phillip Perel- Ok we will start back with college days. I entered Johns Hopkins university and finished there with a BA degree in 1939. I entered the university of Tennessee for one year and then entered the family jewelry business which Perel and Loeistein. And except for 54 years in the army as a flying instructor I have been in the jewelry business and in that connection have been interested many civic endeavors including the formation of a retail merchants association, retail jewelers association. I was instrumental in helping to establish the first better business bureau. Have been actively engaged in the cotton carnival activities and the Christmas parade. I have been one of the organizers and the past president of the arthritis foundation. This kind of lays the groundwork for my entrance into politics. I became interested at the urging of some friends to enter the race for city council beginning with the change in the new form of government, This took place back in the summer of 1967. I entered the primary and won in the primary and entered the run off and was elected to the position of city councilmen, Took office on January 1st 1968 and found it intentionally interesting and absorbing and proceeded with a great sense of responsibility and a gratification for what was being accomplished. Shortly after that early in February we were beset with a racial dispute that grew out of a labor strike in the sanitation department that quickly developed from a labor dispute into something far more serious. This was February the 12th. Shortly after this happened a group of negro ministers and racial leaders injected themselves into the disorder and approached city hall. At that time the city council had unanimously had agreed that it was an administrative problem rather than a legislative problem and we endorsed the action that the mayor should deal with this problem. We were asked as a council as a body to sit and hear some of the grievances that were presented by some of the negro ministers. This occurred one afternoon, in order to make additional space to seat all them that wanted to come we moved the council meeting from this council chamber in city hall to the municipal auditorium. We went there and the meeting was very hostile and we again told them that we thought it was an administrative problem and while we were glad to become interested in it they should take their grievances through the proper channels and through the mayor. About this same time the labor leaders from out of the city came in with a very again the word hostile comes to mind, with a very hostile attitude and demanded certain things in a way that left no room for arbitration. The city council through the mayor proposed 9 points on which there would be agreement. The only points of disagreement were that the city at that time failed to indicate that they would give full and exclusive recognition to this particular union and they also indicated that they could not meet some of the wage demands in the full amount that were being asked and particularly they would not agree to a dues check off through the payroll because this was a policy that had been long established and the city didn't feel like breaking that policy. Shortly after this the meeting was dismissed and the councilmen left under police guard because the

atmosphere was very tense. At the next council meeting the following Tuesday the city hall was packed with great numbers of not only the sanitation workers but supporters the ministers the racial leaders and the out of state agitators. At that time...(Tape Break) Alright to take it back up we left by police guard and we didn't hear any more from these people until the following Tuesday at the city council meeting and we then had word they were going to appear in mass which they did along with I think I did say this before with all of the sanitation workers and the leaders and their supporters and the labor leaders and the out of town agitators, the ministers and a great many of other people. And they asked for time to be heard and again there was a very explosive and intense atmosphere and the city council chamber was very heavily protected by police guards, many whom remained out of sight in the basement and in the "anti" rooms. The meeting just completely got out of hand,. Now the day before this is interesting to note they had an all day sit-in in the council chamber in which they had a meeting and I heard about it only from local reports and from what I read in the newspaper. Well it became very outspoken and they threatened to sit in and they ate their lunch in there and they strew waste all over the place and there were one or two of the negro ministers who tried their best to incite to violence and threaten to tear up the place and burn up city hall and tear the seal of the wall and such stuff as this. So the next day at the council meeting these same ones were back there and frankly many people in the council were reluctant to even hear this thing because we again at this time still felt it was not our province that it was an administrative problem that they should be taking their grievances through normal channels and they should be negotiating to the mayor and the appointed representatives of the city office. So the thing did get out of hand again there were some, reverend Bell and reverend Lawson and a couple of others whose names that I can't call at the moment made very inflammatory speeches and a completely showed disrespect for the members of the council and for the office that they hold and the council chamber itself and finally my name was mentioned at one instance that I showed no regard for the negroes and that might business has been built on doing business with the negroes. It was very uncomplimentary things they were saying, I have forgotten exact wording. Finally councilmen Donelson has about as much as anybody could stand and he got up and told them that if they could not treat the council with the proper respect and dignity that he for one wouldn't listen to any more and there was shouting match back and forth, he called for an adjournment which was voted and we left again under police guard and this went on for some time in the next week or two and I had a family vacation scheduled to coincide with my daughter's spring vacation which had been in the planning stage for several months. It had to be at that time because that was the only time she would be out of school. We also arranged with my son who was in Tulane to come on his spring vacation. We were all going to take a family vacation in Acapulco Mexico. So consequently I did leave and this was about march the 23rd or 24th and we went to Mexico and I understand that while we were gone we got the news in the paper that the first big demonstration march was held during which the violence broke out and I understand that Dr. Martin Luther King was here for that and he later disclaimed any responsibility for the violence but never the less it did happen, it has happened in many other places where he had led marches nonviolent

