Joe Sweat, Commercial Appeal Reporter, 1970

SS007.mp3

David Yellin- March 21st 1970 Tape 4

Joe Sweat- So he got the statement together for the television people in the evening of the assassination and we went first to, this was, we went in a police car and unmarked police car with two policeman. One was (Seuxley?) Was driving and McAdams I believe is the other police man's name. He is from Mississippi I know. At least that is his hometown. We went in a police car at tremendous speeds.

David Yellin- Were you in the same car.

Joe Sweat- Yeah I was in the car with him, Lobe and I , and the two police man. We went at fantastic speeds, the only time I had gone that fast in the city. Of course the streets were very much deserted because of curfew.

David Yellin- Did you feel any threat any danger going in that car?

Joe Sweat- Well it was certainly in the back of my mind that this man was such a perfect target all the people that were upset, or a lot of people who were upset about King's death.

Carol Yellin- Do you think he had any fear?

Joe Sweat- Well I think he was just realistic about it. He realized there was a danger, a grave danger, to his life. But he didn't exhibit anything that I saw as fear. He was carrying a gun incidentally. He had showed it to me I believe it was that evening, It was a revolver, a pearl handled revolver that the police had given him and had requested that he carry it, or suggested that he carry it.

David Yellin- Did he have it in a holster?

Joe Sweat- No, he carried it in his pants pocket. In fact, it was always falling out. (Laughs)

Carol Yellin- You mean this was the first day he had that or he got it earlier on.

Joe Sweat- Well I don't know. My memory is that was the first I was aware of it, but he might have had it a little earlier. I don't even know why he showed it to me, he said I wish you wouldn't say anything about this . He said, I told them I didn't want it but they insisted I carry the damn thing.

Carol Yellin- He probably wanted you to feel more secure.

Joe Sweat- But he said they insisted I carry the damn thing, so I will. But we went first to WREC television in the Peabody. Went roaring up and rushing in and they wee waiting. Someone in his office mark or someone had called ahead of time and told each station that we would be there and they would have everything ready. He made his announcement, which I am sure you have on record, calling on the city to be calm and stressing , and he think felt this, stressing that violence had not been the

way of Dr., King, and it was ironical that his death should cause an outburst of violence. So he stressed this in those statements. Went first to WREC, and then we went to WMC on union and then out to WHBQ close to Memphis State. Then we went fro there to the national guard armory to where the national guard was beginning to arrive. He just wanted to drop by there and check. Soldiers came over and saluted and everything. He just said how are you doing, and just light talk. Then we went back to city hall and we were all hungry and he had someone somehow fix up a lot of hamburgers and they brought them over. Lobe incidentally can eat a hamburger in about two bites and it is gone.

David Yellin- Who paid for them?

Joe Sweat- He paid for them. He paid for them out of his own pocket. I can recall him getting out the money and giving it to the fellow. All the restaurants were closed that was the problem, all the restaurants were closed because of the curfew and he found somebody somewhere that would make them. One of the police men did, and the police men left and finally came back with a big sack. I didn't get enough I can remember that.

Carol Yellin- The lobby of the Peabody was that deserted by the time you got over there?

Joe Sweat- We didn't go through the lobby we came through the side door and went downstairs. For such a historic evening I just cant remember anything that just knocks me over you know. We stayed there, at the mayors office until, it had been my intention to stay the night there, and it had been his intention to stay the night there. He had made arrangements for his wife and children to be taken secretly to Ned Cook's house…no,no,no,no,no I'm sorry to be taken to a motel, with Ned Cook and his family at some motel suite somewhere.

David Yellin- In the city?

