Joe Sweat, Commercial Appeal Reporter, 1970

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David Yellin- Okay got mail.

Joe Sweat- Right. He did have a habit of asking reporters who covered him advice on matters involving the city. He would say what do you think I am going to do about this. I would usually say I don't know you are the mayor do whatever you want to, I will just report it. I can recall several times on real serious matters, I can bring up again when we get to the garbage strike, knowing they were having the negotiations one time, he came to me, this was during one of those public things when they were firing back and forth. There was a coffee break and he came over and said, you know what do you think, how do you think it is going, what else do you think I ought to say to them? I said, I don't think I should say.

David Yellin- Joe Why did he do that?

Joe Sweat- Well, I never knew for sure but I suspected that part of it was that this was his way of keeping in good graces with the reporters. It is very flattering you know for a politician to ask your advice. Also, there is a possibility that it may be true politics because if a man gives you a piece of advice then he can't really slam you too hard for using that advice when he writes it up in the newspaper. These are possibilities. The other possibility is that he maybe really wanted to know. I never, I honestly could not say why.

David Yellin- Also, all of these things may be all part of it, is it part of his nature to ask people, do a lot of people go around and do this? They just ask generally, that is there outgoing nature.

Joe Sweat- Well he would ask, I don't know I guess the pattern was kind of varied, of course people that were close to him, people that were in the administration and people that really counted I guess he did quite often ask there advice. This was a little unusual to me you know you don't get that too often as a reporter, you don't run into many that are really asking for your advice. That kind of struck me. Another general comment about his general style of his administration. He was a stickler for going through channels and not using the office of the mayor in what would be almost a way that you would expect someone to use it. For instance getting a friend a job with the city. You know I mean that is technically not supposed to be done, technically you don't do that, but almost all mayors do it. He was absolutely as far as I was able to tell, one of the most honest politicians I had ever covered. I mean he really went by the book. He would not do anyone a favor if it involved anything that might be questionable in the way of the city.

David Yellin- But he would on occasion would call up and say this fellow deserves attention because it is right for him to get attention. Like if some, I mean his famous Thursday's, we have some tapes of him saying well if that is the case I will call down there at the park commission and see what I can do about this.

Carol Yellin- He really doesn't say that what he says is you talk to them, I will call down there and tell them you are coming, I think is what he says.

Joe Sweat- Now he might say this fellow is coming. (Tape Break) To amplify just a little bit, I am not saying that he didn't do these things, but I was never ever aware of him doing it. That is I was never ever aware of him saying to anyone I will get you a job with the city. Or I was never aware of him calling anyone and saying give this man a job. I tell you, people come in and maybe some pathetic case and this guy really needed a job with the city, and t his happened many, many times. It might have been because I was there, I don't know, but Lobe would always say, I cannot tell them to give you a job. You fill out this application and you go down there and talk to them and I hope you get it, but I cannot call anyone and say give you a job. I know of one case where a man, I would rather not use names in this particular case. The son was in a very important position in the newspaper business and he could have at anytime done Lobe a lot of harm. Which would have been bad had Lobe had bad relations with him, His father worked for the city and his father was fired. Lobe would not have him re-instated, and I know the normal political inclination was…the normal political inclination would have been for him to slip around a little bit and get this fellow back on the city because his son was so important. But he would not do it and I know he never did do it, I happen to know personally that he never did do it. He was besieged by some important people in the city. The son never did I will say that, but he would be called by very well-known ministers and stuff like that and they would say this guy, he really, he was drinking on the job see, and he said he won't do it again, give him back. Lobe would say I'm sorry, I would really, I think it's tragic, I cannot, if his boss in whatever department he was in the city saw fit to relieve him of his job I will not intervene. Now as I say he might not have followed that consistently, behind, under the table. There may have been times when he didn't do that kind of thing, but I was very much impressed the whole time I was there that he was one of the most honest politicians I had ever seen. A real stickler for that kind of detail. Never any question about his responsibility to his office. Another general comment that I think is important, because I think he was a little unfairly treated in some things. I was never, ever, and I spent during the real crisis period there spent nights with him and down at the office was with him in some very strained relationships. I never, ever one single time heard Lobe treat a black person with anything other than respect. And he never made derogatory statements about black people. Never, ever, heard him make a derogatory statement at all about black people. He couldn't say negro, but the poor bastard couldn't say negro I mean. He would get chided about this he would say nigro. A lot of us in the south tend to do that.

