Joe Sweat, Commercial Appeal Reporter, 1970

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David Yellin- Side 3 with Joe Sweat on March 21st, 1970.

Joe Sweat- Let me make a general comment about the strike first and then get into some specifics. It was my opinion throughout the whole strike, and it still is, that Henry Lobe never ever considered this properly a racial matter. He always considered it a labor matter. And that might be one of the tragedies really, that he didn't see the racial implications of it. And when I say properly a racial matter, I think that obviously as time went along you realize that race has gotten mixed into it but he never though it was proper that it should.

David Yellin- So therefore it did not exist.

Joe Sweat- Yeah, that it was not, that they were talking about a labor situation, and it ought to be fought along the classic battle lines of labor. The way you traditional fight a strike in industry which he had had some experience with at the Laundry. He said over and over again publicly and privately that he thought that these fellows were you know very wrong. He felt that the union people were using the racial thing to further their labor ends. He, when he met first, and very vividly recall the first day. The men had gone out on strike and the labor representatives came in.

Carol Yellin- You talking about Champa?

Joe Sweat- Yeah and Lucie.

Carol Yellin- Paisley.

Joe Sweat- Well Paisley was there some of the time, some of the time he wasn't. Here you had Champa the white man and Lucie a black man, and Lobe related to Lucie much better than he did Champa. Champa was really, of course Champa was a fine bred. I don't know it was suggested by some people, now not by Lobe, but by some people that this was calculated and there was a Mr. Bad and a Mr. Good you know. But Lucie was just one of the smoothest fellers that you could possibly ever imagine. Very articulate, very courteous, and of Champa was the epitome of rudeness.

Carol Yellin- Was he from the beginning?

Joe Sweat- From the very beginning. From the very beginning.

David Yellin- Were you there when they met?

Joe Sweat- Oh yeah, first time and he sat on the couch and they started discussing some of the issues. Then they would get to arguing you know, Champa and Lobe. And Champa would be on his feet and shaking his finger, get right up in Lobe's face, I swear his finger would almost be touching his nose, jabbing his finger at his nose and everything. Of course Lobe by and large did a pretty good job of keeping his

cool, but occasionally Champa would just get to him. He had this classic phrase he would always use he would say Champa, you son of a bitch…(laughs)

David Yellin- He didn't have to ask Champa where he was from?

Joe Sweat- No (Laughs). And it would be like that in almost every single meeting, Champa and Lobe would be tangling, but by and large most of the time Lobe would keep pretty calm and pretty cool and that didn't mean he wasn't seething underneath. He would keep that kind of square jaw you know, and he would come back and he would shout occasionally. He would get his licks in. He would never get as eruptive as Champa would on the other side you know.

David Yellin- Well when they were there that first time it would Champa, Lucie, and Lobe, and who else anybody?

Joe Sweat- My recollection is that those were the only…I don't believe Paisley was there on the first, but he probably was the next day.

David Yellin- Who was there with the mayor, anybody in particular, Halle?

Joe Sweat- Again, it would on the mayor's side, the only constant was Lobe. Now I am talking about if you are going through the days. The next most constantly visible person would be Gianatti, the city attorney, Frank Gianatti, city attorney.

David Yellin- How much would he participate in this or did it alter?

Joe Sweat- Well Frank is a rather quiet guy and he would only if you really got into a question that really went against his knowledge as a lawyer would he start trying to cite the law and so forth and so on. But he wouldn't get in there and slug it out.

David Yellin- There would never be any comradery between Champa and Gianatti because of there Italian background?

Joe Sweat- No, no, not at all. Never, ever. Gianatti was most consistently against the mayor's open office attitude during this period. In fact, he would occasionally urge him to have the reporters to go out so that they could talk privately. He would engage Lobe in private conversations, and of course this falls into the whole lawyer mystique. He did not like the idea of doing everything in a fishbowl. As I look back on that whole framework right now I have mixed emotions about it. That strike might possibly had been settled sooner if we weren't there. But on the other hand at the time I was insisting on being there as much as I possibly could because this was my responsibility.

David Yellin- That explains it.

Joe Sweat- You mean why it's my responsibility?

David Yellin- Why it might have?

