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Frank Ahlgren, Editor of the Commercial Appeal, 1972

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This is August 14, 1972, and we're talking to Frank Ahlgren in Frank Ahlgren's office at 100 North Main; Carol Lynn Yellin and David Yellin.

David Yellin: Well, first if you could, even though we do have records, can you, a brief biography?

Frank Ahlgren: My name is Frank Ahlgren. I was editor of the *Commercial Appeal*, a morning newspaper in Memphis from November 7, 1936 until December 31, 1968. They have a compulsory retirement policy at the *Commercial Appeal*, and they let me serve out my term and then turned me out to graze. I was editor during the incidents we are going to discuss here, and much of my talk might be considered conjecture. It is, however, based on day-by-day interviews with members of the staff, who were on the scene of much of the action, also with various -- I had conversations with various parties interested, ranging from the mayor to Jesse Epps, and the Reverend James Lawson, and Reverend H. Ralph Jackson, and the Reverend Bell, I think it's Ezekiel Bell, isn't it? I did not ever meet the Reverend Martin Luther King, although many of the people on the periphery of his organization were in my office from time to time, including Ben Hicks, who is now...

David Yellin: Ben Hooks.

Frank Ahlgren: Ben Hooks, I am sorry, who is now a member of the FCC, Federal Communications Commission, and; oh, Mrs. Smith.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Maxine?

Frank Ahlgren: Maxine Smith, who was the executive secretary of the NAACP here, and Jesse Turner, the president of it. Jesse's son, who is a very good student out at Christian Brothers High School. In short, I think I rubbed shoulders and exchanged pleasantries and other things with various members of the community, with then commissioner of safety, director of safety they called him, Frank Holloman, and former FBI man, who is an old friend from many years standing, and who is to this day still accuses me of having conned him into taking that job. He was at Memphis State you may recall, and then he went with the MCC, well the Mid South Medical Center. And, he did tell me when he was approached by the mayor and asked my advice, and I said, "You're not asking for advice, you're just an old fire horse that wants to get back into the business." And he says, "Well, I guess that's partly it." He's a very good organizer and did well at the other two -- at Memphis State he was particularly good in the development phase, which is just beginning there, and it's a difficult thing to raise money for a state-supported school.

Carol Lynn Yellin: As we know.

Frank Ahlgren: I am going around (muffled) in this but...

David Yellin: No, that's splendid, that's fine.

Frank Ahlgren: In, I think it was February 12; incidentally I had to brush up a little on my dates, so I think these are reasonably sure.

Carol Lynn Yellin: You've done your homework, as we see.

Frank Ahlgren: On February 12 we first carried news of the sanitation strike, and it occurred over an incident where some men were sent home after they'd reported for work, and others were not, and they were grumbling about not getting equal treatment. One thing led to another, and they marched out. Well, things kind of rocked along. Jesse Epps and some others, whose name I can't recall, came in. I was then a vice chairman of the committee on community relations, which was a biracial organization.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Mr. Ahlgren, that was the committee that had started several years previous wasn't it?

Frank Ahlgren: Yes.

Carol Lynn Yellin: It had really been in existence.

David Yellin: Was that (muffled)

Frank Ahlgren: Six, seven years at least.

David Yellin: May I ask one thing? When you first heard of it, as a newspaper man or citizen, whatever -- you can be called several things, but a Frank Ahlgren, what was your feeling about the seriousness, the impact of it? Do you recall?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, quite frankly I didn't think it would be extremely serious, and you may recall, they went out on February 12, and by the end of February, out of 100 sanitation trucks, 90 were operating, many of them under police guard of course, but they were functioning.

David Yellin: In your memory, and it's awfully hard to disengage yourself from what eventually did happen, it was a strike of sanitation workers.

Frank Ahlgren: Yes.

David Yellin: And the first couple of days there was no alarm in the city, would you say that was right about it? Or was there?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, the first couple of days, no, but then when the mass picketing started there was alarm, and then these people from the national organization came in, and this meeting I was to tell you about down at the YWCA, one of the national officers,

minor officer, not the president who came later -- one of the minor officers said, "We, the national, had nothing to do with this strike to begin with. It was a protest by some local members." And this struck me as rather ironical, and in fact I had to hold my tongue when he blandly said, "We wouldn't call a strike in February, we would wait until the summer time." And here he had just come from New York, where they had one of the biggest garbage strikes in their history, and I started to get up, and then I thought no, this is an emotional meeting. There were Negroes and whites there, and things -- I was a vice chairman and I didn't want to rock the boat.

David Yellin: Now, in order to be as crystal clear as can, did you believe what he said?

Frank Ahlgren: No, of course not.

David Yellin: All right, now why do you think he said that?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, I just mentioned, he blandly said, "we don't call strikes in the wintertime, we wait until the summertime," and he had just arrived here from the biggest garbage strike New York ever had.

Carol Lynn Yellin: That had just been over just previous...

Frank Ahlgren: It wasn't over yet. They were still wollering around up there.

Carol Lynn Yellin: And this meeting we interrupted you, but this was a meeting of this community relations?

Frank Ahlgren: Yes.

Carol Lynn Yellin: It was a public meeting that had been called by the committee that you were vice chairman?

Frank Ahlgren: That's right, that's right.

David Yellin: Specifically for the strike.

Frank Ahlgren: Specifically for this, and to hear both sides, that is this man that spoke for the union, and...

David Yellin: Was this man Ciampa? Do you remember?

Frank Ahlgren: I think it was, yeah, I think that's who it was.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Rather than, it wasn't Jerry Wurf.

Frank Ahlgren: No. No, Wurf came in later.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Right. So this was early on in the strike then?

Frank Ahlgren: That's right.

David Yellin: Excuse me, why did the community relations committee feel that they should call this meeting?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, because by that time it had become a marching up and down again proposition with placards, "I AM A MAN" and that business, and disrupting things.

David Yellin: I hope we're not interrupting you.

Frank Ahlgren: No, no. It's good to bring me back to the subject. Old editors ramble.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, no, this is good because I haven't heard too much about this meeting at the YWCA.

David Yellin: You don't recall the date on that do you?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, it was toward the end of the month. Now the strike took place on the 12th, and it was towards the end of the month because the sanitation people thought they had it pretty well in hand. And this is when they started bringing in their people from outside, and that's when Jesse Epps hooked up with -- Jesse Epps came in, and he was, he was the big organizer from Washington. He was the man Wurf sent in. Jerry Wurf I think. And Epps hooked up with the Reverend H. Ralph Jackson, and I think with Bell, but I don't know too much about that, but I know Jackson and Epps were pretty close.

David Yellin: Now way back we interrupted you, you said "they" came to your office, now Epps...

Frank Ahlgren: Oh, well, I mean during the course -- Epps, Ben Hooks would drop in, or Jesse Turner would come by, and say he'd like to talk about what he thought. I'd run into David Haywood.

