

Interview

with

CHARLES SIMPSON PEETE JR.

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by Elizabeth Gritter

The Southern Oral History Program
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Charlie Peete, Jr.
by Elizabeth Gritter
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Memphis TN

Charlie Peete, Jr.

Q. How did you get interested in politics.

A. My first contact with Loeb. Henry and my father – my father was an architect. They knew each other and got to know each other better in the 50s. At that time, we didn't have a CC. We had a different type of city governor – a mayor and four commissioners. Henry was a commissioner before he was mayor. When Henry asked my father to run at an engineer's club – a September picnic where all engineers and architects got together and had a lot of fun. My sister and I went with my father to this Sept. 1959 engineer's club picnic on Riverside Drive. Before it was over, my father came over and told us that he had been asked by Loeb to run for one of commission positions. But my father was not a politician – nice honor – but he declined. He died suddenly. That's how I got to know Loeb more or less. Later on there was a lady running Dutch Treat luncheon at time Bessie Appleberry, no longer living. I got involved with her and helping her run the luncheon. I got to know Henry better then. So when she finally had to move to Dallas and later died, I kind of took over. Going back a little bit. I started going in August of 66. The first program director was a man by the name of Buddy Eisen, who was pharmacist. He got sick. I took over and have been running it since then. We've had a lot of different speakers and even had former senator Howard Baker of TN, we've had former Sen. Bill Brock and Harlan Matthews, a Democrat, he was in U.S. Senate for a short period of time, we had Bill Morris. Just all kinds of speakers, would take me forever to list them all. [Interruption.] Ed McAteer who is head of religious roundtable and strong evangelical is master of ceremonies. I made him that 12 years ago. He conducts the meetings and I get the speakers. Sometimes he gets speakers too. I send out the notices, contact TV, radio stations. It takes a lot of work. I send out 200 to 300 notices every month. We have been meeting most of time on 2nd Sat. Used to be on 1st Sat. We have been at Picadilly about a year . . .

EG: Who comes?

CP: Mainly older, retired people. We're trying to get young people more involved with civic things like this. Some young people come. We do not endorse candidates and issues and we never have. Strictly educational, informational forum. Henry didn't want it. We have kind of a tradition in that one of the first things we do is introduce yourself at table, then have prayer, pledge of allegiance, singing of national anthem, then we introduce speakers, we try to reserve last few minutes for questions and answers. That's the way I've going for years.

EG: Is that how it was in 1950s.

CP: Exactly. We're trying to keep it like it's been going since Henry was there. Henry died in Sept. of 93, he was 71. His son comes quite often.

EG: What's purpose of luncheon.

CP: To inform the public on what is going on, who is running the city and county, and what the issues are in the city and the county. We're strictly nonpartisan forum. We do not take side but it's mainly an informational nonpartisan organization. We do not have dues or anything like that. We take up money just to pay for the postage that's sent out and also we have that banister? we pay for. We try to--. Strictly nonpartisan.

EG: Funding comes from donations.

CP: Yes, and no set donations. People give different.

EG: Were you involved with Loeb's campaign for mayor in 67.

CP: Yes I was a volunteer.

EG: were you involved in 59.

CP: Yes.

EG: What attracted you.

CP: His conservative ideas. I'm a strong conservative and so is McAtter. We're nonpartisan but we're conservative basically. That the reason--. My father was very strong Loeb supporter. I've always liked Henry. I liked him for his honesty and for the fact he's a straight shooters. I thought he helped Memphis a great deal.

EG: What conservative ideas did you like?

CP: Limited, efficient government. Henry was a man of integrity and I like his ideas. I think he did a good job for the city.

EG: What sort of volunteer work?

CP: Passing out literature, manning telephones for him. Didn't raise money. Mainly knocking on doors.

EG: Did in 59 and 76.

CP: Everytime I ran I was with him.

EG: What remember about 59 election?

CP: Well, that one, I was involved but on a limited basis. That's been a long time ago too. Henry served as mayor. He served two terms. IN between those two terms, Ingram was mayor . . . He served four years.

EG: I know Ogill was going to run for reelection.

CP: Yeah, he had health problems. Would've been very interesting election. Mr. Orgill had to drop out.

EG: Do you think if Orgill--.

