

Thomas E. "Pete" Sisson  
By Elizabeth Gritter  
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Memphis

Thomas E. "Pete" Sisson

EG: How did you get interested in politics?

PS: What got me started more than anything else was Mphs Junior Chamber of Commerce. I was active and president of that organization. As a result, I became active in many campaigns. One thing led to another. I served as campaign managers... I guess the JCC was the thing that precipitated my serious activity both in community affairs and government. As a result, I wound up being the chairman of... I wasn't happy with what they were doing on political scene, so I started running myself. "I know that you had mentioned that you had read in the paper about me fixing to run for office and that was the Press Scimitar had sent a reporter down to my office when I worked for U.S. Rubber Company to try to get me to run. I didn't run at that time. But that is when you saw that story."

EG: That one in 1959?

PS: Yes, in the next election I did run.

EG: You were involved in Kefauver campaign in 1948. What was that like?

PS: Kefauver was a Democrat and was considered a very liberal person for our area here. But I got into his campaign and we were very active and had a good time, but later on I didn't mention it--.

EG: When you became Republican?

PS: Yes. I was also active in Albert Gore's campaign.

EG: What campaign activity for Kefauver and Gore?

PS: Spoke for them, passed out literature for them, traveled for them. Kefauver was also well liked by the editor of the MPS at that time - Mr. Meeman who was one of Kefauver's supporters and that's the reason that the PS - I say that's the reason - that's one of the reasons they sent a reporter out to try to get me to run. We had a mayor at that time, I believe it was Orgill, that had an opening on his staff for an administrative assistant. I was in line or was considered for that post and Kefauver's man that he had in the committee or so.

EG: It seems like a lot of politicians got training in JC.

PS: Back in those days, it was a training ground for young men. We had a very active club. That's where the civic leadership came from. Now, it's turned out to be a women's club.

EG: How did club prepare people for public office, engaging in politics?

PS: Well you engaged in politics – that was the young person that was active and would get out and do things. That's what the politicians were trying to draw in. In fact in that list I gave you Bill Morris was president of the JC, Bill Boyd I don't think was president or was close to being president. That was the thing that--. Most of the political people particular like the mayors and what have you they would always go and get the young leadership and guys would get out and do things.

EG: I noticed Bill Farris was involved and so many people had that as their background.

PS: Bill Farris was just a notch above me. In fact, I was president of Memphis club when he attempted to be president of TN Jaycees . . . Clubs were over the state. If you want to get started in towns, that's where you go.

EG: Striking to me with researching Memphis how much civic involvement there was, candidates went to campaign at civic clubs and lawn parties and coke parties--.

PS: That's the way they used to do it. They've gotten away from it now. Now it's not the people power that counts, it's financial.

EG: Back then much more into meeting the people and talking about the issues and so forth. What did these civic clubs do? What were they about?

PS: Communities band together to try to do something for their community, or be the leverage to get something done for their community. They want streets – get group together, that's where they get streets, neighborhood clean up. It's a local organization – community leaders.

EG: How influential were they in political activities back then and how important.

PS: Back then, they were very influential. Now, they're not. Like with Mr. Crump, he worked through the civic clubs. They worked for him. As a result, they got patronage. Patronage at one time police dept, fire dept would go out and work. That's not the case now. You see now the African American people are beginning to move in on the fire, police jobs. They've got a man for mayor who gets them in/it helps. When I was PWC, I had an opportunity to help people to get jobs. They thought I was the greatest. That's just the nature of politics. It's changed so much now you need money to advertise.

EG: How influential in 1950s was radio and television? I've noticed in 1959 candidates made television appearances.

PS: "Radio and television wasn't as influential but the two papers were. There was always a big fight to see which papers were going to support which candidates. They were as political as we were. They'd like to get their candidates in to have the influence, and, as I told you, the PS always supported me." Now, PS is not here now, but they would support me the Commercial wouldn't. It was that kind of battle. I had to play my cards the way the game has to be played.

EG: It seems too that part of the reason they were influential was that after Crump died that there wasn't any major political organization or group that was as influential. I know

there was a civic research group and good government league but these organizations didn't seem to last and it seemed like the newspapers filled in that role.

PS: "The newspapers were the ones that really helped breathe life in some of these groups, but after Mr. Crump passed his old cronies were hanging on as much as they could." In that election, it was one pro and one against. I was working for the Memphis Park Commission and I was out at Overton Park and was working and I drove this black car looked like it was a mile long and they called me and put me in a car and carried me downtown and I went up to Mr. Crump's office. He said, "Pete you have a great future ahead of you if you keep your nose clean." Mentions won cleanest city award and that was a big thing. He said a national organization gave that award.