David Yellin: Caywood.

Frank Ahlgren: Caywood. David Caywood.

David Yellin: The reason we're doing this is because our transcribers have trouble spelling it anyhow, and we'd better try to get it right. And we're much more conversant with these names, you know, since we've lived with them. So that, could you just by some chance, when Ben Hooks would come in, Jesse Epps -- what was the nature of the conversation? I mean -- I have to ask this, why did they come to you? What did they ask you?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, I was editor of the largest paper here, and the morning paper, and probably as a result of a call one of our reports had made, and he'd like to tell me directly what he thought was taking place.

Carol Lynn Yellin: It was partly, too, because of your involvement in...

Frank Ahlgren: Community relations.

Carol Lynn Yellin: In community relations before. This had happened in other crises I suppose. I mean you had these lines of communication naturally.

Frank Ahlgren: Particularly when they opened the restaurants, and I established a very good rapport with Jesse Turner then, because these restaurant people were pretty hard to handle, and yet I knew they were going to get into a lot of trouble if they didn't abide by what is the law.

Carol Lynn Yellin: I remember at one point you were reading a report of a speech you had made concerning the Memphis progress, and this was, I believe, before the strike.

Frank Ahlgren: And we had it with the library. I am a member of the library board.

Carol Lynn Yellin: And all of this -- the thing I want to get into the record because it's my memory, and I'm sure that you have more information, that this had all been done absolutely without incident, in a Deep South city, which Memphis is.

Frank Ahlgren: Well, there had been some incidents, yes.

Carol Lynn Yellin: But without the serious kind of incidents that had occurred elsewhere.

Frank Ahlgren: No real violence. Some of these restaurants downtown had a little shoving, and pulling, and...

Carol Lynn Yellin: But there have been a gradual yielding, rather than there had never been this kind of stop here. I mean there had been a working out of these things as the years went...

Frank Ahlgren: Oh, there were some rather painful confrontations. I recall one group of restaurants, well, I went out to see the head of it, and cooled my heels for about an hour, and finally he saw me and he said, "I'm sorry, we can't do anything, my board of directors have instructed me," and about two weeks later after they had a sit-in he came to me and said, "My board of directors has changed its mind." And I said, "Well you tell your board of directors to make the arrangements then. I'm not being paid for this work, and I don't intend to be an errand boy." I was pretty steamed up for the cavalierish way they acted.

David Yellin: Obviously this was outside company (muffled).

Frank Ahlgren: Oh sure.

David Yellin: The board of directors were from elsewhere.

Frank Ahlgren: It was 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, talking with Jesse Epps about a threatened boycott on a Saturday night, and Jesse giving up his Saturday night to work on this, to prevent a march on a downtown restaurant, and while Jesse and I talked, and he figured out how he could get to the kids out at LeMoyne to keep them from marching, because we had agreed it wouldn't really do any good anyway, this was man was ready to yield. The man was out at a hunt breakfast or something after I'd stayed up all night working on this thing.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Working on his business.

Frank Ahlgren: Exactly, he says, "Oh, I'm sorry, we can't reach him, he's out at a hunt breakfast." You know how that made me feel. I'd like to had hunted him out with a horse.

David Yellin: You don't have to censor yourself, now, but.

Frank Ahlgren: Well, getting back to this sequence of events. Jim Lawson, Reverend James Lawson, quite an articulate and (muffled) person, but he was losing the spotlight to the Reverend Jackson, and Jesse Epps. So, he calls his friend, Martin Luther King, and asked him if he would lead a march. Now this is hearsay, as most of this is I guess, but Martin Luther agreed. At that time he was toying with the idea of a big Washington march, and the supposition was that this first march he led here was a kind of tryout for it, to see how they would handle it, how the people would be marshaled, and of course that was the March 16 rally. Then they set a march for -- that was the rally, March 16.

David Yellin: Yeah, the speech that he gave.

Frank Ahlgren: But that's where they set up the march.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Yeah, and he agreed to come back and lead the march.

Frank Ahlgren: On the 22nd, and that's when it snowed about 7 inches.

Carol Lynn Yellin: The big snow, yeah.

Frank Ahlgren: But then he came back, on the 28th, and that's when the shooting started, and he was fortunate enough to catch a meat truck, and back to the Rivermont Hotel

David Yellin: That's interesting, that's not a euphemism. It was a meat truck?

Frank Ahlgren: It was a meat truck from a packing company, and he climbed in the driver seat with the driver and they drove him to the Rivermont Hotel. So the next time came, he got a little static about that, a little flack about staying at the plush Rivermont Hotel. So the next time, and this was very, I think important, the police here, by Holloman's own admission that night when we were trying to find King said, "We don't know where he is. We traced him to following his caravan all over the downtown. He did go out to the Rivermont, and he did go down to Peabody, and we don't know just where to prepare for, but we think he might be going down to this motel." And this is...

Carol Lynn Yellin: This was when he came back in that first...

Frank Ahlgren: On April 4.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Yeah, right.

David Yellin: Actually the 3rd.

Frank Ahlgren: So the police did not know where he was going to stay. And I know he made the scene at the Peabody because our boys were with him there. And then they weren't sure.

Carol Lynn Yellin: You mean your reporters.

Frank Ahlgren: Reporters, yes, but there was an aloofness there that probably led to King's not having as much -- well I know he didn't have as much protection as he would have had if he had cooperated with the police.

Carol Lynn Yellin: And, just no information was available to the police.

Frank Ahlgren: They had no official information. They had to assume that that was a trouble spot. Well, that was as our dear mayor said, it was a new ballgame after the assassination. Of course they got together. I recall walking down Second Street one Saturday afternoon, right by the, well right here at the corner of Second and Jefferson. I was going over to the Tennessee Club for lunch, late lunch. It was about 2:00, and I ran into Frank Miles, who was the mediator. They said that he was with a federal man, federal mediation man, and I can't recall his name.

David Yellin: Jim Reynolds.

Frank Ahlgren: Reynolds, that's right, Jim Reynolds.

David Yellin: You know, he's Clinton Reynolds brother?

Frank Ahlgren: That's right, and it comes back to me now. Sure, we talked about that while we stood on the corner, and there was a -- he had two assistants with him.

David Yellin: Reynolds did?

Frank Ahlgren: Yes. One was a colored boy, and one was a girl, and Frank introduced me, and said that, told them who I was, and not only my professional interest in it as an editor, but also my connections with the Committee on Community Relations. And so, Reynolds took me and Frank by the arm and we moved into a doorway there on Second, and of course he says, "How the hell are we going to get this thing off the hook?" Well, by that time the city was feeling it. They knew that they had to do something because things were really...

Carol Lynn Yellin: The downtown, the merchant, the business community was feeling the effects of the boycott by then.