Joe Sweat- In the city. Then about two in the morning, he talked to his wife a couple of times on the phone and told her each time that he was going to spend the night there. But then about two o'clock nothing was happening. It had just kind of gotten…Oh no let me back up just a minute. We left the national guard armory and we went to the police station. We went into Hollaman's office. Hollaman was saying that, was describing this kind of guerrilla activity that was going on around town, hit and run activity he calls it. He said you know there is no way you can really run it down it is just happening everywhere. Hollaman was shaking his head, he was very worried. The police station was just a real beehive of activity. Guns were and ammunition cases were being opened up, guns were being passed out and on and on. Police man were running everywhere, taking off in cars so forth. Then they, we left there and went on back to the city hall and nothing else really happened. The usual communication with Hollaman, how are things and what's happening and that sort of thing. I would call the office occasionally and phone in things for the story. But then about 2 o'clock in the morning we decided it really wasn't doing any good

to stay there. That we would go on home and come back the next morning. It so happens that I live on Poplar, and Lobe would come out Poplar to go to his home on Colonial. So he says, you prolly oughta try and stay with us because you don't know what's going to happen. So he rode in the police car and I rode in my little VW and we went right out Poplar neck and neck until we got to Colonial and then they turned off and I went home.

Carol Yellin- Just left you.

Joe Sweat- Yeah. I didn't see him anymore.

David Yellin- He slept at his house that night?

Joe Sweat- Well that's what I don't know, it could have been o pick up pajamas or anything and go on to the motel. But he did go to Colonial Rd. and turn off and that's the last I saw him until the next day.

Carol Yellin- Was he visibly showing strain by this time?

Joe Sweat- He wasn't that night, now the first time I can really recall him showing real strain, was…I don't know what evening it was but Sister Edna Marie Hoffstetter were having a sit-in at city hall. Do you know what night this was?

David Yellin- That was before the assassination…no after…it was Friday night.

Joe Sweat- They came with ministers on Friday morning.

David Yellin- And they stayed there.

Carol Yellin- Friday night.

Joe Sweat- They stayed there.

Carol Yellin- The men stayed the next five or six nights.

Joe Sweat- Well it was the evening that they put them out of city hall.

David Yellin- Right.

Carol Yellin- Which makes them (Muffled)

Joe Sweat- I guess that was the first evening. Up until that time they even just let him sit there in Lobe's office. And he took all this pretty calmly. But by that evening, by Friday evening, the strain was really beginning to get to him. He was a bit shaken because he asked me several times what I thought he should do about allowing those people to stay in city hall. I said I'm sorry I am not going to say, I don't believe that is my job. That is something you have to say. Whatever you do I am going to report it. He said to me repeatedly, and perhaps because he knew I was catholic, that he was very worried about Sister Edna Marie's safety. About the safety of all of them but particularly her. He said, you know you just cant put this nun out, we just

cant throw them out of the city hall. Sue Light said you cant let them stay here. Sue Light was very very firm and one of the few times that I ever saw Lobe that he was evasulated. He didn't know what to do, he was very confused. He kept saying to Sue Light, well why can't they just stay here. And Sue Light said, I am sorry it is dangerous we don't want anyone in this building we want this building secure.

David Yellin- What do you think Sue Light was worried about.

Joe Sweat- I don't know. I think...frankly I think Sue Light was irritated with these people. I think he saw that there was a crisis situation and that they were, in his view, they were making themselves as obnoxious as they could be, which they were, that was part of the reason they were there.

David Yellin- He wasn't worried that they would do something personally?

Joe Sweat- Well he never said it in those terms, but he was just saying sort of in terms it is not good police security to allow someone to stay in the building that you are trying to seal off from the public because you want to protect the mayor. Then you let this…

Carol Yellin- Sister Edna Marie?

Joe Sweat- Right. So he was saying all sorts, Lobe was saying you know why can't they stay upstairs, can't they stay here,...I don't see any reason to put them outside, there is no place for them to use the bathroom, this sort of thing. We can't just throw a nun out on the street and Sue Light was saying, so then I even recall that there was not even a scuffle but a little bit of a tug back and forth between Sue Light and the mayor. Mayor was trying to go down to the front door. He wanted tot talk to them one more time and see if he couldn't get at least Sister Adrian Marie to go home. They had already been put out at the time. Sue Light had the mayor's arm and was trying to pull him back up the stairs trying to ay leave them alone you need to stay inside. And the mayor was saying no, I just want to talk to them one more time, they shouldn't be out there. And it was really a very confused situation and he was really under strain and Sue Light ordered him back in the office and made him go. It's a fine line but almost physically made the mayor go back in the office and stay there. I had every reason to believe at the time and still do, Sue Light was worried about the mayor's safety and the mayor was worried perhaps a number of things, how this would look publicly to kick 8 of them out on the street. You know just his own feeling of compassion.