Joe Sweat- Well because I think the city was somewhat polarized because I wrote some stories about the type of give and take that was going on particularly between the mayor and Champa and the way Champa really read him the riot act on a couple things and dressed him down. And because, I know this happened because we got letters into the paper and people were coming…

David Yellin- Because you reported the situation.

Joe Sweat- Right we reported the situation very accurately but people just said well you know this is just a disgrace.

David Yellin- This is a case of over communication.

Joe Sweat- Yeah, the audacity of this man coming in and talking to our mayor this way. Well really that had nothing to do with the issues, the decision should not been made one way or the other whether he talked abusively to the mayor or not.

Carol Yellin- Did you have any kind of relationship with Champa himself?

Joe Sweat- Oh I got along real well with both sides. It was awkward because I palled around with them, palled around in the sense of covered them and went places with them after the labor meetings and this sort of thing.

David Yellin- We might get back and probe that a little more, but something that has been bugging me ever since I have heard it, and I heard it sort of as an inside rumor. The first confrontation on television in which I think Champa did call the mayor a liar. Do you remember that incident.

Joe Sweat- Yes.

David Yellin- Do you remember anything…did they ever go into a room together, in the anti-room of the mayor's office and have a private conversation before they went out to television. Do you recall?

Joe Sweat- I don't recall if they went into an anti-room and had a conversation before they went out to television. Because I don't recall on that specific instance if there was television present. But I do recall on one evening when we were down there quite late that they did go privately into a conference room and talk some. And some of the union people told me later that Lobe made some agreements in there which then he pulled back on in public. Now I only have what they told me.

David Yellin- That's what I heard. That's what I heard.

Joe Sweat- Yeah, that he agreed to go along with virtually everything they were asking, that they had reached some sort of compromise, and then when they came out and perhaps television was present, I just can't remember that certain thing.

David Yellin- That's when Champa is supposed to have called him a liar.

Joe Sweat- Well he called him a liar on several issues so maybe that's why I don't remember that specific one. But there was that evening in which they went into…in fact they split up and Gianatti went with, I don't know how they matched up or broke off but some of the city people went with some of the union people, and vice versa and we had broke up into two different groups and talked about things. And reach some sort of, or at least told us…this was one session in which no reporters were present so I don't know about that. But what I have been told by all of the union people at one time or another later when we talked about it. I'm told by all of them that agreements were made in that room that would have virtually settled the strike but then when they got out into the room in public and in the next few days that all that just fell apart.

Carol Yellin- Alright Joe what about the rumor about the Ingram influence on the union people. I heard there was a rumor that Ingram had met with Champa very early on.

Joe Sweat- I never saw any evidence of it what so ever. I never saw any evidence that Ingram, had any dealings with the union at all. Not only just did I see no evidence that he had anything to do with the union, I didn't see any evidence that he had any dealings with the leadership in the black community much. He may, he may have had tremendous amount but I never saw any evidence of it. He never showed up in any meetings.

Carol Yellin- (Muffled)

David Yellin- In conjunction with your comment on the newspaper people essentially had they not been there there would have been a better chance had they been allowed to deal privately and call each other names and come out of it, and I assume what you are saying, is come out of it and give a public appearance. Two sides trying to find an answer. How much would you accredit or discredit that it was a personality conflict even form the very beginning that even prevented them form getting together or do you think…I mean just for the record.

Joe Sweat- Well I think, and I am just guessing on some of this, it's just a hunch I have. I have a hunch that a good bit of it was personality conflict between…number one personality conflict between Henry Lobe and Champa too get right down to specifics. Also a general conflict between Henry Lobe's philosophy of government and labor and race relations, the whole bit, his whole view.

David Yellin- Plus the fact that go ahead excuse me…

Joe Sweat- The conflict between that and between the whole thing that was happening in America at the time.

David Yellin- The reality of it.

Joe Sweat- The reality of the situation.

David Yellin- And all of this, I mean this last part he was in a sense holding on to the old ideas of another world. So much of it to, wasn't in your explanation of the mayor was that his, whatever it was about outsiders, it could have been anybody in a sense, that when it came down to it here were some people from the outside.

Joe Sweat- Yeah that certainly got into him. Before I forget this let me make on comment. There was another person present right at the first and during (phone rings tape cuts)

Joe Sweat- The other person who was present at the first session and during most of the other sessions is T.O. Jones.

David Yellin- Yes, yes.