EG: In terms of political campaign and politics back then, what sort of role did women play?

PS: They played a significant role. They played a different role than they play now, b/c women were always available to come in to do the grunt work. They were important.

EG: What do you mean by that?

PS: Telephoning, addressing mailing, which is very important. Now, you can hire that stuff done. In fact now you can go get recording that somebody can dial a phone and a machine goes all the time. But then it was all manual stuff, but it was fun.

EG: These were volunteer workers?

PS: Yeah. That's where you had the coke parties and lawn parties. Women would come in and help set those up and come and do them. They were very significant activities in somebody's neighborhood, you would bring your neighbors in and you would have 15 to 20 people in the room and they would pass out the cokes and that type stuff and candidate would get up and talk a little bit. Everybody feels part of the team. Instead of just going down to vote, they're voting for their team to win. Now you just go down and vote. If you're interested enough, you turn the TV on and see what the results are.

EG: Back then more ceremonial.

PS: Yes, and you had participation – people coming out and doing things. I remember when Bill Farris ran for mayor of Memphis and he was supposed to win. Bill Ingram was the city judge that had no power except.

EG: Seems like such citywide interest in local elections.

PS: The thing that caused that besides the two local newspapers were these community organizations – which you mentioned the civic clubs and --. They had a base--. It's not just sitting home and reading your newspaper like you do now or listening to the news and then go vote. You had activity. People wore big buttons and all that sort of stuff.

EG: You mentioned influential of black votes in Ingram's election. You mentioned the rise and influence of the black electorate in 1950s and one thing I looked at particular was Sugarman's campaign for public works post.

PS: I don't remember particularly. Russell was an attorney. As I was doing some () work for real estate? When he announced for public works commissioner, I thought he

was crazy . . . While I was on commission he came up for an appointment for the judgeship, I'm not sure if I was chairman or not, I laughed at him and voted him in.

EG: In 1987

PS: whenever he became judge. Russell Sugarmon was a clean cut guy. He really was the NAACP attorney and Maxine wa the chairman and I was sort of on the fringe with them at the time.

EG: A lot of people ran in 1967.

PS: Commission was abolished. We had to run or not run. Loeb was reelected to mayor (in 1967) but he had an image in the black community that wasn't very good – turned them out for vote. (Earlier n the interview he mentioned that black votes key to INgrams victory in 1963).

EG: Why did you think Sugarmon crazy to run for PWC?

PS: Because I was running. I had announced running.

EG: interesting 1959 could see how biased paper was and promoted candidates and smiling.

PS: Well both of them were the same way. One of the reasons that the PS liked me was that I was a campaign manager for Lewis T. for Congress. He was against Cliff Davis, the sitting Congressman.

EG: Were you involved with Democratic party?

PS: At that time, yes. After I had been elected commissioner of public works... (Tells bridge story).

510: Government of Shelby County changed forme two or three times.

EG: SC Quarterly Court. It was the county legislative body of the county and it became named the commission.

PS: Yes.

EG: What did squires do?

PS: It meant he was a member of the quarterly court. They had a 3 man commission which was the administrative body – chairman, one in charge of penal farm, one in charge of (doesn't remember). They had three commissioners that ran the government and then the Quarterly court that had representatives from all the outlining towns and all that sort of stuff that was the legislative body. The battle of Memphis trying to control the Quarterly Court. So, we had county battling. The chairman of county commission, EW Hale, and Mr. Crump joined them together to run this outfit? When we did a commission, it seemed like Bill Morris was mayor. Instead of having a commission, we had a mayor and had an administrative staff.

EG: Were commissioners elected countywide or by district?

PS: Let's see, it was by district and I don't know if we had some commissioners that



were--. I believe they were countywide by districts. We had a long time county against the city. At one time, the Republican party didn't exist very much. Everybody was a Democrat, including me too. After a while it got into another kind of a (). Then it seemed like most of the African Americans were all Democrats and evolved on other side were Republicans.

EG: whites became Republicans?

PS: Yeah.

EG: When do you see this shift?

PS: It's hard for me to give the date.

### Side B

EG: Interests me that 1) power of black vote, and 2) that party politics integrated. Were you there?

PS: No, I wasn't there. But, the black vote was beginning to feel its oats? They weren't controlling but they were almost controlling. A white candidate with some black votes would win.

EG: This was when you ran in 63. When would you say this influence started.

PS: It was going on then. I was at a rally at Maxine and Vasco's house. She would come down and give me fits when I was on the county commission. Vasco on commission. Vasco's picture is on the wall at my home.

EG: How influential was SCDC?

PS: Very.

EG: How would you describe or characterize influence and what were your interactions with the club.