Carol Yellin- Joe, this maybe be completely off base, but did Lobe kind of have a thing about ministers, for instance Baxton Bryant take a couple of conversations that he had with Lobe, that they went exactly religious in nature but it kind of bordered and it seemed to me so strange…I cant explain it exactly except Lobe seemed to be very careful with ministers for some reason. And I don't think it was the public image thing, because there was fighting all those other black ministers.

Joe Sweat- I don't know about that. I know he did not care for Braxton Brown as an individual in the least. He felt that he was…in fact, he felt he was very insincere because at one particular meeting with Braxton, Braxton told an ethnic joke. In fact, I remember the joke, I can tell you if you would like me to tell you. Baxton said, did you hear the joke about Judson catching a plane and going up to the North pole and the plane landed with skis on the snow and Johnson walked out for about a mile and looked all around, no that's not far enough. He walked for two or three more miles, and I wont prolong the joke. But he finally got out there and was absolutely surrounded by nothing. Just this desolate snow and then he said nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger. He wanted to get it out of his system. Lobe was just stunned by this. Baxton just cackled and laughed. Lobe said, looked at me and he pointed at Baxton and he said, this guy is supposed to be an integrationist, I don't understand this. He did kind of smile but he didn't laugh at the joke. I thin he was a little bit offended. I think he thought that this was another indication of what he felt was a basic insincerity of Baxton Brown. He also was aware that Baxton talked different ways to different people. The reason he was aware of this was the police bugged all the union meetings and they had brought some of the tapes. Baxton had appeared at some of the union meetings and Lobe, I know this because one of the policeman told me, Lobe didn't. They had played the mayor some of the tapes of speeches given at the union meetings and one of them was Baxton Brown. He said some things in there that he had said the opposite thing to the mayor or so the policeman claimed.

Carol Yellin- What about the charge about the union rooms in the hotel were bugged?

Joe Sweat- I don't know anything about that.

Carol Yellin- Did you ever hear that?

Joe Sweat- I never did even hear that. But I know that the union meetings were bugged. In fact they…

Carol Yellin- (Muffled0)

Joe Sweat- They caught policeman.

Carol Yellin- Did you go to union meetings?

Joe Sweat- I used to go to almost all the union meetings. I went there with this, I almost went to jail over you might recall. I went there with the understanding that I was there on a confidential basis and nothing was to be reported out of there. The reason I said I almost went to jail is when the case came to court and they called me as a witness and I refused to testify on the basis on what I had heard. I refused to testify about what I had heard in the union meeting.

Carol Yellin- What you get?

Joe Sweat- This was when they were trying to get the injunction against the union.

David Yellin- Oh yeah that is the march.

Joe Sweat- The judge said well you know, better reporters than you have gone to jail for contempt of court, now don't you want to think about this. I said, no I am sorry your honor. I was really expecting to go and then Lobe said to Gianatti, withdraw the damn question.

David Yellin- Another thing I would like to ask you while we are on it. During your time with mayor Lobe during the strike, who did he blame, if anybody. An individual, the situation, did he feel that other than Champa, indeed if it is Champa. Champa sort of disappeared and then Worth came in. Did he blame Lawson, did he blame this one, that one.

Joe Sweat- No, in fact, most of the time any criticism that he, you know, that was against the union.

David Yellin- The concept of the union.

Joe Sweat- Yes, the concept of the union, the concept that public employees could strike. Not necessarily this particular union but almost any union that organizers public employees. That was in his mind really the (muffled). The unionization of public employees, in my way of thinking that was the chief (velop?) Of the mind of Henry Lowe.