Joe Sweat- A big chubby, big roly poly fellow who headed the local union.

Carol Yellin- If he had anything to do with the negotiations other than just sitting there?

Joe Sweat- Very little, in fact he went to sleep a lot. He slept on the mayor's couch a lot, and he got to snoring during one of the negotiation sessions so loudly that we all got tickled. He would just curl up on the couch and just snore away and sleep. The union people just completely disregarded him. They went through the motions of taking him into their confidence and conferring with him on things.

David Yellin- Before or during?

Joe Sweat- During everything because they had to make it appear that the local people were…

David Yellin- If by some chance a man like Lucie had been head of the local union, he might have handled it and that might have been helpful.

Joe Sweat- Oh I'm sure it would have been, yeah. Because T.O. was really an organizer he wasn't a negotiator. This was his job was organizing, and he talked the language of the guys down in the lots you know where they meet the garbage trucks, and he didn't talk the language of the negotiating table. But they still felt that since he was head of the local union that he should have a stake in there.

David Yellin- Now we can go ahead, any steps that you remember. Where you there I guess when the strike went in, one thing that occurs to me where you there when they started to give Lobe a bodyguard? What do you know about that?

Joe Sweat- Yes they didn't…the thing that I cant recall is exactly when they placed the bodyguard., when they gave him a bodyguard. I know that the bodyguard thing became very critical and very evident from the assassination of…but it was some period before that, that the police began sending over some men.

Carol Yellin- Now did they just sit in his office all the time.

David Yellin- You don't remember?

Carol Yellin- Would it be as early as the making, that first making on May…

Joe Sweat- I believe that's probably when they started coming over. I am a little bit vague on exactly when. The man who was in charge of the bodyguard detail for Lobe was name Sue Lay. He was a LT., very quiet well-mannered.

David Yellin- Was he the blond fellow or the short?

Joe Sweat- No he was dark headed, shorter man.

Carol Yellin- And they would just sit in his office all day long?.

Joe Sweat- Yeah there were about three body guards, but Sue Lay was the man in charge and then there was one other man, who was there a good bit too and then others would come and go and relieve them and so forth. It got to the point that they were staying with him all the time. Sure Lay as I say was in charge of them, they didn't, they acted as you would expect police man to act. They stayed out of the way and sort of did their job and they didn't intervene. I know things came up in the office that they as policeman might find rather distasteful. For instance talk in the office about the concept of police brutality and then so forth, this kind of thing. They didn't say anything.

Carol Yellin- The reporters didn't sit in the back of the room and play poker with the …

Joe Sweat- No they were very friendly, they were very friendly. They did put a police radio at one end of the office so they could keep up with everything. Then on the evening of the assassination they put up a movie…they used a movie screen, I always thought this probably the movie screen they used at the vice squad to check out all the dirty movies they pick up. But they brought a movie screen over and they put it beside Lobe's desk, because his desk is right beside a huge…Well they drew all the blinds on the window side, but on the side next to the wall , the whole wall, the whole panel of the wall was glass. If the lights were right you could see him sitting at his desk through that panel. So the thinking was that somebody might come up through that hall and fire through the glass so they put a movie screen to cover that whole glass so that you couldn't tell what was behind it. This was translucent glass, you can't see through it but you can see a shadow on it. So I know when I first walked into the office on the evening that Dr. King was killed this hit me immediately.

Carol Yellin- As long as you are there tell about Dr. King, or did you cover him that day.

Joe Sweat- Yes I had been at the, I had gone by there and made the usual checks in and out of his office. That was on Friday,

Carol Yellin- Thursday.

David Yellin- Thursday.

Joe Sweat- I mean Thursday, and there was a case came up in federal court whether to allow the march to proceed. Of course the city was fighting it,

Carol Yellin- Did you cover that?

Joe Sweat- Yes and I had gone over to federal court and covered that hearing, which lasted on through most of the afternoon. It seemed to me that the hearing was over about 2 or 3 o'clock. I stood around in the back of the courtroom for about an hour and talked to Andy Young, who had appeared as Dr. King's representative. King himself did not appear in court. And we talked about a lot of things, some mutual friends we had so on and so forth. In fact I remember Young saying that the only other march they had ever had any violence in was in Albany Georgia when they had a march one Saturday evening and you know how our people are on Saturday and laughed. From then on we have an unwritten policy that we never have a march on Saturday. He was kind of kidding about this and so we talked for awhile.