PS: The SCDC carried a lot of influence, b/c they would put out a ballot at election time. They would lput it out in the churches, and they could energize a good vote. That's one of the things that made Harold so influential. They got known over the state and then state people running would go to get the support of the SCDC. They were very influential. The club now is sort of broken up. I still they have a club but I don't think it has that influence. The politics around here -- Harold Ford had the reputation of being the one who could call the shots on the African American vote. Those were great days.  
[Laughter.]

EG: Did you have to appear b/f the SCDC?

PS: I appeared before everybody that would let me appear before them. While I was the pwc, then there was an effort to organize the black garbagemen. I worked at it pretty hard to keep them from doing that. I met with Maxine and all the black leaders. They couldn't organize with me. They started a walk out at one time at ht end of the week and they were going to march up in front of City Hall and I went up there and stood there and watched them and that was the end of it. They couldn't pull the strike out. I went

out of office, Loeb came in office. He didn't have the black community leaders supporting them. Then they made the thing into a labor feud instead of a local feud. After they settled the thing and all that I had done several things. I had two times a week garbage pick up. It was Monday and Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. If didn't fix thing... Laobr leaders after me pretty heavy but I . After I went out of office, Loeb came in they were having trouble getting garbage picked up. New city council called me in to tell them how to do it. It made me feel good. We had done a number of things – They couldn't pull those guys against me.

EG: So it sound slike you had a good working relationship with them and that's why they didn't work against you.

PS: That's right. Also, I went to the community leaders, brough tin their leaders and get their advice.

EG: Loeb probably didn't do at all.

PS: Didn't do at all. He was the conservative. He talked the conservative talk.

EG: Absolute power of city commission to do desegregation at time. How did that work out?

PS: When they integrated schools, police protected, mentioned Armour. Bill Boyd was Hunter Lane's administrative decision.

EG: Desegregation of parks?

PS: He doesn't remember.

EG: Restaurants, movies, other accommodations?

PS: Remembers Orpheum, blacks went in side door and went up on balcony.

EG: school desegregation, later on I know busing was very controversial issue here.

PS: It's still a controversial issue. He said that he worked with Vasco on county commission.

EG: I saw you mixed up blacfks and whites, before

PS: Well blacks would sit in one place and whites in the other and cameras come up and focus on that. They would make their arguments such that cameras would be on them. When I was chair, we'd have them in betweena dn it worked pretty good. Newspapers made fun of it. I didn't want this racial thing back and forth.

238 EG: How do you see Memphis as similar or different than the rest of the S?

PS: I don'tknow about reast of S, I can say Memphis is, you can call it, diversifying, the black population has grown and is moving eastward and the people are moving out into the county and all that stuff and so the voting numbers are going up black and whites are sort of staying put.

Seems like polarization in terms of white moving out into city. What think done to overcome polarization?

PS: Two things probably already being done: economic status of black community is raising and the next thing we have is some leaders from the school system. Econ base is growing for black community and gives them more power to go where they want to.

EG: Do you think having blacks in public office has been positive toward improved race relations here?

PS: Why. You have more of them and they become () majority and intermingle better.

EG: One of the things I wondered if when blacks elected to city council so it's interesting to hear about how this was at first. They sat separately find not able to work together.

PS: I didn't approve not sitting together b/c you didn't do what you were supposed to do but you did what would cause more publicity? If you could intermingle, then you hear everybody's views and every once in awhile you'll see them gang up and you can see that sometimes on tough questions, they'll all lock up. I know that on the city government they just approved MLGW? - it was almost a black-white thing, wasn't quite.

EG: Intermingling caused greater interaction whereas before not so much interaction.

PS: Yeah. And now when a black gets in power he develops opposition from the blacks just b/c he's the boss of something, thinks he's the boss, where there were few they would always go with the black.

EG: With more blacks who are politicized and in public office, there's more internal divisions. When there's a just a few leaders, they're more likely to follow the leaders. That's what you were saying?

PS: Yes.

EG: Did you find in 1950s that blacks were an important electoral force or that became more widespread in the 1960s?

PS: I think in the 50s they sort of stuck together.

EG: We've talked about differences between Memphis politics then and now with rise of black electoral participation and differences of campaign styles and decline in civic participation, what other differences?

PS: Now, I think candidates go out and make an effort to have a mixture of campaigns. They seek out the blacks or they seek out the whites. Before it was always one way or another. When you get that, then you --. It breaks down the polarization. That's the way AC go tin. He just a good guy and everybody likes him and tries to do () on all sides so he's got people on all sides trying to do with him.

EG: I saw this area was very strongly for Reagan, another thing that shows this turn toward Republican party and conservatism.