Frank Ahlgren: Well, not only the boycott, but the threats of violence.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Just the general image (muffled).

David Yellin: Now, just for the record. This would be, if this were a Saturday, the 12th? If the 5th were the Saturday after the assassination.

Frank Ahlgren: I think it was later than that.

David Yellin: Because the 16th it was solved, it was settled.

Frank Ahlgren: Was that the...?

David Yellin: Yes, it was settled on the 16th, so it would have to be Saturday.

Frank Ahlgren: Well they didn't sign any paper, though did they?

David Yellin: Yes, sir.

Frank Ahlgren: Did they sign a memorandum of agreement?

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, not -- they hadn't by then.

David Yellin: April 16th they had announced the end of the strike.

Frank Ahlgren: Well, this was the...

David Yellin: Before that.

Frank Ahlgren: Yes, it was before that.

David Yellin: But after the assassination.

Frank Ahlgren: Oh yeah.

David Yellin: And it wasn't the Saturday right after the assassination?

Frank Ahlgren: No, I don't think it was. It seems to me that...

David Yellin: He had been here a week.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Because he would just have arrived.

David Yellin: He arrived that day.

Carol Lynn Yellin: He wasn't doing anything about meetings until...

David Yellin: Right. Now, I don't know whether this helps you, but it helps us.

Frank Ahlgren: That was the extent of...

David Yellin: And so what did you say, then?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, we just discussed it frankly and said that -- I said in my opinion that they'll go for this salary, or this wage rate, but the hang-up is on whether it'll be paid by the...

Carol Lynn Yellin: The check off.

Frank Ahlgren: The check off, or go through the employee's union.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Credit, the credit union.

Frank Ahlgren: Credit, credit union, right.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Which they did eventually.

Frank Ahlgren: Which they worked out.

David Yellin: Also there was a question of where the money would come from since it was not in the city's...

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah.

David Yellin: Right. Now did you have anything to do with obtaining that money from an anonymous citizen?

Frank Ahlgren: No, no I did not.

David Yellin: Now, one other thing. This is just at random. I remember, and I am sure I am not going against the confidence, I think it was David Caywood who said that either he met you, or -- no maybe it was (muffled).

Frank Ahlgren: Well, I met David Caywood. Not that day, but another day when things were pretty hot, and he was representing the Civil Liberties Union at that time. I think he was (muffled).

David Yellin: And he talked to you about something, and do you recall that at all?

Frank Ahlgren: Oh sure. It was right about -- it again was on Second Street right by the old.

David Yellin: What do you do in your spare time?

Frank Ahlgren: Just walk up and down Second Street. But I had just come from one of these community relations meetings. And, Caywood was -- well the Negroes would talk to him quite frankly. I think he represented them.

David Yellin: He represented them when they were arrested, 108, and so on. Right.

Frank Ahlgren: But, at that point things were not nearly as, well -- the potential wasn't even approached.

Carol Lynn Yellin: It wasn't as far along.

Frank Ahlgren: No.

David Yellin: Well, okay, if you're finished with your chronological recall, I mean maybe.

Frank Ahlgren: Well, then there were other aftermaths. We had a committee that met out at Southwestern every Thursday afternoon for a while.

Carol Lynn Yellin: This was after the strike?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah.

Carol Lynn Yellin: An outgrowth of the strike.

Frank Ahlgren: That's right.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Do you remember who was involved?

Frank Ahlgren: Yes, very well. Ben Hooks, Jesse Turner, Frank Holloman, of course the president of Southwestern.

David Yellin: David Alexander?

Frank Ahlgren: Yes, Alexander.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Was John T. Fisher in this?

Frank Ahlgren: Yes, John T. was in there.

David Yellin: Now this was during the strike?

Frank Ahlgren: No, this was after the strike. This was after the assassination, and our text was Martin Luther King's book, and (muffled) member would read a chapter in preparation for it, and then we'd all discuss it.

David Yellin: Was that known as the Ben Hooks Literary Society?

Frank Ahlgren: That's right, yes.

David Yellin: Maury Griner was...

Frank Ahlgren: And Downing Pryor, and let me see. I don't know whether Gilliam was there or not. I think he was, though. The old man.

David Yellin: Oh, oh.

Frank Ahlgren: Not the son.

David Yellin: I see. Art Gilliam's father.

Frank Ahlgren: Yes.

Carol Lynn Yellin: The man who's the president of NBC, that was later Chamber of Commerce, Louis...

David Yellin: McKay.

Frank Ahlgren: McKay, yes, he was in there.

David Yellin: Also I guess the Reverend Jackson used to show up, didn't he? Ralph Jackson.

Frank Ahlgren: I don't recall him being there.

Carol Lynn Yellin: I've never really known the story of this.

Frank Ahlgren: Jim Lawson was there.

Carol Lynn Yellin: It was really just about, it was about half-and-half, half white and half black, and it truly was the real leadership of the city, then was involved, I mean.

Frank Ahlgren: Well, some of us were presumptuous to think that we could. At least we were keeping the thing moving.

Carol Lynn Yellin: The concern. Keeping the communications.

Frank Ahlgren: Keep the bitterness out of it.

David Yellin: And all of you could read, I would say. All right, can we ask a few questions.

Frank Ahlgren: Oh, sure, anything.

David Yellin: Did you meet Jerry Wurf?

Frank Ahlgren: Yes.

David Yellin: And when and in what way?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, in fact, not officially, he was having some conversations with Mayor Loeb on the night of the gridiron. Loeb brought him down to the gridiron banquet.

David Yellin: Or was it your testimonial?

Frank Ahlgren: No, this was the gridiron.

Carol Lynn Yellin: In fact, this reminds me, it was when you received the National Council of Christian and Jews award.

Frank Ahlgren: I thought it was the gridiron.

David Yellin: Well, you may have thought it was funny. And that was the night that Mayor Loeb walked in Jerry Wurf. And there was a big ovation. Right. In fact that was....

Carol Lynn Yellin: Did you meet him that night?

David Yellin: Yeah, yeah. Now the night you won that award...

Frank Ahlgren: I did not meet him at my office.

David Yellin: Oh, he never did come? And you never met him in any kind of face-to-face confrontation?

Carol Lynn Yellin: Excuse me, was he introduced to you by the mayor that night?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah.

Carol Lynn Yellin: So, he was with the mayor then?

Frank Ahlgren: And sat there with him. There was a lot of ribbing going on all around them.

David Yellin: Well, now that's the next question I wanted to ask you about, what I call your testimonial dinner, when you won that award, and as I believe it was the 22nd of February, I believe. The 22nd or 21st.

Frank Ahlgren: What is the date over there on the wall, it'll tell you.

David Yellin: Right.

Frank Ahlgren: See that excerpt? No, right here, this little typed up thing.

