Joe Sweat, Commercial Appeal Reporter, 1970

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Joe Sweat- I picked Henry Lobe up on his first day in office and I was with him form then on but I did not cover the election. I wasn't covering the newer grinds, with Logan getting elected.

Carol Yellin- For who?

Joe Sweat- For the A.P.

Carol Yellin- Oh did you just come to the Commercial Appeal?

Joe Sweat- Yeah I came to the commercial appeal in October of 1967, which was the….

Carol Yellin- Right the time of the election.

Joe Sweat- The election, but they have a rule at the Commercial Appeal that when a new reporter comes in you spent 3 months at the copy desk to learn style. They don't care if you are (muffled) or Bernie Maller you do that time. But I think it is a good thing. But anyway before that I had been covering the New York grinds and the second national conference on black power which was the big conference on black power.

Carol Yellin- A.P. where?

Joe Sweat- With A.P. in Newark, New Jersey.

Carol Yellin- You were living in…

Joe Sweat- Right and the reason I came to the Commercial Appeal is that Frank Algun, I had a good friend Bill Bennett of the Commercial Appeal who was their main correspondent and Bill had urged me to talk to them because they were talking about forming an urban reporting team. Which was kind of a new concept in journalism. Which they did form and they needed someone with some good solid background not only in general journalism but in urban reporting. You know I had sort of gone through the fire in Newark, and dealt with a lot of these problems and to cover the black power conference so…And I kind of wanted to get away from Newark anyways I didn't like it there.

Carol Yellin- Let me cut back even further, are you from Memphis to start with?

Joe Sweat- Yeah, I'm from Memphis but I have been a lot of places. I was with the A.P. Chattanooga,

Carol Yellin- Is that where you started A.P.?

Joe Sweat- See I was with a press (semeter?) Here first. After I got out of the (ninety?). So when press semeter hired away by the A.P. and sent to Chattanooga and this just about the time the racial thing was getting going.

David Yellin- What was that date?

Carol Yellin- What year?

Joe Sweat- That was 1959, when I went to Chattanooga, and the racial thing was beginning to crank up and of course the next year was when Kennedy was elected. Kennedy's best man , and very close personal friend was Charlie Bartlett, one of the guys I…most memorable acquaintances I ever had was Charlie Bartlett and it was a luck thing because I was there Chattanooga Times and he was there for Washington Correspondent. One thing led to the other, then I was in the Chattanooga bureau of the A.P. and then I came to Nashville. About 63' was there for a couple more years and about 65' I left A.P. and went to Vanderbilt to start a news bureau.

Carol Yellin- That's right.

Joe Sweat- Stayed there for three years.

David Yellin- News Bureau for whom?

Joe Sweat- For Vanderbilt University.

Carol Yellin- What public relations for Vanderbilt essentially?

Joe Sweat- Right, right. We try to keep it pretty straight news. This was kind of a theory that I had actually in the long run didn't work out that well because of development. The news bureau actually worked out real well, I thought it worked real well, we were doing fine, but development kept wanting to use us as a public relations tool. So I finally said no and went back into news with the A.P. and with Newark City.

Carol Yellin- Did you have a degree in journalism?

Joe Sweat- No, English/Literature at Memphis State University.

Carol Yellin- Okay.

Joe Sweat- No I had no intention of going into journalism until I was in the Navy and was editing the Navy newspaper and one thing led to the other. But anyway…

David Yellin- What were you going to do write a mid-american novel.

Carol Yellin- He was going to teach Sr. English….

Joe Sweat- Yeah at some high school. So then I went to Newark, Newark riots, black power conference, skip back to one thing prior to leaving the A.P. in Nashville. I covered the death days of the Highlander Folk School, when the state moved in and closed….it was a fascinating thing because Highlander, kind of runs into the thing we are talking about here because you see Highlander was a very unusual place. It was one of the few places in the South those days that civil rights workers and labor workers to some extent, but mostly civil rights workers could go and be left alone

for a weekend or a week and plan things. The drug store sit-in was planned in Highlander, the…

David Yellin- When did you cover that?

Joe Sweat- That was in, Highlander was finally closed up in about 1960, something like that.

David Yellin- Excuse me you are saying that's where things happened…

Joe Sweat- So many of these things were planned, the freedom rides were all planned there. This place was very uncomfortable for the state of Tennessee to have it there.

David Yellin- They just sent us a tape incidentally of a Martin Luther King speech in 1957.

Joe Sweat- At Highlander?