Carol Yellin- Never a joke?

Joe Sweat- No. Never, ever, and when people would, I have seen instances when jokes were told in his presence and he would, he might smile but he really wouldn't enter into it. Again you never know, it's maybe because you are there or something.

David Yellin- Couldn't have acted that way.

Joe Sweat- I don't think a guy could be that consistent . So my analysis as I look back on it was that if Lobe was…Lobe was not what I consider a racist. Now he was not going along, or in with some of the more progressive thinking today as far as race relations go, but he was not a racist in the sense of one who holds negros in contempt. Negros would come into the office a whole lot. Number one a lot of them would come ask him for jobs and he would always say just like he would say to anybody else, white people, whatever. Friends, close friends, so forth, sorry. And then he would go and he would spend ungodly amount of time, I was really impressed with this. Young negros would come in and they needed a job and they said can you give us a job, we need a job. Really hard for a young black person to get a job you know. He had spent all this time talking to them about how to get a job, he would say let's get out the newspaper and start going down the want ads. Now you think you can get this job? Why don't you call this man? He was the mayor you know of the city and he was going…and he would say now you go down to the Tennessee Employment agency, they have a lot of good jobs. If you go see this man and he is not interested, just worry him to death, keep going back, make him give you a job.

Carol Yellin- Would that go in with the letter writing. The answering people's letters who were writing their problems which he does personally.

Joe Sweat- Yeah. He does a tremendous amount of dictating including a lot of dictating as he drives back and forth to work.

Carol Yellin- A lot of dictating that seems kind of superfluous for the mayor's job .

Joe Sweat- Yeah. Yeah. You know perhaps he shouldn't have been spending all of his time…he should have been spending his time maybe on problems that would have solved massive, large things rather than individuals, but he was just that kind of person. He would get all bound up with helping each individual that would come in. Try and work out some personal solution to their problem. Then they would be…everyone finds their way to the mayor's office and like there was a child beating case on time and he actually almost starting crying with this lady. I mean it just really tore him up, this lady was telling him about how that this child was being beaten and it was her daughter's child, the son-in-law. He was shrewd enough to realize that when she left there might be some family involvements here you know. So what he did, is he asked the proper agency to check this out. But at the time that she was really telling him this tale which was really heart breaking you know, boy it was just tearing him up. He kept saying, I am really going to look into this, I am really going to look into it. And when she left, you know I expected him to get on the phone and say have that son of a gun arrested because he said, that's my inclination, he said I just can't stand to think of a guy doing that to a child. And yet he called the juvenile office and said will you check this out. Then he said, now I am not sure, it makes me mad to hear this and so and so. I have to consider the source. I was a little bit, I was kind of surprised that he had that much insight into it. I know his first inclination was to jump on the phone and call…

David Yellin- Now this may jump, but while you are on the subject there two things that occur to me. Where you there at all when he did respond to press coverage, not only local, but national coverage, this is later and we may be jumping. And secondly, and if you want to wait we can. How do you assess or account for or describe his attitude about race?

Joe Sweat- Well first of all on the press coverage. He was very leery of outside reporters.

Carol Yellin- Yeah.. Why?

Joe Sweat- Of reporters that did not work for local publications or for local media.

David Yellin- Now this was right from the beginning?

Joe Sweat- Right from the beginning.

Carol Yellin- Because he had not been burned by outside press before?