David Yellin: Right here?

Frank Ahlgren: No, no, no.

David Yellin: Here.

Frank Ahlgren: There.

David Yellin: Right.

Frank Ahlgren: What does that date say?

Carol Lynn Yellin: Read what it says, David, for the record.

David Yellin: Well, it says -- are you sure this is the one.

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah.

David Yellin: I'll read it. A letter from Calvin Ahlgren, San Francisco, California. Is that the one?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah.

David Yellin: "Dad, I remember among all the things you told me, when I asked you for

advice, and sometimes when I didn't, one thing you said, 'Son, I don't care what you do, you can be a ditch digger, or a bank president, but be the best one there is. Be the best.' Now I still have to have it all to do. From where I stand it looks as if you took your own advice to heart. I don't care what you did to me, you're the best there is. Your loving son, Calvin."

Frank Ahlgren: What is the date? That was the...

David Yellin: Received at the Chamber of Commerce dinner, January 14, 1969. That's another one.

Frank Ahlgren: Oh, that isn't it then.

David Yellin: But you did get the (muffled). Yeah this is the one. Oh no, this is '58. You got two of them from...

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, I will say that there seem to be a number of awards around. I'll just put it on the record that there are a number of awards around here, in the...

Frank Ahlgren: Well, these are just to fill out the walls. I've got an attic full of them, not to sound bumptious, which I do, but I just chose enough. That's why.

David Yellin: Yeah, well no, I'm glad I read that one. But we do recall because we do have some record of that as being the 21st or 22nd of February, but it was about 10 days.

Frank Ahlgren: It seemed to -- what is that thing over there?

David Yellin: No, that's '58 oddly enough.

Frank Ahlgren: No, not that one, the one over here on the right. See? Right under the City of Memphis?

Carol Lynn Yellin: 14th day of January '69 was Frank Ahlgren day, proclaimed by Henry Loeb.

Frank Ahlgren: That was the Chamber of Commerce. The one around, how about that one over there.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Here it is, no.

David Yellin: No that's '58.

Carol Lynn Yellin: No, '58.

Frank Ahlgren: What is that one?

David Yellin: Well, you don't have it, except this might be it. No, this is another one. Here's Wilson, (muffled).

Frank Ahlgren: Everett Cook.

David Yellin: Yeah, Everett Cook.

Frank Ahlgren: Well that's -- I don't know. It's home in the...

David Yellin: In any case, do you recall that dinner?

Frank Ahlgren: Yes, very well.

David Yellin: And, because by then the strike, as you recall, had not really been well fermented very much at that point.

Frank Ahlgren: No, Loeb was just hanging in there. I think you're right, the date was around the 22nd. I think it was Washington's birthday.

David Yellin: Right, in fact it was Washington's birthday.

Frank Ahlgren: No, Loeb was just hanging in there. He felt that he had it under control.

David Yellin: As a matter of fact, one of the things that -- the reason I think it is a significant one as far as it goes, is because, if I may, more than just hanging in there, the reception that Mayor Loeb got that night indicated to him that people were behind him very solidly, right.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Before you get too much further on, we were naming names, and one of the things that I wanted to just review, too, was the people who were on that human relations or community relations committee that you were vice chairman of, could you name some of those people, too?

Frank Ahlgren: Well.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Was Lucius Burch a member of that?

Frank Ahlgren: Yes. He was one of the founders. Ed Meeman and I.

David Yellin: And was it Ed Orgill?

Frank Ahlgren: Ed Orgill was the...

David Yellin: Chairman?

Frank Ahlgren: Chairman. Ed Meeman was chairman later. And, oh dear. The president of the UP Bank.

David Yellin: Morgan?

Frank Ahlgren: No, no. Morgan is the...

David Yellin: Allen Morgan.

Frank Ahlgren: That's First National.

David Yellin: First National. Those bankers mix me up. Harrison?

Frank Ahlgren: This is long before Harrison.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Carl Carson?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, Carl was a member, but he wasn't one of the original members. Well, then of course in those days Maxine Smith's husband...

Carol Lynn Yellin: Vasco.

Frank Ahlgren: Dr. Vasco Smith was very strong for it, and worked hard at it. He'd leave his practice in the middle of the afternoon and come over to these meetings. And Reverend...dear me.

Carol Lynn Yellin: The men from the Urban League?

Frank Ahlgren: Yes. Oh, Mac was one of the charter members.

Carol Lynn Yellin: I can't remember their names either. McDaniel was.

Frank Ahlgren: That's right.

David Yellin: (muffled)

Frank Ahlgren: No, McDaniel.

David Yellin: Right, right.

Frank Ahlgren: The Congregational Church, not Marshall Wingfield, I'm talking about the Negro preacher of a Congregational Church.

David Yellin: Not Hollis Price.

Frank Ahlgren: No, but Hollis was one of them of course. And, oh Professor Hunt

was.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Blair Hunt.

Frank Ahlgren: Blair Hunt.

Carol Lynn Yellin: I know exactly who you mean because...

Frank Ahlgren: Michael? Was his name Reverend Michael?

Carol Lynn Yellin: Michaels, or something.

Frank Ahlgren: Something like that.

Carol Lynn Yellin: He's the one who when I spoke at LeMoyne he asked me early on to speak at LeMoyne one time.

Frank Ahlgren: He was very, very strong.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Yes, and a very good man.

Frank Ahlgren: And, then of course we had the Gold Dust twins. That's a bad expression I guess.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Sugarmon and Willis.

Frank Ahlgren: Sugarmon and Willis. And they were remarkably effective in bridging the gap. You must recall that this was all, you know, it started out with a white committee and a Negro committee.

David Yellin: Separate.

Frank Ahlgren: Separated, and Sam Bates was head of the white committee, and I don't know -- it wasn't Jesse who headed the Negro at that time, but I recall we had a joint meeting at the YWCA when we were putting this thing together, and I just said flatly, "Look, we can't run from one to another. This has got to be a biracial committee, period." Well, in those days you couldn't find a place to meet but the YWCA.

Carol Lynn Yellin: This was not the YMCA, this was the YWCA.

Frank Ahlgren: No, this was the YWCA.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Yes. Someone said that to me the other day, as a girl growing up said it was the only place that you could go.

David Yellin: Well, this may help recall, and I think it its. Here we have the city of

Memphis surrounded by Little Rock, Birmingham, Clinton, all this is where things happened. Why didn't it happen in Memphis?

Frank Ahlgren: Because we started earlier.

David Yellin: Now, who are "we" and what did we start.

Frank Ahlgren: Well.

David Yellin: Some of the things you've told us, but...

Frank Ahlgren: Yes. It started about 1950 I guess, when we started holding concern meetings. See, we were conditioned for this by the migration through Memphis of the -- see after the war, and then the mechanical pickers, and the mechanical harvesting things came into full bloom, and it displaced a lot of the Negroes out in the country, and they'd come and live with their relatives here, or just paused here long enough to get money to go farther north.