David Yellin- Yeah.

Joe Sweat- So they got him on a technicality, three charges. One was operating a racially integrated classroom, well of course that was thrown out of court. After 54' how could you….Then they got him for possession of unstamped liquor, which Miles Horton to this day claims that was planted by the police. The third charge was selling beer without a license which was kind of funny. What happened was they would have these meetings and they would buy a case of beer for the people who were going to be there and they would put it in a tub with ice and then everyone would put it in the kitty. Well technically that is selling beer without a license. I sell beer without a license at home (laughs).

Carol Yellin- Can you put it in a case?

Joe Sweat- If I have a party.

David Yellin- That's true.

Joe Sweat- But anyway that little digression, so anyway I went on to A.P. in Nashville and then Vanderbilt and then Newark and the Newark riots and the black power conference which was really more interesting to me than the riots. A riot is not terribly interesting.

David Yellin- That was the one in Newark?

Joe Sweat- That was the one in Newark when the city tried everything to keep it from…man they said we just gone through, the city has almost been burned to the ground how could you possibly bring in every known militant in the Northern Hemisphere. And they did, Rat Browns, Stumpley, the whole bunch. And I got to know a fellow at that conference that has had a lot of influence on my thinking and I think he is a real sharp fellow, Nathan Right. Who by some people is considered the

great theoretician of black power, in its formal sense, in its theoretical sense. He is a mild, nice, kind guy. He is with the Episcopal church in Newark. He had jut written a book called *black power and urban unrest*.

David Yellin- Just recently he wrote it?

Joe Sweat- Now at that time, at the time I was in Newark, he had written this book and he had written another book called *Ready to Ride*. In which he talked about the psychological factors that are involved.

David Yellin- You say his book was "black power," was that before the term was used by Stokely Carmichael.

Joe Sweat- No.

Carol Yellin- What year was it?

Joe Sweat- The title of the book was *Black Power and Urban Unrest*.

Carol Yellin- The (muffled) was in 66'.

Joe Sweat- Right, and of course Stokely wasn't the first person, the first person to really use it publicly was Adam Clayton Powell. But you know it was kind of obscure. And then Stokely used it and made it very famous. Nathan Wright, I don't know whether he had kicked the term around, years gone by or not but maybe he jut thought it was a good thing that stuck in people's minds and what have you. And Ron Caranga was there. He was staying at his home at that time.

Carol Yellin- When was this, this would be the end of the summer of 67'?

Joe Sweat- No, Yeah right, this was in the fall of 67' right before I came to Memphis.

David Yellin- Oh I see I thought you were back in the 60's.

Carol Yellin- Me too.

Joe Sweat- This was...I jumped around a bit I know. This was in the falloff 1967.

David Yellin- It might be interesting before we even get in it, at that time where was Martin Luther King in relation to those people? Was his name ever mentioned?

Joe Sweat- Oh yes, but this was at the time when he was first beginning to go through, or get some of the guff from the very strong militants, who were just beginning to say that King has had it, his day is done. As Eldridge Cleaver says you know we have to sit back and let him play out his thing, but as soon as his does he is finished. This was just at the beginning of that. Dr. King did not come to that national conference on black power, however, he did have a representative there.

David Yellin- Do you remember…

Joe Sweat- I can't remember who it was, and the reason I can't remember is because he didn't make much of a splash. It might have been Andy Young. It was one of his…I know Ralph Featherstone was there the fellow who was killed just recently in that explosion. Featherstone was there very, he and Ratt Brown were very obvious swaggering around and everything. This was when all the African dress was beginning to come in.

David Yellin- Now were you admitted to some of the meetings?

Joe Sweat- We had problems, particularly because of skin color. There was one famous episode where they were using an Episcopal Church for a press conference and some of the Black Panthers came in and threw all the newsman out the windows.

David Yellin- Physically?