PS: Back during that time was when the Repub. Party was emerging as a party too see right here in Memphis. By the same token, Al Gore lost the presidency in TN and that's b/c well he was sort of arrogant and self grandizing or whatever and so a good portion voted against him. He lost it from his personality.

EG: Who were major interest groups in politics in 50s and 60s. One of the things I thought was labor. How about labor in campaigns?

PS: Labor was very influential in the 1950s and 60s but now it's not.

EG: makes sense with it being heyday of organized labor.

PS: They participated nad then they got a name of being aggressive labor folks? They had a lot of influence early.

EG: Is aw from press coverage so much endorsements, labor, business from prominent candidates, every prominent person it seemed had some say.

PS: TH emunicipal labor unions really weren't strong back then. They were just coming in to their being. I had met with bunches and bunches of them. I knew them personally. The election in which I ran for mayor I went down and talked to them, the city labor unions, and well at that time I was really an outsider.

EG: What about business in terms of elections back then?

PS: I didn't think that business was that influential. THye are now from the standpoint that they give money and that' where you get a lot of money. They aren't interested in what they used to do – personal campaigning, etc. Rather they're about donating.

EG: What was Mayor Ingram like?

PS: Peculiar guy. He was sort of a loner in a way. I liked him myself. He was always thinking. He knew the law, always carried code book with him. Came up with some fair ideas. He also would do some things would irritate some people. He didn't like CA. He used to do stuff just to irritate them, I think.

EG: What was his political philosophy would you say?

PS: I don't know he had a political philosophy. I don't think he was a Democrat. He wanted to --. He put his marbles iwht AF Am more so than others and that's where his support was.

EG: When did you switch to Repub and why?

PS: I don't know when I did but I did b/c I guess I wanted to win. When you're a political paerson, you do strange thigns but in same token have to have integrity and stick by it.

EG: ON city commission.

PS: Jimmy Moore, Lnae, Sisson, Armour, Ingram.

EG: What was Jimmy Moore like?

PS: A good old boy. He had the institutions and he was glad?... Everybody liked him – he didn't have any tough places he had to make decisions. Mayor always had the tough decisions. Getting back to our problem with our labor unions, it was about dues check off. City commission didn't do that. I didn't care if they did or didn't but I told them they could put table out in front of lodge nad take the money.



EG: Would you have done dues check off?

PS: I may have not. I told them ?. I met with them.

EG: It seems like your approach was about seeing everybody's side, being a peacemaker, negotiating.

PS: We had to do our job. Re: controversy over hours, he said do time clocks. He said lasted a day because not used to that schedule.

EG: Do you think in 1959 ORgill would've won if he hadn't dropped out b/ cof illness.

PS: I was campaigning for him. It would've been a close race but he could've won. But it's just a shame. He had something in his neck, carotid artery. I was one of Orgill's key men, b/c I almost -- as told you before, -- went to work for him. He saw me one day at a meeting and said Pete why do you want to do this -- be my adm asst. Whenever you turn around, someone sticks knife in your back, he said.

What like about him?

He was a business person.

Tape 2

Side A

I was part of DCC.

How influential was it?

Concerned Citizens Association?

Yeah.

I think where it's influence was the best was with the paper.

With PS.

Yeah. That was where their interest was. As far as being a powerful influence in the political scene, it was most of the do-gooders? Was in there. Mostly the do-gooders. It wasn't the most powerful thing in the world but I was a member.

Did it continue after 1959 campaign, was Dedicated citizens association?

Well I thought it was Concerned Citizens. It continued a little while but not long.

Do you remember how it demised?

That was just nobody had the interst.

I saw that organization asked each candidate to take stance.

And there was newspaper.

PS played up association. I saw one of the planks was segregation nd there was internal debate whether to have that plank. Do you remember anything about it?

No.

It asked candidates to list views nad 8 was segregation.  
They put out questionnaires like that but it was mostly the newspaper nad they also were favorable to AfAm joining in.

Were there Af Am .  
They could do it. Some were, yes.

There was a Unity Ticket I saw newspapers advocated for people to be elected.  
I don't remember it and who was supporting it.

I told him, described it.  
I remember a Unity Ticket but doesn't remember how it all worked.

Were you a delegate to conveniots of Dem or Repub?  
No.

It seems with Memphis politics and dominated with machine government and 1959 one somewhat free of machine control. What was political climate like move from Crump's death...  
They were trying to develop leadership. They were against the Crump machine. () heyda to the newspapers.

Was there anything else about plitics back then or now, major things we haven't covered or anything you want to add?  
I can't think of anything.

You said major contributions bridge over Miss. River – what else?  
Oh, all physical aspects of city I was involved in it. Memorial Stadium wher Liberty Bowl I participate in that.