Carol Lynn Yellin: On into Detroit.

Frank Ahlgren: To Dee-troit.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Dee-troit.

Frank Ahlgren: And so we were stuck with a lot of these problems before many cities. We were a gathering place, and they started having problems, and we had concern meetings.

David Yellin: Now what kind of problems?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, police problems for one thing. Getting sufficient neighborhood awareness and reasonability, and trying to help these people with the inundation of relatives from the outlying territory, and they were...

Carol Lynn Yellin: Many of whom had never lived in cities.

Frank Ahlgren: No, and didn't know how to act, and they -- it was distressing to the black community, too. That's why they were...

David Yellin: Of course that's where they came. They came to the black community.

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah, yeah. And the black community were looking to us for some guidance, and, if possible, help. And at one point this West Coast oriented organization was trying to move in here, and the NAACP just told them that -- it was a white organizer that came in, they told them they didn't need them around here. Well, the...

David Yellin: You mean a civil rights organization?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah.

Carol Lynn Yellin: That wasn't CORE, was it?

Frank Ahlgren: I guess it was.

David Yellin: You say West Coast, yeah.

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah, that was CORE. And they -- (muffled) had a meeting up in Lewy Donelson's office. Lewy was not, he wasn't one of the original members.

(PHONE INTERRUPTION)

Carol Lynn Yellin: We were talking about CORE.

Frank Ahlgren: And we were in Lewy Donelson's office up in the Commerce Title Building it was in those days. And, there were so many of us there some of us seated on the floor, and I wasn't quite as familiar with some of them. I thought Vasco Smith was a preacher, and he was a dentist. I called him Reverend a couple of times. Finally he said, "I'm a dentist." The CORE people had been in there trying to stir things up, and they didn't want things stirred up that way. They wanted to make progress. In fact, one Saturday afternoon Vasco and his wife and two or three others picketed Lowenstein's in its old building, and the then manager called me in tears, and said, "Can't you get them off my back?" I said, "Why can't you get them off your back?" He said, "Because they don't believe me." I said I appreciated the compliment, and I went down there and I got them together in his office, and he promised -- they wanted to have more Negroes hired as clerks, and they didn't want just one of these token Negro vice presidents in charge of Negroes. They wanted some black faces around at the counters. And, he assured them that they would get that, and they were on their way. In those days, picketing on Saturday afternoon meant something to the downtown store, where they didn't have these big shopping centers. Well, getting back to why we didn't have all the big trouble, as in Little Rock, was because of the, as I say, we were conditioned for it, and we'd had responsible people in the Negro community, and in the white community, and realized the danger with the situation, and they were, I think, men and women of good will.

David Yellin: Yeah. Well, then this of course then brings us naturally what happened in '68. Why didn't the same conditions prevail, as sort of the song goes? I mean what happened in '68 that made it different?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, there's no doubt in my mind that it was the hard-nosed attitude of the city administration, and their bluntness about it, and the determination of this new union to throw it's weight around, and here were two factions, one Ralph Jackson and Jesse Epps the union man, and the other Jim Lawson and well, the Southern Leadership Conference, and he called in his friend Martin King because he was losing ground, and

he saw the Epps was not doing the right thing as it were. He was exploiting the union.

David Yellin: So, to review that sort of again. Here we had two new elements, as you call hard elements, on the black side one, and on the white the administration.

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah, and then the Negroes found they could march down Main Street in vast numbers and delay things and not suffer any consequences, and that encouraged them, too.

David Yellin: Now then, why again it seems almost a necessary question, that if before, as you have described it, the -- I don't know what to call it without almost sounding as if you're giving an opinion, but the concerned people in Memphis, such as yourself and others, were able to at least have your concern prevail over the city administration up until then. Something happened in '68, and that didn't happen any more.

Frank Ahlgren: Well, now, this again is opinion, but we found out at our first meeting after the strike that the union wasn't going to listen to us, unless we were going to push the city administration to their way of thinking. They were just professional and tough organizers. They had a kind of suspicion that we were using Uncle Toms to keep the community quiet. We found that out at that meeting, that this was a new element that had taken over.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Now this was the first meeting that you spoke of earlier at the YWCA?

Frank Ahlgren: That's right.

Carol Lynn Yellin: When the union Ciampa, as you recall it, said that, "We would never start a strike in February."

Frank Ahlgren: And not long after that Vasco Smith wrote and said he was resigning. I think his wife had put some pressure on him, too. We were good friends. In fact, when they took a holiday in the Caribbean, they'd send me back a postcard about the fine time they were having. But things changed when that hard atmosphere...

Carol Lynn Yellin: This would be the beginning of polarization that everybody...

Frank Ahlgren: And that's exactly right. And he ordered me a note as vice chairman and said, "As you know, our organization has turned as fire department to put out racist fires." but he says, "As you know, I'm a better fire starter than I am fireman." Kind of making, you know. But I think his wife probably wrote the letter for him, to let us know that he was no longer -- well that he was on the other side period.

Carol Lynn Yellin: One of the things that I wanted to ask about was the eventual, when the matter of the organization of the strikers and the ministers and so forth got going, and the boycotts that came up -- had this ever happened before? Any attempt really to

organize, city wide boycotts, or boycotts of certain industries and such?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, of course they boycotted the *Commercial Appeal* some years ago because we wouldn't...

Carol Lynn Yellin: Oh, they had boycotted before?

Frank Ahlgren: Oh yes, yeah, long before that.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Why was that?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, it was at the time of the Montgomery bus; they were going to boycott the bus people, and too many of them had to depend on the bus, so they shifted over to the *Commercial Appeal*, because at that time we were having conversations about using Mr., and Mrs., and Miss in front of Negro names. We did it for the people of substance, and the clergy's wives and so on. In fact, a lot of the bishops said that they had the nerve to call me and see if my wife was the wife of a bishop before they'd use Mrs. And of course attitude was we thought it was a chance to get some better attitudes about the institution of marriage, and I remember telling them in a meeting very frankly that the *Commercial Appeal* would underwrite any reasonable amount of effort to put on a campaign amongst the unmarried, living together, common law arrangements, emphasizing the fact if nothing else they needed it for their social security and their other benefits, to be legitimate -- to be legitimately married, and they would have nothing to do with that. "No, we want Mr. and Mrs., and Miss." And, that went on. They never did know how badly they had cut into our Negro circulation.

David Yellin: But they had?

Frank Ahlgren: Oh, yes, they had, sure. Because they went out and organized, and in fact they -- some of the preachers got up money to pay carriers who would be thrown out of work by the boycott. They paid them.

Carol Lynn Yellin: This in '54, or whenever the Montgomery thing was?

