Oral History Interview with Joe Swickard

April 14, 2013
502 St. Clair Ave Grosse Pointe, MI
Detroit Newspaper Strike Oral History Project

Joseph M. Swicakrd, Interviewee

The interviewee is Joseph M. (Joe) Swickard, a former crime reporter form the *Detroit Free Press*. Swickard was born in 1947 in Galesburg, IL and came to the *Detroit Free Press* in 1979. He worked at the *Free Press* until recently. At the *Free Press* Swickard served mainly as a crime reporter covering the crack-cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and later he investigated the Detroit Police Department which resulted in the consent decree with the FBI. Swickard was a member of the Newspaper Guild Local #22 and participated as a spokesperson for the strikers providing some sort of a measured response to other outside media. Additionally, Mr. Swickard's wife Susan was also a reporter at the *Free Press*. Retired from the *Free Press*, he currently works for the Kresge Foundation. Swickard is an inductee of the Michigan Journalism Hall of Fame and resides in Grosse Pointe, MI.

William Dawson, Interviewer

William Dawson is a Master's Candidate in Library and Information Science and Archival Administration at Wayne State University. He has an Bachelor's of Arts from the University of Kansas. Mr. Dawson is also a processing assistant at the Walter Reuther Labor Library in Detroit, MI.

Interview Location and Other Notes

The interview was recorded at Mr. Swickard's home at 502 St. Clair Ave in Grosse Pointe, MI on April 14, 2013 at 4 pm. The only noticeable error on the recording is the interviewer glancing at his notes for the next question and trying to reorganize some papers, but other than that the sound quality is clear and you can easily hear both the interviewer and the interviewee. The recorder that was used was a Sony ICD-PX312 MP3 recorder. The interview was then transferred to the interviewer's computer.

Dawson: My name is William Dawson and I am here on behalf of the Walter Reuther Labor Library and Joe Turrini's oral history class, history 7770, and I am talking to Joe Swickard today about the Detroit Newspaper Strike. The Date is April 14, 2013. Joe, happy to have you with us.

Swickard: Well thank you.

Dawson: Let's start off with your background; growing up did your family have any union members or any history of activism?

Swickard: No history of activism, my mother was a public school teacher and there is a teacher's association but it wasn't especially militant or anything. It was more of an association than a union.

Dawson: How did you first get involved with journalism?

Swickard: I grew up with it. My father was a sport's editor in a small town and wound up hanging out with him and going to work with him every day and it was just a natural progression.

Dawson: What newspaper did your father work for?

Swickard: The *Galesburg Register Mail* "a better newspaper serving Western Illinois."

Dawson: Where did you study journalism?

Swickard: Off and on, I had a checkered college career. I don't have a degree. I studied some at Columbia College in Chicago, but mainly it was on the job and observation. I approached it more as a craft and artisan situation than a science to me.

Dawson: When did you come to the *Detroit Free Press*?

Swickard: I came in May, 1979 from the *Miami News*.

Dawson: Were there any places you worked at before working at the *Miami News*?

Swickard: Okay, I started out as a communication's clerk at the *Chicago Sun-Times* in the summer of 1969; that was a summer job and it was clearing copy off the old teletype machines and setting up telex links for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The wire room sat in between the *Chicago Sun-Times* on one side and the *Chicago Daily News* on the other. It was large glass enclosed room with banks and banks of teletype machines. And toward the end of the summer there was an opening on the beeline column at the *Daily News*. The beeline column was a public service column; clearing red tape, reuniting lost people, the newspaper will solve your problem. I talked to them and I didn't get a job because somebody else with more seniority was hired, but it was suggested that if I was still around they thought there would be another opening coming up in December, and if I wanted to take that chance. I was welcome to stay on. I did and I got the job in December of 1969 and just rolled from there.

Dawson: What made you decide to come to Detroit to work at the *Free Press*?

Swickard: It was a larger newspaper. It was a better newspaper and my then fiancé, now my wife—I had gone from the *Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel* to the *Miami News*. She had been working as a feature writer for the *Ft. Lauderdale News* and had applied at the *Miami Herald*. There were no openings there, but they put her name in the Knight-Ridder pipeline and the *Free Press* called her for an interview and they offered her a job and we talked it over and said "Okay, let's go for it, we'll cross apply and see if we can get in the same city," and we wound up with job offers in both places and we decided to come to Detroit. The future [in Detroit] was a little more stable. The [Miami] *News* was an afternoon paper with declining circulation and South Florida at that time was starting to go through the cocaine boom and it was an area where you had to really think twice if you wanted to raise a family in that kind of get quick rich era.