marches. Which always seem to turn to violence. In our place of business 4 or our front windows were broken and although we had no merchandise lost we did suffer the expense of the broken windows and the fear of our employees that came in to lock the doors and were afraid to leave. There was just much tension and much unrest. At this same time my sister was ill with a terminal illness and we received a call while we were in Acapulco shortly after the news of the violence had broken out and we did come back to Memphis and I came back upon, I got in on a Saturday night I think it was about April the 1st or the 2nd I have forgotten the date and I was, I did go into the council...No my sister died right about that time and I missed that council meeting which would have been on Tuesday April the 2nd. But I was called up on the 3rd and the 4th for a special meeting and I was at city hall in fact I was meeting with several of the council members and a (muffled) mediator Mr. Miles in one of the rooms at the hotel Claridge. This was late in the afternoon and we received word over the radio and over the television that Martin Luther King had been shot. At that time we didn't know how seriously. But we quickly dismissed the meeting and we went over to mayor Lobe's office in city hall and while we were in mayor Lobe's office the bulletin came through that Martin Luther King was dead and of course we expected that there would be some violence and some trouble and frankly we were all very much concerned with the safety of the city and the safety of the mayor because we thought there might be some attempt at retaliation. The other members of the council that were there in the mayor's office were Downing Pryor, myself, and I think reverend Neders was there and Mr. Fred Davis and I believe there was one or two more I don't remember. Each of us felt that we, while there was a before the atmosphere got any worse we should perhaps go be with our families before any violence broke out and while the streets were relatively calm. Mayor Lobe at that time was under heavy police guard. He indicated that he wanted to go over fire and police director's Frank Holloman's office and all this stuff that it would not be safe for him to leave his office at this time of a very tense moment. We were, we all felt under extreme pressure. Finally mayor lobe did urge us to go ahead and be with our families and we did leave and we went home I remember this was on a Thursday evening and everybody was just glued to their television sets just waiting for further news and nobody knew exactly what was going to happen and that is as far as I can...oh I should mention that before the disorder broke out during which our windows were broken out there had been another instance when the meeting was held in the auditorium and after it was a rather short meeting and when we saw it would do no good we did conclude the meeting and the people who were at that meeting the labor people and the sanitation workers and their sympathizers did start a march down Main St. from the auditorium south on Main evidently heading towards Beale or one of their temples where they were going to meet. When they got about opposite Goldsmith's or about Main and Gayoso St. an incident broke out in which there was some violence. Later the story was that one of the police cars which was escorting the marchers nudged one of the women marchers, or she nudged the car we don't know. Anyway they started trying to overturn the police car and the police waded in with sticks and then later used mace and the marchers scattered and we locked our front doors to keep any trouble makers from coming in here and from our people being molested and there was a

great amount of apprehension at that time which lasted for perhaps an hour or so, this was in the late to middle afternoon and we did close our store at least so we could give our people to get home before dark and get off the streets. I was quoted in the paper, one of the newspaper people who I don't remember, came in to use our telephone. We did unlock the front door to let him in and he asked me what I thought about what had happened. I said it was disgraceful and there seemed to be a great amount of agitators and trouble makers. These agitators and trouble makers ought to be put in jail. And this was later quoted out of context in the newspaper where it said that councilmen Perel says they ought to all be put in jail and I did get a lot of repercussions from my negro friends and customers who took this to me that I thought all negroes should be put in jail which of course was not true and I tried to explain that my thought was then and still is that trouble makers agitators, people who create violence and disorder should be put in jail. I felt that way then and I do feel so now. Alright now questions.