CP: I think Orgill might've won. Well known name in Memphis. Unfortunate he had to retire. Would've been close race. To be honest, I think Mr. Orgill might've won that but who knows. It is an interesting question.

EG: It seems like civic clubs prominent back then. What did they do?

CP: Henry was commander of American Legion, I think. I wasn't in that, so I couldn't help you in that. He was very active in that. He founded and we still go to that Memphians for America. In 1971, he founded that. It meets 1st Friday of every month and I go to that. It's goal is to support the flying of the American flag. They sell American flags only one weekend in the year, this coming July the 4th. I've got some literature. Founded in 1971. They do not have regular membership either. We meet at 7:30 am at the Holiday Inn Select Hotel on Sycamore View Road and we have different speakers. Last month we had SC AG. I've been going to those. The guy who runs it is a good friend of mine. They don't endorse either. Kind of a volunteer group. Like I say they put out once a year they support the flying of the American flag and they sell them too.

EG: I noticed 59 election that blacks made a big effort. Remember anything about that.

CP: I really can't help you on that. I don't remember. I knew he ran for Sugarmon. I remember big effort to defeat Sugarmon. Doesn't remember specifics. I wasn't involved with that really. I know Henry sometimes I would go with Loeb and some of his supporters and we would work in other campaigns. For example, Robin Beard doesn't live in Memphis anymore. He was a Congressman from W TN and I remember helping him. That was one of Henry's big supporters. He got defeated by Sen. Jim Sasser who 12 years later got defeated by Bill Frist. Bill Frist beat Sasser. On Sugarmon I couldn't help you.

EG: What do you remember about women's involvement?

CP: Well, we needed them. A lot of women were involved in Henry's election – Jane Brunswick – she died several years ago – was a big supporter of Henry Loeb. Henry used to go out – I'll never forget this – when he was commissioner of public service and go out on these garbage trucks and help pick up the garbage. He was very civic minded. He didn't mind going out and getting the work himself. He really got out there and helped clean up Memphis.

EG: With women's involvement – were they involved with campaigning?

CP: Oh yeah. A lot of women helped me get out the notices for the Dutch Treat luncheon and also for Henry's election and re-election. They were invaluable. We would meet over at this lady's house for many years – can't remember her name. We'd do a lot of stuffing of envelopes and things like that and put out notices about Dutch Treat luncheon. I had a lot of help.

EG: This was with 67 and 66 when you took over and even with 59.

CP: Yeah. I had some old Loeb buttons and bumperstickers – wish I had them.

EG: It seems like there was a high interest in the election, in all your elections. How characterize citywide interest?

CP: I would say the high interest – well Henry had a temper. I'd seen it on display. He either liked you or didn't like you, number one. I would say Henry was a real leader whether you liked him or not, I think most people would agree he was a born leader. He was fair to everybody. He was very opinionated. Once he made a decision, he didn't go back and change it. He was very forceful, very much a leader of men. Everybody respected him. Of course, a lot of people had no use for him. That's just one thing you have to take when you're a public official. Mantri is writing a book about Loeb.

EG: I know during this time a lot of CRM activity, what did you think about it? At the time and now.

CP: I really think that Henry Loeb -- a lot of people will disagree with me -- did a lot for both races. He was heavily criticized but I think basically he was for the people -- I don't care whether they're black or white or orange. He was criticized in that civil rights thing. I felt that Henry--. There were some blacks that liked Loeb too but they were always kind of dismissed as being Uncle Toms. I think Henry was basically for civil rights but I think these days that Henry would probably say and I would say too that we spend too much time on rights and not responsibilities.

EG: What do you mean by that?

CP: We spend too much time concerning some of these petty rights rather than being responsible men and women. Like I think you can be too extreme one way or the other. I think Henry and most of his people were basically trying to be good to both races but Henry got a lot of heavy criticism b/c they felt that he was always for the white man. He really wasn't -- he was good for both races.

EG: How was he good to Black Americans?

CP: For instance, he made this black man a city judge.

EG: OH?

CP: Yes. Henry did a lot for the blacks that never really was advertised. I think that's unfortunate. I think Henry was basically for the rights of everybody but he got blamed for a lot of stuff that he should've have gotten blamed for.

EG: What other things?