Joe Sweat- Physically, and I went out the door they didn't bother me. But they were always sort of invading these and what would happen is these fellows would come in and they would either talk very abusively to you or in this case throw us out so on so forth. Then the leaders of the conference would come back later and apologize. They would say you have to understand this fellows. But it was kind of funny because the television people were the ones who really caught it because they had all that cumbersome equipment…(Laughs). I had a pencil and a piece of paper so it was easy to run. The only fatality in my office was a fellow I worked with named Al Wexler and his pipe was broken but other than that we were in good shape. I had, I really had, I am kind of off the subject I know you want to get on to Memphis, but I will tell you one little thing that I thought was kind of funny. I was the only southerner in the A.P. office in Newark. By and large the only one who had any feeling what so ever towards negros. Which was very ironic, they were always taking me for granted saying: Boy in the south you now how to handle those niggers. I would say, now wait a minute, I don't feel that way. And they would say, come one, you know. We would get in violent arguments. They couldn't understand this that I was from the south, all these guys were pretty thorough racists in the office. There was a fellow named Willy Smith that was arming the ghettoes, and I thought this was a fascinating story and I wanted to do it. I got a hold of the guy on the telephone and he said he would send a couple of his boys to pick me up one night. The fellows in the office said you are out of your mind, they kill white people down there. So I said I grew up with these people, we used to swim together in all the ditches in Arkansas and everything. I said I can get along with them. And they said you are crazy, you are crazy. So they picked me up and I did get pretty frightened because they were armed, very much armed.

David Yellin- Who was this who said this? A black militant you knew?

Joe Sweat- This was a black militant who was arming the ghettoes, it became a national story.

David Yellin- Who got you to see..

Joe Sweat- I called him on the telephone.

David Yellin- Oh you called him personally.

Joe Sweat- I said Willy I want to come in and do a story. He sort of stuttered a little bit and said okay and then said he would send some of his fellows around to pick me up one night in front of the A.P. office. They picked me up and there were four of them, two on each side of me in the back seat and two other fellows in the front seat and they were all armed with rifles. They had, the group was called the community black patrol, and what they were doing is going around and harassing the Newark police. Anytime they spotted a police car which had arrested a negro, or was frisking a negro, or was questioning a negro, they would just pull up and stand there and watch and make notes and take pictures. They were also armed. I never really understood how the police let them do this. The police would get very upset because Newark police department is horrible, Memphis or any police department I have ever had any experience with is just nothing compared to Newark, really some of the most racist people I have seen in my life. The whole town is controlled by the mafia.

Carol Yellin- I was going to say Newark…

Joe Sweat- Through and through everybody has their price. Anyway they picked me up and took me down to the…just forever we went into this dark ghetto. I had this overview in my mind of this huge black spot with this little white spot right in the middle of it and that was me.

David Yellin- (Laughs)

Joe Sweat- I went…

David Yellin- Now it was a little green.

Joe Sweat- Yeah, that's right and they took me into this little office, just a little whole in the wall and there were huge posters of Ratt Brown, and Stokely, and….(laughs). I walked in and this fellow said, he had a big rifle, he said, this was Willy, where are you from. Oh I didn't want to tell him, I wanted to say Harlem, or something like that. So I said Memphis, Tennessee. He said is that right, I am from (muffled) Mississippi. (Laughs)And the evening ended up, well they went out and got fried chicken and we sat around the table eating fried chicken and talking about how much we both detested George Wallace. But anyway, shortly after that I came to Memphis.

David Yellin- Well did you get a story.

Joe Sweat- Oh yes, in fact fabulous story because it turned out that the fellow was on the board of world poverty.

David Yellin- Down in Mississippi?

Joe Sweat- No, no. It was in the North and made it very, very awkward for Sgt. Triver because here was a board member of a huge city, a board member of World Poverty who was down arming the ghettoes, buying guns and passing them out.

Carol Yellin- Before the New York riot?

Joe Sweat- No this was after the New York riot.

David Yellin- And it was printed.

Joe Sweat- Oh yes.

David Yellin- Was he unhappy or did you see him again?

Joe Sweat- Oh no he was happy.

David Yellin- Did you see medium cool?

Joe Sweat- I didn't see medium cool.

David Yellin- You should go see it there is a scene almost like that.

Joe Sweat- I would like to see that. I wanted to see it very much but for one reason or another missed it. Things like this happened quite often there. And I was kind of fortunate because all this good background experience. I lived in Newark. I was the only fellow in the office that lived in Newark. Newark is so bad that guys live in New York and commute over you know. They would either do that or there were some of them that lived out in the suburbs. But I lived in downtown Newark in an apartment house and I got to kind of know the place and you know. No different, the problems are exactly the same they just kind of magnified.

David Yellin- You are so recognizable by your accent for sure.

Joe Sweat- Yeah, yeah, oh your from the south. Let me say something. (Laughs)

David Yellin- Had you told that fellow you from Connecticut. (Laughs)

Joe Sweat- So I came to Memphis and at this period of time, at the copy desk at the Commercial Appeal. Lobe came in the office..