Carol Yellin- Did he say anything about how Dr. King was feeling at that point?

Joe Sweat- No. Nothing at all about King specifically, he mentioned his name many times in general terms in terms of strategy and so forth. But then we left federal court building.

David Yellin- When you say we did you and Andy Young leave together?

Joe Sweat- I think we walked downstairs together and then went on our various ways and he went on back to the motel, and in fact was with King, it was a short time later he went on down there with King and King was killed. I went back by and checked the mayor's office to see if they were going to appeal the ruling.

Carol Yellin- Was Lobe in his office?

Joe Sweat- Lobe was in his office and Gianatti was there, and Gianatti said as usual we will have to discuss that later.

David Yellin- This was about 3:30 or 4:00.

Joe Sweat- Right, so when I went back to the office, and I was working on this story that was based on the court ruling that afternoon. I was in the office when King was killed.

David Yellin- And the court ruling just to have a resume was that there would be a march…

Carol Yellin- Well had the court ruled, or..

David Yellin- They were going to rule the next day.

Joe Sweat- They were going to rule the next day that is right. My story was on the hearing.

Carol Yellin- Well now when you are in the office the police radio was on the desk or where you getting police calls in the office?

Joe Sweat- I was sitting over quite away from there and they of course, bedlam broke lose.

David Yellin- Now this is from 3:30 to 6:00 when it happened?

Joe Sweat- Yeah well I had gone back by city hall and everything I guess I got to the office around 4:30 or 5:00. This was the Commercial Appeal office.

David Yellin- Just excuse me now, you are such a good reporter you will pick it up, during that time there were meetings around the city of various groups, did you ever know about those?

Joe Sweat- No, no I didn't, well I knew that..

David Yellin- You know various groups form meeting and someone was trying to organize a meeting of the business men and so on, they were still trying to something that very day.

Joe Sweat- Oh well now let me say this I was not aware of those kinds of meetings going on in that specific moment, but I knew that throughout this whole period there had been those kinds of meetings off and on. In fact, if I am not mistaken when, it was either that day or the day before I had been in Lobe's office and he was talking to Ned Cook about getting some business men together and doing something that they were always trying to do. (Laughs) I went into the Commercial Appeal office and the, Angus McCary who is a city editor told me that King had been shot and he was assigning people to go to the various hospitals because they didn't know where they were taking him. I went over to the city desk and this is when they had the famous radio conversation between some mysterious fellow who was supposed to have been following James Earl Ray. We stood there and listened to that, you know I have them in sight and they are in a white Oldsmobile or whatever it was. It went on and on and on, and you were hearing a blow by blow account of these whoever it was who was supposed to be following whoever it was who was supposed to have shot King.

Carol Yellin- Joe was that that early, within 5 minutes after the shooting?

Joe Sweat- Oh within a short time. Very short time because I know I was still in the office and then because I did one other thing I called my wife and told her that King had been shot, Shortly after that Angus told me to go to city hall and stay with Lobe for the ret of the night. So then I went to city hall.

David Yellin- How did you get down there your own car?

Joe Sweat- Yeah I had an assigned parking place inside city hall you could drive into the basement.

Carol Yellin- Did you have trouble getting into Lobe's office?

Joe Sweat- No because I called ahead of time and they were going to have someone open the door for me, because the upstairs doors were locked. So I went to Lobe's office and you know as I said the thing that struck my eye first was that movie screen up there.

Carol Yellin- Excuse me for a second did they have police down in the lower floor?

Joe Sweat- I don't remember any, but there is a guard at the back door anyway.

David Yellin- What number did you call? Is there a private number?

Joe Sweat- I had Lobe's direct line I could get straight to him anytime.

David Yellin- Who answered?

Joe Sweat- I believe he did because I said of course you hear about Dr. King, I cant remember his exact words but yes this is awful or this is terrible or something to that effect. I said, I need to come down there, and he said fine I'll have someone let you in the building. So I went on down and I went in and there was, outside that window I mentioned there was a policeman sitting there with a riot gun. On the inside after I got into the office like I said the movie screen was in there, there was 3 or 4 policeman milling around. All plain clothes men incidentally. This was this way, his bodyguards were always plainclothes.