Frank Ahlgren: It was later than that I'd think. It was about '57. Yeah, it was '57.

Carol Lynn Yellin: And did this happen again during this strike?

Frank Ahlgren: Not to any extent.

David Yellin: Did they cut in as much, I think...?

Frank Ahlgren: No, not in any sense. If there was a real boycott, we weren't aware of it.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Did you have any information, or did any information come to you

about -- well you said that of course the city was feeling, after the assassination, was that there was more pressure built to get the strike settled, but would you have any knowledge of the effectiveness of the boycott before the assassination?

Frank Ahlgren: You mean on the businesses?

Carol Lynn Yellin: Just city wide, on downtown businesses?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, truthfully, any effort to find out was usually met with a rebuff, they just didn't -- they'd say, "That's our business."

David Yellin: That's the business people said that to you?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah, but they were hurting.

Carol Lynn Yellin: When the newspaper tried to get any information, when your reporters and all that?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah, and they'd say, "That's our business."

David Yellin: This is to Professor Ahlgren now, you're giving the lecture at Memphis State, or so. Could you or would you even begin -- what did you envision, or what did you think of in practice, your position as the editor of the newspaper, or the newspaper itself, not you as much personally, in this kind of community situation?

Frank Ahlgren: You mean what was my editorial stance?

David Yellin: Yes. What did you feel that the place of the newspaper was in this kind of thing, and your editorial stance, which of course would amplify what you're...

Frank Ahlgren: We wanted the sanitation people to have living wage. We thought there was room for improvement in their wage, and they got that, but we were opposed to -- we are opposed as has been our history, of having any public official, public employees, employees by the tax payers or by...in any form of government in labor unions. That's been our role historically, and we were not for the labor union movement.

David Yellin: Well, now when this became a -- caused the community to come in turmoil and opposition, and it became a black and white situation, again, where did you feel that that...?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, we felt that the union was not a good thing for the whole community, but here we were in a very explosive situation, and our advice was go ahead and sign up, not sign up, go ahead and write a memorandum and pay them through the credit union.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Settle it?

Frank Ahlgren: Settle it. Get it settled as fast as we can, because these sores are going to be festering.

Carol Lynn Yellin: And this would have been in line with what had been done before, in situations.

David Yellin: And what eventually did happen in the strike.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Because usually the Memphis handling of these things had been to not to let it come to that -- as you said, that hard-nosed, immovable object, that irresistible force.

Frank Ahlgren: That's right.

Carol Lynn Yellin: In the same line, I want to go back to one thing that has been mentioned. The presence -- this is not so much newspaper, but this is getting into media and the presence of the TV cameras, plus reporters at all of those early negotiations at the insistence of Mayor Loeb, and the question of whether that affected the ability of the union, and the city to arrive at an agreement.

Frank Ahlgren: Unquestionably Epps saw marvelous opportunity to upstage everybody, and he got that flapping mouth going, and nobody had a chance to talk. Sure, it did, but I couldn't speak out against it, because we're for open covenants, open (muffled).

Carol Lynn Yellin: You're for open (muffled). Well I was thinking exactly, and I think this is getting right to my point, that as a journalist I would have hated to have had to make the decision of where does the good of the newspaper, and the good of the news media (muffled), which as you say were always for the open meeting, and when does concern for community peace take over, and was there conflict (muffled)?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, I am a member of a number of boards, including the University of Tennessee, and we have executive sessions when we discuss salaries or individual personalities that might reflect on them, or quite frankly any kind of a real estate deal, which would send prices up, but other than that I certainly think that the judgment of the whole is better than the judgment of a few who think they know it all.

David Yellin: Except that in this instance it wasn't the media that requested presence. It certainly wasn't the television media that requested presence, it was the mayor who insisted that television cameras be there.

Frank Ahlgren: But he wanted it to be out in the open, that's one good thing about him.

David Yellin: Now, can I ask you, and you have alluded to Reverend Lawson. How do you evaluate, or how would you evaluate his position, his influence or lack of influence

in this whole thing?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, it was very pronounced for a while. In fact, he had been showing great, well he is a very able man, and he had been doing some good spiritual organizing, and undoubtedly he was an important factor. He is very articulate, as you know. But, he -- someone else tried to get into the act, and so he had to call on Martin Luther to help him out. I mean, that's my estimate of it, and that's the way it turned...

Carol Lynn Yellin: What do you feel his position is now? Do you feel he is...?

Frank Ahlgren: I don't know what it is now, I don't hear much from him or about him. And of course I am out of touch now with things, but I am sure that as long as he's here he's going to be a big influence on the community.

David Yellin: Well, do you think, and I am just following it only a little further -- do you think had someone else been in his stead, and be it of anybody, that it might have turned out differently?

Frank Ahlgren: No, I don't think so.

David Yellin: So it was better than he?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, by the same token, do you think if, say if we had had the present mayor, Chandler, or another mayor would it have turned out differently?

Frank Ahlgren: I think it might have, yes.

Carol Lynn Yellin: So that actually that had more influence on...

Frank Ahlgren: I think that they didn't like Loeb, and they were easy to move in the direction of defiance.

David Yellin: Now "they" being the black people?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah. Now, the -- I don't know whether Chandler is any better liked. I think he doesn't represent quite the hard, iron-fisted...

Carol Lynn Yellin: The visible thing?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah, so that it might have been avoided. But this, these people had fought Loeb, and when he won they didn't wait very long to get into action, in spite of what the gentleman from New York said. They were looking around for something.

David Yellin: Yeah, so, well now, I am trying to pick up something because it seems to

me that you might be thought, saying that this was a kind of a calculated affair.

Frank Ahlgren: Well, it certainly came off that way.

David Yellin: What were they after, if I, you know?

Frank Ahlgren: They were looking for an incident, I think. They thought they were -- that with Loeb in there they were going to be further shoved down on the scale, and they organized. They had a union by that time, and so they went...

Carol Lynn Yellin: This being the local union people, T.O. Jones who was the union leader, and so forth, right.

Frank Ahlgren: That's right. And they thought, well let's have at it.

David Yellin: Now was this part of a bigger -- again and you have said (muffled)?

Frank Ahlgren: I think it was, yes.

David Yellin: Part of the bigger plan.

Frank Ahlgren: I think so.

David Yellin: Because it certainly has come out that Jerry Wurf's union is the largest growing union.

Carol Lynn Yellin: The question is, and of course I don't know if whether anyone has more of an opinion on how planned it was or how opportunistic. I mean simply taking advantage of the opportunity when it was offered.

Frank Ahlgren: I think it was more opportunistic, and I don't think they had it planned,

Carol Lynn Yellin: There was no reluctance.