Carol Yellin- Wait a minute, what was the urban reporting thing supposed to be?

Joe Sweat- This was team journalism. Which was a thing that caught on around the country a few years ago. Has either been tried and kept at some newspapers and abandoned at others. The idea is that you take a group of reporters and put them into an area. It can work in various ways, but the ideal way is say you take a team of 3 or 4 reporters and put them into the ghetto and they all work together and then they come up with these blockbuster stories where they have all fed information and written it together.

Carol Yellin- Who was your team?

Joe Sweat- Well the team consisted of Carl Crawford, Louis Silver, Bob Marks, and Dick Lents. It shifted, it didn't really work how it was supposed to.

Carol Yellin- I was going to say your bi-line…

Joe Sweat- What we really, the variation of this program that they made at the Commercial Appeal was they really couldn't afford to take group teams of fellows and put them into areas so they would go ahead and run the regular beat minors to be city hall. Dick Lents was federal, well Dick Lents was over on the courts for awhile, and Louis Silver on the federal beat and this shifted around. Bob Marks in county courthouse. And then if there were an emergency in any given area, a major story, everyone would pull in from their areas and we would all work together. Carl Crawford was the head of the team who worked in the office.

David Yellin- Who would make that decision?

Joe Sweat- Carl Crawford.

David Yellin- About whether there was an emergency.

Joe Sweat- In conjunction, in consultation with Augurn and Angus McCarren and some of the other editors at the office. However, the team idea in the long run never worked out really well. It ended up everybody was so caught up in their own work on their own beats and it really we got into situations when we probably should have put the team reporting method into effect but just wouldn't work out. So half the time they would end up sending someone to work with you from the general assignments staff who really wasn't technically part of the team anyways. I am not saying it was a big flop, but these things sometimes don't work out as you expect they might.

Carol Yellin- Well you have almost a surplus of manpower.

Joe Sweat- That's right. Which most newspapers find out later that we just don't need to do that.

David Yellin- So you were then given the city hall beat right?

Joe Sweat- And began immediately covering Henry Lobe and the council.

David Yellin- Do you remember your first introduction to Henry Lobe?

Joe Sweat- Right it was on New Year's Day after the inauguration. You see they did that inauguration twice, they did it the night before just to make sure and all that. Then they had the formal down at the stage of the auditorium where they sworn everyone in.

David Yellin- Is it necessary to tell why they did it the night before?

Carol Yellin- We have a newspaper...well you might mention it…

Joe Sweat- The idea that there was some fear on the part of the incoming administration that mayor Ingram, outgoing mayor, would resign suddenly on the night before he was to go out of office and would name then the Vice Mayor, who I think is the Chief of Police really, would take over and then in turn name Ingram to the light, gas and, water…to head the light, gas, and water.

David Yellin- I see.

Joe Sweat- In order to keep that from happening they had a surprise wearing in out at Henry Lobes house, and I did not attend that.

Carol Yellin- Was that covered?

Joe Sweat- Yeah, yeah, in fact Carl Crawford was there and so was the political reporter at the Commercial Appeal, Street, Bill Street. Bill Street was there too. Bill Street also at times was theoretically supposed to work with this team because of his political activity. So they had the inauguration, the formal one the next day with full colors. Then they came across the street and there was a reception in the mayor's office. This was the….I had met Lobe before and years had gone by. I didn't remember it very well, and he didn't remember me at all I don't think. So we were introduced and they told him that I would be covering him and really nothing happened that day, I mean there were so many people around. The only thing I can remember happening was that there was a, and this may be completely irrelevant. There was a crippled fellow that came up to shake Lobes hand, and he just stayed there. Lobe didn't know how to get rid of the guy. It became very, very embarrassing, and Lobe just kept saying well I am very glad you came, and the guy just kept saying I just think you are the greatest guy in the world you know. Lobe didn't know how to get rid of this person. I found it that during his, during the time I was covering him he did sometimes get into awkward situations because in many ways he is a kind of a gracious man. He tries not to embarrass people and he tries not to be awkward about things he is doing. He is not, he can be tremendously gruff, and very hard-nosed and just cuss people out. But on the other hand he can be very kind too. At any rate, so I began covering him. That was on a Sunday that they had their reception and the next day was the first work day. We found, I can recall that the first day I went in there, he found a tape that…I have to tell a little background on this. There was a period during the campaign when Ingram got into it with the newspapers and was always accusing them of misquoting him. So he started carrying a tape recorder, and he would tape record everything he says so he could play it back. Well he left that tape recorder in the desk drawer of the mayor's desk and there was a note on it, to mayor Lobe or something like that. Lobe thought this was just real funny and there were two or three newsman around there on Monday and he got us all in there and he was showing it to us. So we said why don't you use it, it is the property of the city and he said oh I don't need that kind of thing. He thought this was rather funny because of all the background and so then we played with the thing and it was Ingram's voice making speeches on it and everything.