Carol Yellin- Did they have guns on them?

Joe Sweat- I believe there was one other one inside with a visible riot gun, the others just had pistols.

David Yellin- Excuse me when you went in there did they know you or did you have to show your credentials.

Joe Sweat- Well these fellow as I said, there had been, these fellows had come and gone before, but I believe that the fellow that was the evening the fellow who was sitting outside with the riot gun had not seen me before. So he jumped up and wanted to know who I was and everything and about that time one of the other police man came up who did know me and said it's ok and so forth and so on. I got into his office and they had a television on and they were watching…

Carol Yellin- Who was with him?

Joe Sweat- I am not sure. It was either just the police man, possibly Ned Cook had come there by then. But there was no one else, I don't believe Gianatti was there.

Carol Yellin- The councilmen had not come yet?

Joe Sweat- No. In fact, the councilmen did not come down that evening. I get some of my evenings mixed but I don't believe eon the evening of the assassination, a few of the councilmen might have come by but there was no real long meeting or anything.

David Yellin- No. Is this now 7:00 you think?

Joe Sweat- Yes, and riots are beginning to break out across the country.

David Yellin- The announcement of the death.

Joe Sweat- Oh that had already taken place.

Carol Yellin- Oh he had already been pronounced dead by the time you…

Joe Sweat- By the time I got to city hall he had been pronounced dead. In fact, what time was it he was pronounced dead?

Carol Yellin- Officially about 7:10 or 7:15.

David Yellin- 6:04 he was shot. It was always a question of when he really was but I think officially he was dead at 7:14 or something like that.

Joe Sweat- In fact, I honestly believe now that I think about it that he was pronounced dead before he left the office. And I know that he was pronounced dead before I got to Lobe's office.

Carol Yellin- Netters and Prior came by before you got there.

Joe Sweat- You know a lot of this time really there is nothing to tell about because we started just sitting around …

Carol Yellin- Did anyone else come?

Joe Sweat- Then he started trying to get together with some people. He called Ned Cook, he called John Heightsville, who is an attorney. He called one or two other people, city fathers to come down and help him get a statement together.

Carol Yellin- Who is Tom Pruitt, do you know?

Joe Sweat- He is in the..

David Yellin- Attorney, someone in the attorney's office.

Joe Sweat- I am not too…

David Yellin- He was in the city attorney's office. In fact, he was on the city, arbitration committee.

Joe Sweat- I am not really aware of him a whole lot, but he wasn't around a great deal. We organized, we, Lobe organized these fellows together and they started

working on a statement that he should make on television. Then after….no no…after he got the statement into the shape that he wanted, you know he gave me a copy and Charlie Brown.

David Yellin- All this was done in front of you?

Joe Sweat- Oh yeah we were coming and going and he was working with these people and they would try phrases and this sort of thing, they were just sort of fashioning a statement.

Carol Yellin- Was he already getting calls from reporters all over the place.

Joe Sweat- No he wasn't because see the city switch board was closed and no one else knew the direct line. SO they would call and they wouldn't get anything.

David Yellin- Did he get any calls from Hollaman.

Joe Sweat- Oh yeah, he and Hollaman were in contact almost constantly. He would just, Hollaman would just fill him in on what the situation was in the city. Most of Hollaman's end of it I didn't here and occasionally he would get calls from Hollaman, on rare occasions he would say can I talk to in private for a minute but most of the time not.

Carol Yellin- I was going to say were you under the impression from hearing Lobe's end of the conversation with Hollaman were you under the impression that it was worse than it actually turned out to be? Did they feel like they were under siege in the mayor's office or anything like that?

Joe Sweat- Well yeah they were pretty worried because there was a whole lot of hit and run activity going on you know. And a lot of gunfire and police cars occasionally being shot at, windows being broken.

David Yellin- Did they call for the national guard? Did the mayor have to put in the call?

Joe Sweat- Yes but I, the truth of the matter is that I don't know exactly how that came about? I cant recall, I wasn't there when he made the call.

David Yellin- Probably before you came.

Joe Sweat- Anyway they got this statement together so he decided that thing he should do would be to go to the stations and I don't remember why he decided to do that rather than have them come to city hall.

David Yellin- One of the reasons is that only one of them had a remote and film by the time they filmed it it would take hours.