Joe Sweat- I don't know, I never could figure this out but he was, he was automatically on the defensive. The day that the strike began, he had one of these telephone things, I don't know what you call it where you push the button and everyone in the room can hear what is going on. He uh…a reporter called and I later met this reporter and I cant remember his name now, but he was with the Wall Street Journal and he was out of the Houston office. He called and Lobe just put it on the conference call because there were a number of reporters sitting around. He would always tell this person, there are no reporters in the room. He was never devious about it, it was just a lot easier for him so he could just go and work at his desk. He said, this guy started asking some questions and the fellow had a cocky accent and Lobe spent about half the time kidding this guy about his accent.

David Yellin- Cottony accent? Or was it New England?

Joe Sweat- Well it sounded very cottony. He used a few words which I can't recall now and Lobe would say these words back to him like he said them. I can recall the guy said something about how many of your garbage personnel are out on strike. Lobe kind of cracked up and laughed a little bit and he said, well I don't know we are just in the first day of this thing and I can't really tell. And he said well would it be at least haulf? And Lobe said, Haulf? (Laughs) It was obvious throughout the whole conversation that Lobe just didn't have that much respect for this guy for some reason at least it seemed to me.

Carol Yellin- Did the guy know it, or was everybody laughing at this guy on the other end?

Joe Sweat- No I would thin the poor guy knew what was going on. In other instances, now some of my thinking may have been colored by other things later and I think back on it. In other instances the Time would come in and particularly Newsweek one instance I remember. He wouldn't see them and so then they would

come to me and they would say can you get us an interview with the mayor. Well hell that wasn't my job, but I would go over there and talk to him and say you know you have a national image to worry about here, and this is a big city, why don't you talk to these guys. So then he would agree. Well I ended up half the time acting like Lobe's press secretary and I felt a little bit like it was compromising me you know because I have to always get involved and try to get these guys…I would get caught in the middle because these guys would say come on talk to him and see if he won't see us and this sort of thing, and a lot of times he would not see outside reporters and we would come and go all the time.

Carol Yellin- Is this…by when?

Joe Sweat- This was getting on down into the real tough stages of the strike.

Carol Yellin- Does he have a press secretary, or did he have anyone at all?

Joe Sweat- No, no. No press secretary, of course he has Mark, I mean. It was one of his secretaries, Mark sort of handles that sort of thing.

David Yellin- That's Mark King?

Joe Sweat- Mark King. And Mark screens everyone and he really determines who goes into Lobe's office and who doesn't. Usually, most often by checking with Lobe first, but the reporters for the two newspapers here and to some extent the three television stations although they weren't around too much, particularly the reporters working for the two newspapers, you know we had pretty free access to his office. Very seldom would we have to wait very long to get in and even sometimes when he was in a semi-private conversation he would ask the person do you remind if these reporters come in and we would come in or sometimes he would even say well you know this is off the record but you are free to listen. He was quite good in his relation, in what he would, in his working relationship with us. And that relationship would change so dramatically quote when that person was an outsider." I mean his quote.

Carol Yellin- Was it a southern outsider or a northern outsider or…

Joe Sweat- No it didn't seem to make any difference you know quite often the Time and Newsweek men would be from Atlanta and things…

David Yellin- Did you ever speak to him about this?

Joe Sweat- Oh not really, again I didn't really think it was my place you know to kind of prep him on the way to carrying.

David Yellin- I'm trying to find out why or if he knew of if you know why?

Joe Sweat- Well he said the, various things he said indicated to me that he thought that these fellows had nothing to lose what so ever by being, just really tearing him apart. Where as I think he thought the local people would always think twice before

doing so, because they knew they were going to have to face the mayor again see the net day. That doesn't mean the local man isn't going to do it, it jut means he hesitates a little longer before he does it.

David Yellin- Well his exemptability to this field, would you describe it as being paranoid in anyway?

Joe Sweat- Oh uh,

David Yellin- Is this an unfair question?

Joe Sweat- No it's not an unfair question, but I don't think it really went that far. Now there was one thing, I believe that Gary Wells got into this in his choir piece. That mayor Lobe had a habit, and in fact I pointed this out to Wells before he went I there and I think that's how come it ended up in the article, because I always thought it was kind of humorous and I even occasionally, not to much, but I occasionally kidded Lowe about it myself. Is that when reporters would come in from the east he would always make a point to point out that he ha gone to school in the east. This is really not anything sinister either but it was kind of funny because he would, about the third or fourth question he would say where are you from? And the guy would say Baltimore or something and he would say, when I was at Brown I had a room mate from Baltimore. Or I played Tennis with a guy from Baltimore.