Logan would be trying to get some business done, he was very busy that first day you know. Making phone calls and here we all were playing with the tape recorder and we would turn it up and he would chuckle every time he heard Ingram's voice making a speech on the other side of the room you know. Anyway, this went along….

David Yellin- Did he give you any rules, or did he ask you what your procedures would be? Did he say now boys you do this I will do this? I mean not under the table, but just what he thought your relationship should be?

Joe Sweat- No he really didn't. He and there was a bit of a strained relationship with the Commercial Appeal because the last time Lobe had been in office the reporter that covered him had a tremendous fight with Lobe and that was number one. Number two the Commercial Appeal did not support him during the campaign. They did in the run-off I think they endorsed him. So he was a little, and he didn't know me, so he was a little bit leery.

David Yellin- How did you know all this if he didn't say it?

Joe Sweat- No but he mentioned this reporters name, it was Joe Kanandis. He had mentioned several times, now this wasn't necessarily the first day I was there, but several times in those early days, the name Joe Kanandis' name came up and he indicated that there had been bad blood. So this caused me to ask back at the office and they said yes they had been at each other's throats at the end. In fact, it got so bad at the end of Lobe's last administration he forced Kanandis to submit all of his questions in writing, all these sort of things politicians use to harass reporters. He was a little bit uneasy about me. We had, there is nothing in the early days to me that is memorable. So maybe I can just make some general comments about general, not vague I hope, but general impressions, not necessarily confined to any day until we get down to those specifics of the garbage strike. First of all, Lobe is I guess maybe famous now. Being a man who really watches the dollars. He is just almost fanatic about spending money, I think that to some extent this goes right on into his personal life. He is not a real flashy dresser. He would come into the office quite often you know with an old pair of pants on. I don't mean that they were dirty or that they were real threadbare, but they would be not so stylish you know, he was not a dapper mayor. Not by any means. He had a raincoat which he kept in the office and I bet the damn thing must have been 25 years old you know. And it was dirty and scruffy and everything. Of course he's a big man and he has given to the kinds of activities that we normally associate in this country with the outdoorsmen. He likes to hunt, particularly ducks, he is fond of firearms.

David Yellin- Is he a good shot?

Joe Sweat- That I don't know. I would assume he is. Fond of firearms, and I don't mean to convey anything sinister here, I am talking about in the hunting sense. The outdoors loves to swim, I think his greatest day in and day out recreation, he was

not a golfer, as far as I know he never played golf, greatest day in and day out recreation was swimming.

David Yellin- In fact, he had a broken nose when he came into the office.

Joe Sweat- That's right he had hit the side of the pool down in Florida. He has a pool in his backyard. This was a topic of conversation quite often, you know, swimming in the pool with his children, his family, and he had a dog, a swimming dog that he was always kidding about.

Carol Yellin- Did you see Lobe at all outside of the office, were you ever invited to Lobe's…

Joe Sweat- Yeah I was always invited but I never went, because this was a peculiarity of mine perhaps, but I didn't believe in reporters associating with the man they were covering. Now most people don't agree with me on that or at least they didn't practice it. Lobe was always sort of mystified by this. He was always asking me to come out and swim in his pool, and it wasn't that I didn't appreciate it I mean I did and I was trying to be cold towards him but I think there is danger there.

David Yellin- Did you ever tell him this?

Joe Sweat- No I would just refuse, I would say no I'm sorry I can't. Or I would say…I didn't want to make a big point of it but I would say, I will try and come over sometime, I would say that. I never really had any intention of it, so finally he never asked me anymore. But he did on occasion ask me to come by the house and swim in the pool with the dog and bring the children and everything. He was always kidding about this dog that would jump in the pool, they got a big laugh out of that. And he would also say, try and bring reporters into his confidence by asking them their advice. Sometimes on important matters, now whether he would have ended up taking the advice or not, and some of my colleagues, even the opposition would give him all kinds of advice. I think he was always just a little bit miffed because he would ask me things and I would say…(Tape Ends)