Frank Ahlgren: Because after Wurf got on the scene, and then Jackson, and some of the rest -- they got the, well Lawson got the white preachers involved, too, you remember. They marched on City Hall and Jimmy Wax was real dramatic.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Did you feel that the preachers, white or black, were really as effective as the union people or the city people? They were certainly a third element in it.

Frank Ahlgren: Oh yes they were effective. They got the emotional thing going for the union people. Yeah, they got the Negroes steamed up.

Carol Lynn Yellin: And had this ever happened before? The ministers getting into any

of the previous -- like the bus thing, or the library thing, or had that been pretty much under the (muffled) of the NAACP?

Frank Ahlgren: No, they got the boycott against the *Commercial Appeal*. They organized the..

Carol Lynn Yellin: That was the ministers?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah. They're the ones that raised the money to hire the kids away from their jobs.

David Yellin: That wasn't a formal organization at the time.

Frank Ahlgren: No, it fell apart in about six weeks.

David Yellin: Now, if we could, and I hope we're not tiring you too much.

Frank Ahlgren: Oh, no.

David Yellin: It has been said that, for instance, James Lawson, Reverend James Lawson was not supposed to be mentioned in your paper. Now, I just say...

Frank Ahlgren: There never has been in the years that, 32 years I guess.

David Yellin: As I remember yeah, '36 to '68.

Frank Ahlgren: Anyway, there never has been any "sacred cow" list, or any SOB list.

David Yellin: There is a difference.

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, I guess we're at the kind of -- we're at the hard question stage, which we have to go through, but for instance, the business that was listed on, and we have in our archives the boycott papers, or the pamphlets, whatever they were that were put out, one of which concerned the boycott says, "Boycott the *Commercial Appeal* and the *Press Scimitar*." And one of the questions that's mentioned on there is the "Hambone." And I know we also have a clipping of...

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Of the history of the "Hambone," but I would love to have a comment on that.

Frank Ahlgren: Well, that seemed to be a special project of Jesse Turner's.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Was it Jesse Turner?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah. He resented it. I think it's because (muffled) like Jesse a little bit. That bald head with that, you know that oblong end, but there was a determined effort to get us to drop it. But, what had happened, Mrs. Halle, this was Mrs. Jackson, she's married again after Jim died, had (muffled) ailing. I guess he was over 70 years old. I have forgotten how old, and there was a matter of communicating. Her son here that was a cartoonist for the paper also had this strip the riots, and he was up to his eyebrows with his own affair, and so the other son who did the "Hambone" drawings, lived in Dallas, and saw there was always this hang-up of the cartoons, the "Hambone" not getting in, and they weren't very good. She, her husband was dying, Jackson was dying, and he had been the source of some of the -- it got pretty weak. In fact, they only had, aside from the *Commercial Appeal* they only had about five or six papers, and they were small papers.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Oh, it was syndicated.

Frank Ahlgren: Oh yeah, at one time there were 267 papers.

Carol Lynn Yellin: I hadn't realized that.

Frank Ahlgren: Now back in the '20s they even had one up in an unlikely place, Port Covenant, Ontario. Because a large Mid-South colony had cottages there in the summer time. But, it was largely (muffled) in the south of course, and -- but it had dwindles and the syndicate gave it up, and then Archer and Woodbury, an advertising agency, it's the same Woodbury that's out at Memphis State, and they handled it for a while. But they only had what, five papers besides the *Commercial Appeal*, and that doesn't even pay mailing expense, we paid them. So, they finally suggested (muffled). And that's what she did. She (muffled).

Carol Lynn Yellin: Was she aware of the criticism of it?

Frank Ahlgren: Oh yeah. She didn't like to yield under fire, nor did I, but no use trying to...just keeping something in there to further irritate it that had done as good as it was, well (muffled). It wasn't really worth all the trouble that this was.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, the one other thing, and again, this is the cartoon, and this is the garbage can cartoon that was so criticized in the black community, and was mentioned later in some of the national write-ups, the picture of a black man sitting on a garbage can, and something marked anarchy. And this was evidently one of the points that was -- didn't this come before the boycott was announced? Wasn't this instrumental in (muffled)?

Frank Ahlgren: Well, I tell you the truth. We weren't aware that there was any boycott of the newspaper.

Carol Lynn Yellin: So, it wasn't really that effective, then.

Frank Ahlgren: No.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, I guess I'm calling it a boycott because we have this little pamphlet.

Frank Ahlgren: It was in the list of things not to do.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Right, right.

Frank Ahlgren: But, so far as our circulation was concerned, now the one in '57 did bite in pretty good, but it was a boycott aimed at, only at us, not even the *Press-Scimitar*, just the *Commercial Appeal*.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, I guess what I wanted to ask was the review of the cartoons that went in -- was there any final decision on what... Was there any review of these cartoons with an eye to what they would do to community opinion?

Frank Ahlgren: Oh, yes, every cartoon that appears is viewed in that light and how it touches on the local scene, or the national scene or anything.

Carol Lynn Yellin: But this particular cartoon, before it was printed...?

Frank Ahlgren: No, there wasn't any apprehension.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Right, right, that's what.

David Yellin: Now when some of these people came to talk to you, some of the black leaders for instance. Indeed, what was your communication with the black community? Was there any complaint against the paper and your handling of the (muffled)?

Frank Ahlgren: Oh sure. They'd complain about we weren't publishing their side, or...

Carol Lynn Yellin: Nobody ever comes to see an editor that there isn't a complaint.

Frank Ahlgren: Oh, yeah, a lot of them come there looking for something, and can butter you up pretty good. No, there is no violence or anything. You know boys, and girls, I've got to hit the trail here pretty soon, unless you've got something...

David Yellin: Right, just one more question (muffled).

Frank Ahlgren: (muffled), but I do have to get going.

David Yellin: Yeah, and maybe you might...at one time near the end of the strike before the assassination, as a matter of fact I think on the Wednesday, April 3, somebody asked

you for a list of outstanding community leaders to call to a meeting. Do you recall that? I think it was from the civil rights, the United States Civil Rights, maybe or...?

Frank Ahlgren: No, I don't recall anything like that.

David Yellin: And, the reason I mention it is that I wondered if you did have any memorabilia, or any papers, or any letters that you would want to give to the collection at your discretion?

Frank Ahlgren: No, anything like that has probably been destroyed, because when I left the paper, I just took those personal files and put them in a box and had a truck come by and get the rest of the stuff, but plaques, and (muffled).

David Yellin: So you have nothing?

Frank Ahlgren: I moved right in here, and this is it.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, I have one other thing, and this will take only a minute, but we, I would like to just have on the tape in your own words, a little review of your career before you came to the *Digest*, if we just -- where you were born.

David Yellin: Before you came to the *Commercial Appeal*.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Before you came to the *Digest*, listen to me!

Frank Ahlgren: I'd gladly go to the *Digest*.