William Sader- Do you think that when the labor leaders got down here and found that it was a racial issue involved, or it became a racial issue do you think they took advantage of this particular situation?

Phillip Perel- I have no doubt at all in my mind that they used what would have normally been a routine labor dispute that should have been handled and settled as a labor dispute but because the people involved were primarily negroes, the majority I would say are almost entirely negroes. Sensing a chance to cash in on labor unrest that they deliberately used these people and used these tactics to change a labor dispute into a racial dispute where none should have existed.

William Sader- Well do you feel they had a strong influence in bringing this to a, making the racial issue a very strong point?

Phillip Perel- I think that they did but certainly only in the conjunction with the negro ministers, the handful of negro ministers that I would consider the, that type of leader who resort to racial unrest to acquire their own aims, accomplish their own purposes.

Selma Lewis- What would you think that these purposes would be that the negro ministers would have?

Phillip Perel- Well at the outset people who were involved I think were seeing power to coalesce their organizations and this looked like the perfect springboard to catapult them into power and put them out in the forefront and make them heroes if they could accomplish their aims and if nothing else to bring people together who up until that time had no real single purpose of organization.

Selma Lewis- Do you feel that if the council had not felt it was an administrative problem and had been, had stepped, would there have been a chance they could have stepped in and done something about the strike?

Phillip Perel- The only way would have been to completely capitulate on every demand that these people made. And in the beginning with the mayor's approval the council did ratify the mayor's agreement on seven of the nine points that were demanded and the only ones that were not ratified were as I said the dues check off and the exclusive recognition. But everything else they asked for, in fact some of those things were corrected when there were grievances about the conditions at work, in laying off people when there was bad weather or not paying them for a day when they came, indiscrimination among the ranks or rather discrimination among the ranks. These things were corrected they didn't even have to wait for the labor dispute as soon as these were brought the attention of the responsible city officials they were corrected.

Selma Lewis- In discussing the incident in mayor Lobe's office after the assassination did you feel tension your self between the negro and white people there?

Phillip Perel- No I did not because the people who were there we had worked with on the council at that time 6 or 7 weeks we had been together and had worked on many mutual civic problems. No we didn't feel there was any difference at all we were not in an enemy camp so to speak. I have one other question if you don't mind which is about your feeling about Martin Luther King and do you feel that he himself promoted violence?

Phillip Perel- this is kind of hard to answer because I had not that much experience with him. My only thought in the matter was even though he preached nonviolence, violence and disorder seemed to follow in his wake. Now whether he incited this violence than then faded out of the picture and left other people to carry it on or not I couldn't say, I don't know. I do know that the history was one of disorder wherever he went.

William Sader- When I believe you were closed al the Perel and Loeinstein stores were closed the day of his funeral is that right?

Phillip Perel- That is correct.

William Sader- Do you feel that, I know you were one of the very few that were closed. Do you feel...

Phillip Perel- Let me make a correction this was not true, most of the downtown stores closed.

William Sader- Oh they were?

Phillip Perel- Yes we debated with this problem on the day before the funeral and we called many of the downtown merchants because there was an indication that there would be a massive march of some kind and we took the attitude that there would be little if any retail business and to make our employees come in under these conditions and then have to leave where there might be violence in the streets

and disorder we felt would be a disservice to them and the day before we tried to get other merchants to agree on some procedure. And up until late in the afternoon on the day before the funeral the merchants really could not agree many of the stores the department stores particularly wanted to stay open, they figured they would just take their chances. So finally rather than wait until too late to make an announcement we took the bull by the horns about 3:00 in the afternoon and announced to our own personnel and to our city branch stores that we would be closed. We did it for two purposes first because we felt it would be a significant gesture to the community because many of the negro community did feel strongly about the death of Martin Luther King that this would be the mark of respect for him regardless whether we agreed with his ideas or not he was a person of stature and this would be something we could do. Secondly because we felt like we did not want to contribute to the possibility of further disorder. Later all of the downtown stores did stay closed that is the retail stores with very few exceptions, I don't know who they were but many of them kept their suburban branches open we did not, we closed our entire chain. That is the Memphis stores.