Dawson: What did you write about at the *Free Press*?

Swickard: I focused mainly on criminal justice. I think my title at the time was senior crime reporter. Most of my career has been spent covering recorders court, the criminal courts for the city of Detroit, but also into federal investigations, Wayne County and some statewide and national cases.

Dawson: Where you involved in covering the Crack Epidemic in Detroit at this time?

Swickard: Yes, I was involved in covering the drug gangs prior that and their rise and fall and the various organizations. The Best Friends, the A-Team, Young Boys Incorporated, The Pony Downs, any number of gangs.

Dawson: What was the relationship between the *Free Press* and the Detroit community like before the strike?

Swickard: I thought it was an extraordinary close relationship. That was one of the things that really struck me. *The Free Press* was really a part of the community fabric and people were very proud of the newspaper and there association. It felt very good. It felt like a very homey comfortable situation and I know that's a little bit glamorized but people had a long experience with the *Free Press* and it was a respected part of the community.

Dawson: Can you give me an example of how respected the *Free Press* was to the general community population?

Swickard: People turned to the *Free Press* to solve their problems. If they had a situation with city government or crime they often times turned toward the *Free Press* to raise the issue or to resolve the problem. If you were meeting people out in the community they were always—quite often saying—"I know so and so." "I went to school with such and such, you know Neil Shine," various people that they had gone to school with and they had respected or they had seen around community, people wanted to establish that relationship. That was very common thing.

Dawson: What was working in the press room like under Neil Shine?

Swickard: Oh it was great. He was, at that point, he was high enough up the food chain that he was setting the tone, but not involved with a lot of the day-to-day situations. And so he had taken a step back. People that had worked under him when he was city editor said, you know, he did have a temper; he had very exacting standards and when he moved up the ladder somewhat he was able to take a step back. I remember when I interviewed, and it took some months actually before coming on board, and I remember I ran into him at a party during that period because I had traveled to join my soon-to be wife, and he said something to the effect that, "You're a *Free Press* kind of guy." I was very pleased. And I didn't know if he was pulling smoke up my skirt as it were. I really took pride in that.

Dawson: What was your original reaction to the Joint Operating Agreement, when it was signed between the *Detroit News* and the *Free Press*?

Swickard: Well, it came as a total surprise to me and to a number of people. Dave Lawrence, who was the executive editor then, actually laid down and if you know anything about Dave Lawrence, very button-down—"hi what's your name, where do you plan to be in five years and what steps are you going to take to get there"—kind of guy, he laid down in front of one of the limousines from the court room and he had a look that said, "Come on run over me." And for him to do that was extraordinary and it kind of sent a message that he too was surprised and we were all taken aback.

Dawson: Who was Dave Lawrence?

Swickard: He was executive editor.

Dawson: Okay.

Swickard: He came here and took over after Kurt Luedtke, who was a legendary guy. And Lawrence had been in Florida and in Philadelphia, and he was a very button down, corporate, straight ahead, doing 20 things at once. He would hit the paper at 9 o'clock in the morning and he would have done 3 hours work before coming in. You would see him coming down Jefferson Ave with a tear sheet over the steering wheel and he is correcting copy as he is driving in. He was that kind of guy. So under Kurt Luedke, as I understand it, was more freewheeling, and less constrained and button down.

Dawson: What were other reactions in addition to Lawrence's reaction?

Swickard: Oh people were just shocked. The notion that both newspapers were failing. We knew that there were financial considerations and difficulties, but I don't know, a lot of people had doubts about what the financial situation was really like because it seemed like they, they being the managers, make the numbers jump through hoops. All of a sudden we were doing well, and then we weren't doing well. We had an expanding budget. We had bureaus around the world. We were covering stories in Asia. We had people posted in Europe. We had several bureaus around the country. We had people in Africa. So, that said one thing. And then we're a

failing newspaper said something else. And getting in bed with Gannett was troublesome because Gannett at that time had a reputation of not being a first class operation and that they wanted to be a middle of the road small-town, almost rah-rah journalism; not very adventuresome. Different than Knight-Ridder, which kind of prided itself on being, if not the *New York Times* or *L.A. Times*, but right under that league; very classy, very adventuresome, pushing the edge operation.