Carol Yellin- Okay so the post office has just proved it…

Joe Sweat- Yeah.

Carol Yellin- Entirely correct.

Joe Sweat- I don't think I ever heard him say anything really critical of the black leadership, as such. Now when they walked hand and hand with the union then I am sure he felt…

David Yellin- They might have been prisoners of the union. How about the incident, the compromise headline, not in your paper but…It was the Precimeter wasn't it? That said compromise and then he withdrew.

Joe Sweat- Yeah I believe it was in ours.

David Yellin- Was it.

Joe Sweat- Because he reacted very strongly to the headline word compromise.

David Yellin- Yes.

Carol Yellin- Yes.

Joe Sweat- He was mad about it.

David Yellin- Is it true but he would have gone but this headline did pull him back?

Joe Sweat- Well I think there is that possibility that whole thing played out that way. That this word frightened him and caused him to pull back. Of course you know you have some guessing, he never said that, he never said I am pulling back. But he did say My god I am not compromising with anybody.

Carol Yellin- Well obviously what he thought he was doing he didn't think it was compromising.

Joe Sweat- That's right he didn't see this particular action as a compromise.

Carol Yellin- Did your story say compromise or was it entirely…

Joe Sweat- I think it was just a headline word. And it was perhaps an unfortunate choice. He really reacted to it. I can recall that he said specifically, I thought the story was fine but that damn word compromise, I'm not compromising with anybody. He saw this as him compromising his principles which he was always very strong about not doing.

Carol Yellin- Joe, where did you see pressure from business people coming in, or did you see it?

Joe Sweat- Oh Rodney Barber, Barber is that his name? Head of the downtown association would come in.

Carol Yellin- Was this during the strike, early on, or is this all the way?

Joe Sweat- During the strike when the economic boycott was beginning to work. He would come in trying this solution and that solution and talk with Lobe. I never did see…these business men would come in and they would to him, but they would talk to him sort of in this vain. We are with you and you are right, but they are killing us can't we kind of do something. It is not that we think you are wrong, we think your principles are right.

David Yellin- How do you think he reacted to that?

Joe Sweat- I would really think that they thanked him a whole lot. I think he still felt…

David Yellin- Wouldn't that strengthen his point of view, he was saving them really. Somebody had to be strong.

Joe Sweat- I think he would listen to them, but I never saw any indication that nay of the business community came while I was present really said anything to him that shook him. Or really put any pressure on him that would have cause him…

David Yellin- Now I go back, were you there the day the strike started?

Joe Sweat- Right.

David Yellin- Do you think he had any indication that there was going to be a strike be fore the strike that there was going to be a strike?

Joe Sweat- Well it seems to me that, if I recall correctly, it seems to me there was a day in there in which some guys had gone out, there was a little confusion. When I talk about the day the strike started I am talking about the day that there was ….

David Yellin- Big morning.

Joe Sweat- Yeah the big walk out. There had been some little rumblings ahead of time, in fact he had mentioned it. He had mentioned like three or four days back in the week before he had said some thing about, oh yeah I got a report here that there are three or four truck crews that didn't show up. He said we are checking into it but I really don't know anything about it yet.

David Yellin- Do you think he was ready at all for any strike? Did he ever have any meetings with the city attorney or any…

Joe Sweat- No I don't think he was prepared for the kind of strike that came about.

David Yellin- Well for any strike.

Joe Sweat- No.

David Yellin- Did Charlie Blackburn ever come into his office the week before the strike as much as you can remember? Of course you weren't there that much then?

Joe Sweat- Oh I was there everyday covering. Sure.

David Yellin- But you didn't sit in his office as you did later?

Joe Sweat- Well, would some, of course there was many hours a day that I wasn't there, so there were many people he saw that I didn't know about. I was not aware either directly or indirectly, through my associates at city hall and so forth. That there was any inclination among the city administration that anything big was about to happen in the way of a strike. I think it caught them off base. I really don't think they were prepared for that kind of thing that suddenly snowballed.

Carol Yellin- Let me ask you something else, we are skipping here but, do you recall , when you saw (Muffled)(Talkover)

Joe Sweat- Uh huh.