William Sader- But the downtown stores stay closed basically because of the potential riot in the marches?

Phillip Perel- I couldn't answer for them I don't know. We did run ads in the paper on the day that the funeral was to be held announcing that all the Perel and Loeisteins stores in Memphis would be closed out of respect for Dr. Martin Luther King.

William Sader- Do you feel that there has been since the assassination any progress made in Memphis toward improvement in human relations and the racial situation?

Phillip Perel- Yes, I think there has been a great deal of improvement and the most notable of which it has caused an awakening among people who never gave the problem much thought before. That doesn't apply to everybody because there were some who were aware of the problem and just kind of pushed it to the background and didn't feel like personally doing anything about it. Now other who felt they had done their duty if they contributed a few dollars to a certain cause but there were very few people who were willing to become personally involved in the thing to the point of giving their own time and thought and attention and more than anything else I think this has come about since the assassination, we have become aware of the grave racial problems which exist and the underlying cause for racial tension and strife and the things that go to add to the ingredients of disorder of any kind.

William Sader- I have one more question, go ahead Selma.

Selma Lewis- No Bill after you.

William Sader- Did the, do you think the council and or the mayor prior to the strike itself thought that the problem would be settled without a strike or do you think they anticipated the strike.

Phillip Perel- No as a matter of fact the strike was called unexpectedly the strike was called without any forewarning of any kind as far as the councilmen, now the mayor may have had some inkling of this but if he did he did not bring it to the attention of the council and I can't believe that he knew the situation was as tense or as likely to call a strike as it was without him doing something about it. The strike as far as I know as a complete surprise and in fact many of the workers we later heard didn't even get the word they came to work on the morning that the strike was called and were told what are you doing here you are not supposed to come to work go home. And some of them really wanted to work and needed to work and needed the money and they were threatened and coerced and told they couldn't work that they would be in jeopardy or their families would be in jeopardy and they went home.

Selma Lewis- In needing to work as they did, Phillip, what do you think really caused the strike.

Phillip Perel- What caused the strike?

Phillip Perel- Do you think it was conditions or do you think it was out of town agitation or...

Phillip Perel- I believe the sanitation workers certainly in their own mind must have felt there was some justification to bring these grievances to some attention. Whether all of them felt that the strike was necessary I couldn't answer this but I do believe that the out of town agitators and later the ministers who came in with the slogans about you are a man and you deserve to be treated like a man and you deserve dignity in your office and all this. They quickly became brainwashed they sat in meetings everyday in their churches and in their labor temples and they quickly became I guess accustomed to the fact that they were fighting for a holy cause. That their whole racial structure was in question here.

Selma Lewis- Did you agree with the mayor is staying on the strike settlement on the issues?

Phillip Perel- Generally yes I did, I think again I will have to put that in proper context. If it hadn't been a racial element ejected in here I think that the settlement might have been made quicker and with more equitability both to the workers and to the city. I was then against a dues check off through the city payroll and I still am. I don't think it is right and I don't think the ministers have any reason to be involved with unions, the alternative which was offered earlier in the dispute which was to let the sanitation workers have their wages collected by the credit union and then paid over to them to be reimbursed the union, that would have been an entirely workable solution and I am sure that many of the workers would have used this as a means to settle this thing early but the labor leaders wouldn't let them do so.

Selma Lewis- Do you think that other members of the council were in agreement with the mayor's stand.

Phillip Perel- I think pretty generally they were. Now later on the 3 negro councilmen indicated that they were thinking more in terms of siding with the sanitation workers and I feel primarily because there was a racial issue rather than a labor issue. They were anxious to alleviate any further racial tension, they were very concerned about it and they sensed an explosive situation because they were probably closer to it than many of us were.

Selma Lewis- but then you feel that the support later became split along racial lines in a way.

Phillip Perel- To some extent yes.

William Sader- Thank you very much Phillip Perel. (Tape End)