Dawson: Well, to make a more pointed question: do you think management was manipulating those numbers at all?

Swickard: They were massaging. I don't know if they had gone all the way to manipulation, but it was a tough case they were trying to make, trying to paint both newspapers as failing, kind of in a death grip you know. Moose out in the woods locking antlers and they're both going to starve to death. There were a number of people, a great number of people who thought that it was unnecessary and that the agreement was some sort of sweetheart deal that really wasn't benefiting the reading public and journalism in general. It was more of a hard-nosed business decision.

Dawson: You mentioned that Knight-Ridder, was way more pro-hard hitting news risks and that Gannett took a more lighter stance did you notice any changes when that merger took place between the different styles of the newsrooms?

Swickard: Well, there was not a merger of the newsroom. One of the comments I made when the merger finally went through was that we were joined at the wallet, not at the heart. And that there were two separate corporate ethics, two separate newsrooms, two separate editorial policies, and while there was this Joint Operating Agreement that we didn't necessarily agree with, it was a financial vehicle to carry us forward but we were each going to carry out our own mission.

Dawson: When did you know there was first going to be a strike?

Swickard: Well, there had been talk for months and we had been through something like that a couple of years earlier leading up to contract negotiations where all of a sudden security people started showing up and they were installing cameras and management making a big show that there getting ready. I think the unions surprised them that year with not making any real demands. It was, "let's just continue the contract we had." And things settled down and when it came around in '95, I think a lot of people thought it was going to be bluster and belly bumping, but really wouldn't get into a strike. And it was my notion that the strike was precipitated by action of the *Detroit News*, that they were the real driving force bent on breaking the power of the unions in circulation and the pressroom because of staffing and cost issues and if they impinged on the Guild in the meantime that was fine with them too. But the scene from what we heard, there were a number of provocative actions done by the *News* management to push the issue.

Dawson: What type of provocations?

Swickard: Taking down the Guild bulletin board, taking stuff out of mail boxes, things like that.

Dawson: Okay so, you're on strike…

Swickard: We didn't think it was going to come. I was in Oklahoma City covering the bombing of the Murrah Court House, and in the middle of that. We knew another deadline was coming up, but didn't think there was going to be a crisis. I finally got an interview with a guy I was trying to track down, one of the lawyers in the case, and the only way I could interview him was get on a plane in Oklahoma City and fly to Lovefield in Dallas with him and then call into the newspaper when I landed. And one of the editors picked up the phone in the newsroom and that was bad news. I thought not much good comes out of landing at Lovefield in Dallas, that's where Kennedy flew in. So we flew back to Oklahoma City and Jeff Taylor, who was the other reporter with me, we went out to a steak house and got the biggest dinner we could and ordered double deserts. And then we flew home the next day. But we ate very well that last night.

Dawson: Yeah, so what was life like during the strike for you and your family?

Swickard: It was a tense situation because both my wife and I worked at the newspaper and I think there was a real sense, as far as the *Free Press* went, that the *Free Press* had always been the friendly *Free Press.* It was avuncular. When my mother was ill and dying and living in Hawaii and I had gone out there for several weeks to be with her and, you know, I spent a lot of time with her, they said, "don't worry about it." Kids grew up in the newsroom. Our daughter

spent a lot of time either visiting my wife or myself in the newsroom and that was not unusual. I don't mean that there was a daycare center, but for children to be in there and to be welcomed and tolerated nicely and the collaboration, and the socialization between top management and reporters, we all felt we were all in it together. But the strike, to some degree, felt like a real betrayal of that. That they had thrown in their lot with Gannett. Some of the others, some said "this is all the *News'* doing," but, you're going along with it.

Dawson: What did you do for work during the strike?

Swickard: I didn't. I did a couple things around town, I can't really remember. My wife was very active in the strike newspaper.

Dawson: *The Sunday Journal*?