CP: Going on garbage trucks into black areas and cleaning them off. I saw him out there with blacks. These were not militant blacks, just blacks that were having a hard time. He was very much involved with helping the handicapped -- that is overlooked. That is black and white. A lot of things that Henry did that helped the city that he never really got credit for. I hope history will be kind to him. He was strictly for the people -- that's easy to say -- but he had no special interest. Another thing too he did not take his city pension. That's something that's overlooked. You won't find many people in office doing that. I know some people will say Henry was a multimillionaire and didn't need it, but every drop in bucket helped. Another thing too -- I went to them sometimes -- he had these

open houses. Anyone who wanted to who had a complaint could go down to his office. Open door – I think it was Thursdays.

EG: Policy of returning people calls and letters – unique.

CP: He would do that sometimes at midnight. He was strictly a person that was for the people and it was true.

EG: If he was so for the people, why wasn't he elected with more black support.

CP: I would say he got very little black support. He had very little black voting power. I think that Henry was-- Pause. I think the blacks had some very extreme leaders that-- A lot of them were these church pastors – Rev. Kyle her ein Memphis. They were very very liberal, they had a lot of hate in them, and they couldn't stand H enry Loeb. It was just something that started rolling and Henry couldn't stop it. These black preachers sometimes need an issue and they pounced on that issue. They got their churches all heated up and congregations heated up. A Very few extrme blacks got this going about Henry Loeb and they were able to influence most of the black here in Memphis and SC. It was unfortunately, but I think Henry really liked the blacks but he liked the whites too. He was trying to please both sides but he couldn't do it.

Side 2

EG: If he was so for the rights for people, why would he come out as an outspoken segregationist?

CP: Well, of course, it looked like-- I think it had to do with the so-called liberal media press that he came off as a segregationist. I don't think he really was. Not when you got to know him personally. He had that perception which I think is erroneous that he was a segregationist. When you got to know him, I really think he would've helped anybody, no matter what cover. I would say Henry was for the working man. He really was for the working man. He was basically fair, honest, but he was painted by some of these extreme black preachers unfairly as a segregationist. As I say, I hope that history will view him more as a person that really cared for his community. I hop eit will come out that way.

EG: You mentioned extreme leaders, why call them extreme, think of other names.

CP: Well Sammy Kyle was a Memphis preacher. Of course, it all came apart when Martin Luther King was assassinated. I remember that day. I was in my front yard and sirens went off. Mr. King died at St. Francis hospital downtown. When that happened, the black leaders – mainly the black preachers – they just – All they could think about was hate. If the assassination had happened in another part fo the country, Mphs would'nt have been affected as much as that it happened her.e The black preachers took that tragic event and made it into something worse. We had curfew several nights. It was unfortunate it happened here, unfortunate it would happen anywhere. I'm not convinced-- They say Mr. Ray did it. I don't know – to stretch your imagination, it could've been everybody. It could've been somebody close to Dr. King that could've killed him – I don't think so. Henry fortunately or unfortunately had to be mayor at that time. I think Henry being a leader he handled the situation extremely well. It could've

been much worse, much worse. As I say, Henry was a leader. Let's say Ingram had been mayor, Ingram was not a leader. No telling what would've happened. He was weak. We were fortunate to have someone strong in leadership to carry us through that tough period in Memphis history. Of course, it hurt Henry. A lot of those black preachers took this even and they made it very emotional and very hateful and they were able to influence their own people. Mainly in the churches where they preached.

How did they make it hateful?

They get very emotional. It's hard to stop someone like that. It was tragic Mr. King was killed. That was a very tragic thing. They considered King one of his heroes and I can understand why some did riot. Of course, there were riots in a lot of different cities across the country and world. I think Memphis came through fairly well.

You think they made it worse by rioting and placing blame on Loeb.

Yes. Loeb's name was mud. I think it was unfortunate. Henry was a down-to-earth person. He cared for the working man. Something like this, it was hard to overcome, very difficult. Like I say, I hope history will look at some of good things he did – like the handicapped, he did call people up, and he actually would go help them sometimes. He was a true leader.

Of course some historians and black and white people view it that if Loeb had yielded more to sanitation workers, he would've prevented tragedy from occurring.

I've heard that. It's hard to speculate what might have happened. I just don't know.

Were you supportive of mayor and his actions.

Yes.

Why?