David Yellin- I think that is a natural thing. If I find somebody is from the east I am reminded quickly.

Joe Sweat- And I think they was that natural reaction, but I think there was also an inclination to say that I am not completely ignorant in the ways of the eastern liberal establishment you know. I have been to Brown, an ivy league school, so forth, don't try and pull anything over on me I know how they operate in the east and this sort of thing. So that was one thing, of course Gary Wells brought out in his Esquire piece that Lobe was the only politician who ever asked to see his press card. But that was…(Laughs). Another thing he would do when he would have meetings, particularly on his open Thursdays and so forth and a hostile group would come in, or there would be present a hostile individual, as soon as that hostility was exhibited Lobe would always say, where are you from. I know it was a, I think it was really subconscious, I don't think he realized it. But what the implication was is if you are against me then you must be an outsider. You must be an outsider. Some lady in a group would start giving him trouble about something involving a garbage truck most often. And he would say and where are you from?

Carol Yellin- She would say Los Angeles…

Joe Sweat- Yeah and he would say well you have to, around here, so and so and so…he wouldn't then take that the next step and say you don't understand our community or something, he would just ask the question and then you would, maybe you would imagine it, but you would almost see a aha twinkle in his eye. But

I am trying to be very fair to him, but he would ask that, I think Jones experienced that when she was down there. He would ask that question quite often. Anyway…

David Yellin- Did anybody have any influence on him, Mark King or…

Joe Sweat- Mark King would have no influence on him, Mark King was strictly Lobe's man. Mark was just, mark was a very, very,very, extremely loyal employee. You know he just followed the mayor's thinking. The mayor would ask Mark to do something and he would always depend on Mark to do it. But he didn't get any advice from Mark. I guess the man he got most of his advice from, his most trusted advisor was Ned Cook. This was the man when he was really in a bind that he would usually call, and closest personal friend too I guess. He would call him and ask him for something. While we have a break can we stop just a second.

Carol Yellin- That was before the strike started when the two garbage men were killed?

David Yellin- Well let's finish with Lobe on mass unless you have a few other but then we will come back to him.

Carol Yellin- Uh when the two garbage men were killed do you remember that?

Joe Sweat- Yeah.

Carol Yellin- Do you remember Lobe's reaction at all?

Joe Sweat- He was upset about it. That was my recollection, that he was shaken not by any implications that it had but just the fact that two guys had been killed in a rather gory fashion and so forth. I know that he sent a telegram or he called or something the families to tell them he was sorry and so forth and so on. I can recall him shaking his head, I was at the office at that time, and he said, Golly that is awful, can you imagine getting killed that way. That was sort of, just the normal…

Carol Yellin- Yeah well the point was their was no insurance or anything, but the families were given money evidently through Lobe's intervention they were given some money.

Joe Sweat- Well I thought that he did send some money or worked out some arrangement…

Carol Yellin- But I don't know if it was his personal money or something arranged through the city, or he never talked about that…

Joe Sweat- The reason I am not sure is because when this first happened, I don't believe that he, as I know none of us were aware bout the insurance situation. The first reaction was, damn what an awful way to die.

David Yellin- Yeah.

Carol Yellin- Yup.

Joe Sweat- But I do recall that later, someone said something to him, and when I say later I mean later the net day or maybe it was later the same day. The destitute situation of the family was brought to his attention and I know that he did get involved in some way in trying to get some money to them. Now I don't know myself whether it was his own personal money or whether he…see what he would do sometimes is he would call some of his friends and say I know somebody that's in a bad situation you know you think you could help them out. This might be a guy like Ned Cook, somebody like that, who is independently wealthy. Quite often someone would come forward and give some money to these people.