Swickard: Yep, but it started out as *The Journal*. She was very active in that. I was initially active in the Guild, but I was becoming disillusioned not only with newspaper management but also with the running of the strike and tactics and the fact that there was a lot of agendas and people wanted to climb on board. I decided to look for work elsewhere. I got a job at the *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram* in Ft. Worth, Texas, and we moved there in '96 and stayed there until the return to work offer was made and accepted.

Dawson: You previously mentioned the different agendas in the unions, do you want to elaborate on that?

Swickard: I think that some union organizations, not necessarily the Guild, but the overarching organizations, I can't think of the world, the overarching organizations.

Dawson: Like the AFL-CIO? The UAW?

Swickard: Perhaps, but some of those saw this as a vehicle to advance their agendas and that their leadership was going to come in and help run the strike and get a victory. I think one of the things that really hurt was when it became clear that there was not going to be a quick settlement and we had a meeting where they started talking about, "we're going to take this court and it could take months or years to settle." There is a provision where we could be offered to return to work and it is a return to work without conditions. And the union leadership fought that, and characterized it consistently, as an unconditional surrender. "Oh, it's unconditional return to work, that is an unconditional surrender." I think personally that the unions would have been better served in making that offer to return to work and would have forced the newspapers to take people back and prevented them from bringing in strikebreakers or scab reporters. I think that it would have put the newspapers more in a bind and would have preserved jobs and get people here. But I think there was moment to stay on strike and you know, the whole idea that "we can't let them push us around," may have hurt us. I'm pretty sure it did in my opinion.

Dawson: So, you feel that because of the union's hard-line stance that it ended up hurting the union in the long-run?

Swickard: I wouldn't call it a hard-line stance. It was a different tactic. And I think if I had run this I would have explored the option, and in fact I urged a number of people, asking "why don't we think about this, this might be the way for us to go, to the return to work." Because people were starting to move away, they were taking jobs elsewhere and was this going to peter out? I personally did not intend to be the poster boy for a losing union. "Oh, here's Joe, and here is Bill, Phil, Fred and Susan, they used to be journalists." I want to be a journalist. That was my main objective. I wanted to be a good Guild member, but I wanted to be a journalist.

Dawson: Did you come in contact with management anytime during the strike and if so what were the negotiations like?

Swickard: I didn't take part in any of the negotiations. I'm not sure how they went, but they were not productive and, oh wait, I'm drawing on blank on his name, the guy who was brought in by the *News*?

Dawson: Was it Frank Vega?

Swickard: Frank Vega, yes. He was there to shrink the power of the unions and work rules and make it more cost efficient, in their book, operation, that was what he was going to do. He had the power of no, just say "no, no, no." And it's hard to negotiate on those lines when his object is to shrink it down.

Dawson: How did you feel the strike was covered in the local media? Obviously the newspapers had their own agenda, but within the television media, radio media, how do you think the strike was covered?

Swickard: I think that it was it was a patchwork. I think a lot of TV was lazy. I think that, for example, if there was some hot issue they, the TV would get an interview with a vice-president in charge of communication and it would be in an office with a guy sitting at his desk and he would be speaking very reasonable. And for the Guild side, or the union side, you got an interview of some guy on a picket line who is all pissed off and angry and unshaven and wearing cutoffs and combat boots and there was somebody else in the background screaming and you didn't know who that person was. It created an unbalanced view. I talked to a couple of the folks saying it was really lazy and not very accurate to do that. They'd go, "Oh, we're giving both sides!" But you know, quite realistically it wasn't giving both sides.

Dawson: Do you feel that it was creating a perception that the union was a bit, that the strikers were a bit crazier, a bit more emotional whereas management was much more calm and rational?

Swickard: Oh yeah, and there had been, I think it was the big labor day rally outside the north plant in Sterling Heights, and the newspapers had created TV ads of the back and forth and it really made it look like the mobs in the street trying to crash in. It angered a whole lot of people that the company was painting us in a broad brush as crazies and people out there to destroy things and violent; it made it easier for television and other outlets to play along with that.

Dawson: Were you involved in picket lines and where you there at the Sterling Heights incident?

Swickard: I was there. But I was there to be kind of a spokesman for the Guild, to try and give the calm rational response, obviously having somebody with tear gas is going to be more emotional than [be calmer and] say this is what is going on.

Dawson: Did you notice any excessive uses of force by the security or by the Sterling Heights Police Department?