I knew Henry pretty well and that he was trying to do the right thing. It was hard b/c the media was against him. I don't have too much use for media. I think the CA had never liked Henry and it's run by a bunch of liberals. Henry called the CA the newspaper you can smell on your doorstep and he meant it. I'm not talking about reporters but editors.

You must've been teaching in schools when had Black Monday. What think about that?

Yeah. Black Monday was an easy day for me b/c they weren't there. I don't think it accomplished anything but it was their way to protest.

Controversy of school busing – what think about that?

To me, school busing was a very expensive way to try to equalize the schools. Overall, I think it has not helped at all. I think anytime you try to force a group of people to do something they don't want to do, it's not going to work. Forced busing didn't help. A lot of highminded liberals people thought it would but it didn't. It was a painful and expensive way to try to equalize the races.

Do you think a lot of people in white community thought of black leaders as extremists.

Yeah, at that time. I think we still have some segregation, but I think time will heal some of these wounds and I think it has and I think – hopefully well the races have to learn how to live with each other and I think we're doing a little bit better. Now, the Dutch Treat Luncheon is open to everybody that wants to come but we don't have much blacks come but we've had some in the past. We've had some black speakers, but I'm just hoping--. I think the people in Memphis have gone through a lot and I think they have come out better and the race is not the primary issue here. The major issues today now are crime, school systems, and the fact that Shelby County government is so heavily in debt. Those are our major issues.

It's interesting when I look through Memphis that Loeb didn't get any black support and seeing now today how races are polarized.

It still is polarized. It's unfortunate and I don't know what's going to change that. But you still see that when they go vote, they vote along racial lines for the most part.

What do you see as some of similarities and differences between Memphis politics in late 50s and 60s and now?

Well, more jobs have opened up to blacks, more black judges, more black elected officials now, which is fine. The difference between 50s and 60s and now.

Yeah.

I would say that we handle the differences between the races – not handled in the streets, they're handled in the courts now. There are a few exceptions but we don't see blacks and whites starting fires or knocking down buildings or houses, we try to settle things through court system. I would say that's a big difference.

Do you remember Freedom Movement in 1960 and 1961 where NAACP boycotted Main St.

Not too much, I really don't. I don't know that much on that.

Why you and others would think that black leaders and activists were extremeist when they were trying to break down barriers of segregation and increased employment or maybe you thought they were extreme in other ways.

I don't really know but I guess for a lack of a better word that is what they were called. That was a new thing for the city of Memphis. They had not had blacks parading in the city for many years before that. They started doing it later on. I don't know if it really helped the blacks or not but it did bring attention to people, brought attention to the fact that there were a lot of injustices that needed to be corrected. It probably helped overall although it was difficult to go thru.

Difficult for the whites?

Some of the whites attitudes were very antiblack. It took a long time for some of them to change. But time is a great healer.

I was talking to an attorney who was active in white—he emphasized changes and attitudes takes time.

It does.

I've learned how it was a radical change.

It was. It was () something to overcome. I believe that time is a great healer. Of course with this election upcoming is going to be nasty and dirty. I'm hoping things will calm it down. We had such a stormy race 4 years ago. They say half of America is for this group and half for another and that's not going to happen thing.

Did you experience any changes in your own racial attitudes?

Yes, I think I've changed. It's been gradual. I pretty well adopted. After 20 years I worked for the same co., I was hoping to work for it in another 20 years. Things come along and you get through disease or accident and you have to change. I hate not working but it's not as bad as I thought it would be. Same is true I think in your racial attitudes. I would say that back in the 50s I was not as maybe caring – not so much caring – not as much interested and now we're all in the same boat. I try to do this Dutch Treat luncheon as a civic thing. I know that some people that used to go to the luncheon were very hard on the blacks but they largely disappeared. I think the city in Memphis is a safer place to live too though we still have crime. But I think the people of Mphs and SC are more understanding but you can't do it overnight.

Do you think – it seems like the rise of Republicanism took place--.
An outgrowth.

Whole S was heavily Democratic.

Now, it's changed to more Republican.

When see that shift?

I think as a result of blacks coming in. You have whites moving out of inner city to suburban areas. You find the growth of the Republican parties with a tremendous increase in the S in the Republican Party as a direct result of the Democrats inner city organization. This will remain for sometime. I think this election in November is going to be the same thing – unfortunately, whites voting for Republican and blacks mainly voting for Democrat. I don't think there's going to be much change. It's going to be a very close election, I think – very close. I think who wins it in November is going to be person who gets out people to the polls. You're going to see a lot of emphasis getting to the polls.