David Yellin- This is jumping in but, when you repeated Lobe's reaction you said by golly, now it occurs to me, what about his use of language.

Joe Sweat- Oh he used very strong language. I think he was naturally a little more hesitant at first, but as he got to know me more he used his more natural god damnit, and son of a bitch and everything. Very salty language.

David Yellin- Censor board wouldn't approve.

Joe Sweat- Nope, no, in fact he would occasionally would forget, he also has very much of the old idea of a certain attitude that men should have around women a very chivalry and gentile attitude. He would forget occasionally and let go with some string of profanity and then you would see this lady and he would say lady I am sorry and he would go into profuse apologies and everything. He was very sincere about it, I don't have any doubt about it. He might even just say well damnit, something like in this day and age we consider it pretty harmless and he would apologize. And this didn't matter whether she was black or white or anything only if she was a female. Also he would apologize to ladies quite often for not having his coat on when they came into the office. He would forget, if a lady was coming into his office he would always get up and put on his coat. And sometimes they, one would get in and he wouldn't think about it and then he would start rolling down his sleeves and say, I didn't know you were coming, I am really sorry you know, and he would apologize. And again I have no doubt that he was very sincere about all of this. But he did use strong language.

David Yellin- Go ahead.

Joe Sweat- If you want to go ahead and get into the strike, I mean that's what you would really want to use.

Carol Yellin- I was going to say I also heard he tells quite smutty jokes well.

Joe Sweat- Uh, yeah I'm sure he enjoyed a good bawdy story. Among men.

David Yellin- reading port noise complaint wasn't all the research.

Joe Sweat- No, no, no, I don't think so.

David Yellin- No we are going to get into the strike but this is stuff we cant really get from anybody else essentially, and he, as we indicated, didn't go into it to much himself. I have one question you may not know anything about. Did you ever hear him mention his father?

Joe Sweat- Yes. When he, when the strike first began, he said that when they had, in the old days, had labor troubles at the laundry, that his father had told him the way you fight a strike is to keep some work going at least a little bit and then gradually get more and more going, more and more going. So that you have the psychological thrust of the strike not bringing you to a standstill. He would occasionally say things about his father.

David Yellin- How did he refer to him? Daddy?

Joe Sweat- I think he would say my father, I am not really sure though. Just simply…

David Yellin- Speaking of parents hehe (Baby Noises)

Joe Sweat- Yeah. I think he would say my father and he didn't talk about him a great deal though. It was not by any means anything obsessive or…he did or would occasionally say something about my father used to say, or something like that. It was quite often something involving frugality and economics or something like that.

David Yellin- In other words it wasn't obsessive or it wasn't to be noticeable.

Joe Sweat- Now I might say since e are close to family, make an easy jump over to religion. He, as you may already know from your research or interviews, made the switch from Judaism to the Episcopal Church. He was a little bit concerned, or he professed to be, a little concerned that he did this as a matter of political expediency. And I cant recall when the date was when he made the switch, but I believe it was after the campaign and after he had been elected.

David Yellin- Officially yes.

Joe Sweat- I knew that it was after the campaign because one of the things he said the reason he had not done it sooner, well first of all he said the reason he did it was because he wanted more harmony in his family and the children were often asking questions. He just thought it unnecessarily confused him. Apparently I gathered that he didn't practice his own Jewish religion any longer and so it didn't make much difference to him. But at the same time he decided not to do it until after the campaign because he didn't want people to think that he was switching religions for political expediency and so forth. In fact, he tried to keep it a secret because he didn't want it public. He was this way about many things involving his family. He wanted to keep his family very private. One time I can recall he got very very mad because a reporter asked something that had a tendency, and this was again an outside reporter, add something that might seem to have implications involving Lobe's family and later on coveted about it. He says you know I got a wife and kid and I don't want these guys getting them into the public eye all the time.

Carol Yellin- Did Mary Lobe ever come to the office?

Joe Sweat- uh ugh.

David Yellin- Just for this record, you would take a position in his office and sit on the couch and sit there for many hours…(Tape Cuts).