Carol Yellin- The following week two groups of ladies came to see the mayor do you remember at all that?

Because one group came and they got their pictures on television and they handed out pamphlets about return to your church home.

David Yellin- One group was in favor of him.

Carol Yellin- Yeah, (Blue Rays?) came in to support him.

Joe Sweat- Well I recall groups like that coming in but I am not sure that I recall the specific one.

Carol Yellin- Were there a lot of groups that came…

Joe Sweat- Oh there were groups that would come in occasionally you know and most of them were supporting him it was unusual for a group to come in, as your group did…most of them would come in and they had taken up a petition or they had discussed this and they decided why don't we go down and tell (Talkover) how we like it. Of course he was kind of a telegram counter doing those things. He would count the letters and the telegrams and he would stack…he would say come here let's go through them, let's go through them. You know the reporters. He had start keeping them, we support what you are doing, he would read them off.

Carol Yellin- Were you in contact with the black leadership at all?

Joe Sweat- Increasingly as time went along. At first not hardly at all, if they…

David Yellin- When were you? What started it?

Carol Yellin- Why? Why?

Joe Sweat- At first, you mean why I wasn't.

Carol Yellin- No why did you become?

Joe Sweat- Oh because they were taking such an active part in the strike. The strike sort of became my baby you know. Then I started going to the union meetings everyday just about.

Carol Yellin- Well didn't they have anyone assigned to cover the…

Joe Sweat- Well occasionally they would but a lot of times what I would do is that story became much more important than the routine stuff at city hall. So I would just pull away from city hall and cover the garbage strike, I mean cover the union meetings, or I would go to down to Flagram Temple and cover something there, but I would check by city hall just to make sure what was going on.

Carol Yellin- Why aren't they assigning someone, if they are doing this urban team, why didn't they assign someone to the black community?

David Yellin- Biggest urban story of the year.

Joe Sweat- Yeah, yeah. Well I don't know. I don't know really the…let me say that I am not really convinced there was any sinister motive in it I just think that's the

thing about not having enough people and wanting to try to make a few reporters do as many jobs as possible.

Carol Yellin- Except in essence it ended up they only covered half the story.

Joe Sweat- That's right yeah.

David Yellin- Apropos that and since we are running out of tape and we only have a few minutes we need to fill in…

Carol Yellin- I have to go get beautiful for this…

David Yellin- Yes, could you tell us a little bit about the paper's attitude.

Joe Sweat- Well of course the paper was very strongly, very, very strongly against the union.

David Yellin- How did this come about, did somebody say this or is this ….

Joe Sweat- I am talking about editorially, and this was obvious form the editorials they wrote. On the other hand on my paper, I can't speak for the Precimeter, on my paper, and specifically as far as I am concerned they never ever tampered with my reporting. They never told me…well they wouldn't have told me I just would have went along with it. They never told me how to cover a story, they never told me, they never, in my opinion, cut a story in such a way that it was a gerrymandered story. I felt that all the cuts they made in any of the stories I wrote were justified cuts strictly on the basis of space and so forth.

David Yellin- Well how about your origination of your stories, were you aware of the paper's attitude? Didn't you edit yourself?

Joe Sweat- Oh no. I didn't try to because you see very frankly I was personally and deep down I was probably pro-union more. I certainly didn't agree with the paper's editorial stand. But at the same time you try to see this thing objectively and you try to do it the best you can. Now the one area in which they might have been able to control the news on this…and this is something you never know about. That is on a selection of stories to cover. Because a reporter has no control, he is assigned to over a story, he goes to cover it. He can be objective from that point on, but the fact of him being assigned to it is something that can be decided at a higher level. That's one way, and another way is selection of play, where they put it in the paper. Of course it was a big story, and most of the time I thought the paper was pretty justified in what they gave it. I never really had any strong feelings about this.

David Yellin- Again, something about, what about the handling of Reverend Lawson?