David Yellin: Strike that.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Strike that. Before you came to the paper.

Frank Ahlgren: Well, I came from the area where the *Digest* originated.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Did you really?

Frank Ahlgren: Yeah, I was born in Superior, Wisconsin.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Oh yes, neighbor to Minnesota.

Frank Ahlgren: Yes. That's right at the head of the lakes there where the -- right across from Duluth, and I went to school at Lane Tech in Chicago, and went back home, graduated from the high school there. Went down to Wisconsin for a semester. My family's political fortunes changed. My dad and Lenroot were followers of LeFollet, and then they fell out with him, and so I went to what is now Wisconsin State at Superior. It was the Superior State normal school, just as Memphis State was West Tennessee normal school. And another coincidence there, I went to the training school at Superior.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Where our children have gone to the training school here.

Frank Ahlgren: And then while I was going to school I worked for the newspaper there. I was the school correspondent, that's where I got hooked.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Is that right?

Frank Ahlgren: And then old (muffled) for the *Duluth Herald*. Had an offer from the *Milwaukee Journal*, and I was working on the journal, and one of my formal associates had come to Memphis to be city editor of the then *News Scimitar*. It was owned by Paul Block. Paul Block owned the *Duluth Herald* where I had worked. So, (muffled) he said,

"I'm city editor, and if you come here I'd bet that with your enthusiasm you'll be the city editor and I'll be managing editor in six months." So here I came in a white wool suit, on the last day of August.

David Yellin: Oh no.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Oh...

Frank Ahlgren: I stepped off that train...

Carol Lynn Yellin: Wisconsin boy.

Frank Ahlgren: And it was just, it was at Grand Central Station down here, and it was just like walking into an island, that heat hit.

David Yellin: Right.

Frank Ahlgren: But, I... and then about, let's see, two months after I got here they sold the paper to Scripps-Howard, and I had worked against Hurst in Milwaukee, and I thought I'll have nothing to do with these chain operations. So, I worked for, oh on the Welcome Wagon. It wasn't Welcome Wagon then. Tom Briggs, he later started the Welcome Wagon, but he was an advertising section man, and I did the words while he sold the music. These ads, until they started the *Evening Appeal* and I could work for a newspaper again. The big *Press-Scimitar*, the newly formed *Press-Scimitar* offered me a job, but I was skeptical of what we call chain operations. When I joined Scripps-Howard I soon learned they don't call it a chain, it's a concern. But -- and things did go along all right for me on the *Evening Appeal*. My friend stayed with the *Press-Scimitar* and he became the city editor there, and I became managing editor of the *Evening Appeal*.

David Yellin: So you skipped a...

Frank Ahlgren: So I worked right up.

David Yellin: What was your friend's name?

Frank Ahlgren: He later became city commissioner, too. He was secretary to the mayor and then city commissioner. Um -- this is what happens when you get old.

David Yellin: I understand about names, yeah. Well.

Frank Ahlgren: I had to start, Ralph Picard.

David Yellin: Oh, P-I-C-A-R-D.

Frank Ahlgren: There's an insurance man here who calls himself Pickard, but this was Ralph Picard. He came from...

David Yellin: Is that the same family?

Frank Ahlgren: No, this one came from Bogalusa, Louisiana.

David Yellin: This Memphis State is a Jackie Picard.

Frank Ahlgren: Is he? P-I-C-A-R-D?

David Yellin: Yeah.

Frank Ahlgren: I didn't know that. Anyway, it was a traditional thing that the mayor's secretary was a newspaper man, and the mayor chose him to be his secretary, and then when there was an opening in the city commission, they chose him for that. And then he was elected.

David Yellin: When you were a reporter and so on, was it just general? I mean, did you have any special?

Frank Ahlgren: No, I did the police run, and the City Hall, and about that time I went on the Copy Desk because I had had some training on the Copy Desk at the *Journal*, and they were very sloppy with their copy editing, and I put in a universal desk. They were writing their own heads, and then writing the story to fit the head, things like that. So, being that close to the operation at the Copy Desk, then I moved into the administrative. So, I didn't have much street experience.

David Yellin: And how long -- you were managing editor for how long?

Frank Ahlgren: Oh, just for about a year on the *Evening Appeal* and then the *Commercial Appeal* was showing signs of old age, and it needed a shake-up, and so they put me in as news editor, but I handled the payroll, which is the same as managing editor. They didn't want to hurt the managing editor's feelings, but I had the payroll -- the hiring and the firing. Then they put me back on the *Evening Appeal* after a later change in

ownership. I got married, so I wanted a daylight job, too.

David Yellin: So, now are we up to '36 when you began?

Frank Ahlgren: No, then they sold the, rather they made a deal on the *Evening Appeal*. The *Commercial Appeal* discontinued the *Evening Appeal*, and the *Press-Scimitar* dropped plans to start a Sunday newspaper, and raised their rates, and so the *Commercial Appeal* -- I went back to the *Commercial Appeal* as city editor. And then I was afraid that the new owner, who had worked for Hurst, was only a front man for Hurst. So, I'd always wanted to get the business side of it, and a friend of mine in Dallas interested me in being the -- this is when NRA came on. And they didn't know anything about NRA, and I had studied law, I went to (muffled) law school, so I went to work in Texas. But after a year-and-a-half, I got a little...

Carol Lynn Yellin: (muffled)

Frank Ahlgren: Well, I found out all I wanted to know about the business side. I negotiated labor contracts, and insurance agreements, and circulation agreements. So I let John Sorrels, who is the executive editor of Scripps-Howard know that I was available for editorial work. He had offered me a job before that. And I went to the *Cleveland Press*, and then when they had to take over the *Commercial Appeal* they sent me in as editor in 1936.

Carol Lynn Yellin: So you were really -- you were coming in from out of town, but you really were returning to (muffled).

Frank Ahlgren: Of course my wife is -- her father was the cartoonist, J.P. Alley. And (muffled). Never got away since. I was offered a job in Pittsburg, and she says, "I'm never going North again." Our year in Cleveland was enough for her. And I had the offer for a San Francisco paper, and she vetoed that, and later found out about San Francisco (muffled). I have a son out there on the *Chronicle*. So, we'll be headed out there sometime in October, if I can work my lecture schedule around that.

David Yellin: Yes, very good.

Frank Ahlgren: If they still want me to lecture. I'd better check in on that. I see (muffled) is going to take on some (muffled).

David Yellin: We have this, that we're forced to do, if you don't mind. That's a release.

Frank Ahlgren: Yes, I've had two of these now.

David Yellin: Well, thank you very much.

Carol Lynn Yellin: We certainly do..

Frank Ahlgren: It was my pleasure.

David Yellin: And ours, I assure you.

Frank Ahlgren: I hope I didn't give you too much misinformation, but that's (muffled).

END OF RECORDING