What do you think about rise of black public officials?

Well, a tremendous increase. Judges, city council is now last few years has been majority black. CC is still majority white but that could change. Blacks have taken over the mayor's job. Herneton has been mayor almost 14 years and I don't think Memphis will ever have a white mayor. Blacks have taken over mayor, cc, county mayor, and eventually county commission. You'll see a lot of whites move out, are moving out now to DeSoto County, Tunica, Fayette, they're moving out for a variety of reasons but also tax in Memphis is driving them a lot of them out.

Do you think increase in black public officials contributed to more understanding or polarization or opposite.

I think the whites have accepted it. If they don't want to accept it, they move it. I think the whites that are here right now in SC are more or less accepting it but some of the more militant whites have moved.

See not just Memphis but other cities too white flight.

It's true – Atlanta, Birmingham, Dallas. It looks like to me that blacks are going to take over in urban areas and whites will dominate the rural area.

Why think white move?

I think #1 taxing situation. I think that's more troubling to them than black situation. Increase in city and county taxes. They don't feel like they're getting the services. Also, they talk about increasing property taxes. Some people can't afford it so they move.

IN 1959, how important/influential newspapers were?

I don't remember that.

You said you thought CA biased in 68.

Yes. They've always been anti-Loeb.

Makes sense given their history of liking Crump. What about PS?

PS was more conservative than CA though owned by same co. Editor was more balanced, I would say, and he was also --. More conservative run newspaper and unfortunately they went out of business.

You're talking late 60s onward.

Yes.

If you can remember 59 or if it's 67 fine, major interest groups at that time? Business? Labor?

Southern Baptists were a big factor. The black churches were a big interest group. Teachers. Fireman. Policeman. He's talking about 50s and 60s – taking him some time to remember. I would say Southern Baptist Convention. Blacks had their own --. JO Patterson on city council was black and had a big church here. Black interest groups were mainly in their churches. I remember going with a white friend of mine that was running for city council – her name was Ruth Carter – she was conservative white person and she went into black community hoping to pick up some votes, we went to black church. Ruth went up there --. People running against Ruth who were blacks. Ruth went up there and we found out that it was pretty much decided they were not going to endorse Ruth b/c in order for them to endorse, they wanted money. It was a common practice back in those years. She was not endorsed and she didn't give any money. A common practice in black churches we went to – had to give money. We went to two or three black churches and complete waste of time. It was a real eye opener. She was also a Reagan delegate to RNC in 1982 I think and this was before that. She ran for city council in early 70s.

Do you remember anything about SCDC?
I don't remember that much about them.

What were common views of whites among Maxine Smith and Sugarmon.
She was a firedevil. She was really (). IN fact, she's still going today. There was a picture of her in the paper a couple days ago. What my impressions were of her: I thought she was a segregationist on the other side. She was as mean as she could be. But again she has mellowed a great deal. In fact, I saw her not too long ago when I was working. But her perception back in those years was that she was very fiery and flamboyant. Today I think she's had some heart trouble and gone down a great deal. Back in those days she and her husband Vasco--. She was the sec to the NAACP for many years and I think she retired several years ago. She could be a devil.

Why did you think she was a segregationist for the other side?
B/c she was so anti-white. She was anti-white. Like there were a lot of antiblacks I thought she was antiwhite. She again has tempered with the years.

What made you think she was so antiwhite, example,
Basically it was her rhetoric. Back in those days she didn't care what she said. She came across to me as a--. Just as a kind of inflammable. She came across as a real extremist to me but like I say she has calmed down.

What are some specifics, her demands her rhetorics.
It was more the perception. She may not () been. It was some of the comments she would make I think were very inflamed, to me they were. A lot of people felt that years ago. But she's retired and every now and then I'll hear a few comments from her in paper and she's more subdued.

Have an example.
Yeah.

You were in school system and around white conservative crowd.
Yes. I graduated from East Memphis High School and it was all white still.

Sugarmon -- what think about him?
I didn't know much about him. That was a long time ago.

Anything else to add?
I probably will think of something and send it to you.