Joe Sweat- I know this came up and there were questions about this, and I have been asked many many times did anyone ever tell you that Lawson's name was not to be used in the paper? The truth is no one ever told me this. Now…

David Yellin- Did you see any evidence that it…

Joe Sweat- I saw evidence of the possibility that Lawson wasn't covered as much as he would have been covered if I had been assigned his story. ON the other hand in order to be fair to them I will say that throughout a lot of that period Lawson, even though he was very very influential in that whole situation he did it very quietly. Lawson was not really out in the open until the closing days in the sense of like…from the point that I most vividly remember Lawson being the man that I thought of, as being the leader, was form the time of the city hall in the council chambers. From then on Lawson was the guy that you thought of.

David Yellin- Well that was the whole part of it, that happened about February 23rd.

Carol Yellin- No, no, no. You are talking about the strike. We are talking about when they were arrested.

Joe Sweat- I am talking about when they were arrested.

Carol Yellin- It was about two Tuesdays after that.

Joe Sweat- I am not saying that I wasn't aware of Lawson being around.

David Yellin- That's after the formation of come and right…

Joe Sweat- For instance Jackson was much more in the forefront in those early days then Lawson was…

Carol Yellin- Because he spoke more

Joe Sweat- Because he spoke at every union meeting everywhere, Joplin Jackson was out there talking. Lawson probably, as we look back on it was much more influential. But there is no doubt in my mind that I know, I know this from office conversation, that Frank Auburn didn't have any use for Lawson. He didn't like him, and sure he was just as happy as Lawson's name wasn't mentioned. But no one ever said to me don't put Lawson in your story, and no one ever cut, that I can recall, he has never been cut out of a story I wrote. In fact, I know that occasionally I would quote him and that sort of thing.

Carol Yellin- Then you would attribute it to him and then the newspaper will stop covering that phase that thing as thoroughly…

Joe Sweat- I think most of the sins of the Commercial Appeal grew out of the old thing of just trying to cut costs and not really…I don't think that most of the men at the working level, and I would say from city editor on down, I am not talking about any higher, most of the men from the working level, city editor on down, had any strong feelings about trying to doctor the news to fit their viewpoint. In fact, most of the guys at the working level were pro-union n the sense….

David Yellin- How come they didn't vote to…

Joe Sweat- I tell you what got involved in that, most of the working reporters, the majority of the working reporters if you could have confined the vote to that would have been in favor of the union. I am not talking about any kind of overwhelming majority, but at least a majority of working reporters. You see what gets involved in the guild, and this has been to the detriment of many guilds, is that you get a lot of other people thrown in tremendous numbers of people in advertising, all these other offices. Those people, advertising people are almost 180 degrees out of phase with us. They were very strongly bitter against the union.

Carol Yellin- You know for sure what circulation (dock) was?

Joe Sweat- I don't know that was always kept very close to the chest. (Laughs) But I'm sure it made, again this thing of making them think twice about assigning stories and the way they cover things. I think the thing that happened on the Commercial Appeal that was probably the most blatant thing that tinted towards racism is the Cal Allie cartoon. And that is the thing that stuck in the mind of more people. I felt reasonably good during most of t his because I had, it was not uncommon to have both Henry Lobe and the union people say, I think that was a very fair story. Well you just can't get much better than that in a highly emotional situation like this.. Now on a given day, they might both be mad, or on a given day occasionally one would be mad and the other wouldn't. Most consistently they would say I think it was a fair story, but I don't know.

David Yellin- This is a, I want to end because I think other things, didn't want to rush you. How do you think your friends in Newark would have acted under similar circumstances, if say on the black side of this. The black peoples side of this. There is a difference between a southern negro and a northern negro.

Joe Sweat- Oh you mean how they would have reacted if they had been caught up in the garbage strike here? I think they would have been much more militant, and I think violence would have come about sooner.

David Yellin- And what do you account for the non-violence of the people down here.

Joe Sweat- Looking back on it I think it was King, or at least King's philosophy guided at the local level by Jim Lawson. I think Lawson is a real thorough non-violent, man of non-violence, practice what he preaches. (Tape End)