Swickard: The police they were, in my opinion, they were paid for by the newspaper. The overtime was paid and they brought in people from elsewhere and there were the hired security people in addition to the other security people who had worked for the newspapers before. John Casteen, somebody in a position of leadership in the Guild, was almost struck by a car, this was I believe at the Free Press and he thumped on the side, gave the fender or the rear quarter panel like a slap, and the security guard who we used to get along with very well, got out and decked John, punched him out, knocked him cold. That was quite telling I thought.

Dawson: What were your thoughts on the replacement workers that came in? I know many journalists referred to them as scabs.

Swickard: Well a scab is someone who crosses the picket line or takes a striker's job, so under that definition, yes. I know that the preferred term by management was "replacement worker" or new hires. I thought that a lot of them were opportunists and some of them claimed to have been

misled, that they had been told that the strike was all over and that there was no animosity. But I found that hard to believe. When the return to work came I made up my mind that I didn't like everyone that I'd worked with before the strike; I had to work with them, but I don't have to go fishing with them, but be a professional and do a professional job.

Dawson: Speaking of return to work, when did you eventually return to work?

Swickard: It was '97, I think I was like the second or third person called back because of my seniority. Yeah, I had 15 or so years, a number of people had taken jobs elsewhere and had really relocated. Some people had no interest in returning.

Dawson: When you returned to work, can you describe the atmosphere at the *Free Press*

Swickard: It was awkward. It was very awkward. It was like you had been broken up and separated from your wife or girlfriend you had decided to get back together and it's not quite the same. And one of the things is that management for whatever reason, to preserve some position or whatever, you had a job, you had a position and not a beat. For example I did criminal justice and I had a wall full of awards and I was told that I was going to be covering religion. Other people came back and they had some position of responsibility or a showcase position and all of a sudden they were doing very menial work. But they were paid the same and the classification was the same. The newsroom was more ready to move along than the other departments. I can't speak about the specific ones but it just seemed that some really actively did not want returned workers, they were really frosty and really relegated and a lot of the scabs had seemed to think,

"Oh, I'm here of my wonderful abilities and strong qualities that they plucked me out and that's why I'm here."

Dawson: You mentioned that Knight-Ridder was more local involved and hard hitting journalism. Did you notice a change in the style of reporting later on in your career at the *Free Press*?

Swickard: Well, we were sold. Knight-Ridder has collapsed and there were other greater economic considerations. I don't think that the general tone of coverage changed because of the strike. I think there were a lot of other financial and industry wide issues that may have affected it, but we didn't soft pedal things. But I know that before the strike we had two labor writers and those vacancies came along well before the strike and we didn't cover the unions as strongly as we had. But almost no one was and they were vacancies beforehand. Those beat reporters, those slots hadn't been filled for some years and they said that they weren't going to be filled.

Dawson: Do you feel that the Union's agenda achieved their goals because of the strike?

Swickard: No. I mean the goals would have been maintaining the jobs and bargaining position, and I think it was mishandled. I feel that staying out was a mistake, the case went through courts and it took years to resolve and it didn't necessarily resolve to the unions' benefit. But if you are in there that is one thing, if you already got the jobs as opposed to staying outside on a point principle and saying, "now let me in" when they have moved on. I think that we had very quickly realized or recognized this is going to be resolved in the courts, it's not going to be a

picket line or a boycott that's going to solve the thing. It would have been better for the membership. It would not have been a dramatic tactic and I think some of the other organizations wanted a major issue that was a show of union strength in a union town and it didn't work out that way.

Dawson: Well, another interesting thing too is that many prominent local leaders such as Mayor Dennis Archer, Cardinal Adam Meida, John Conyers, really were pressing for the management to negotiate with the workers. Why do you think that didn't get done?

Swickard: Because the game plan was being run by Frank Vega and Gannett and they were not a hometown operation and they had no interest in doing this. Frank Vega moved on to San Francisco and somebody asked what was he going to be doing there, or what the problems were in San Francisco, and he apparently had a copy of the contracts and they were thick as a couple of phone books or the old fashioned yellow pages and said "there's the problem!" They've had labor issues in San Francisco for years and things have changed.

Dawson: When you got back to the *Free Press* after covering religion, did you eventually return to your criminal justice beat?

Swickard: Yeah, pretty quickly, the newsroom was going to put people where they were needed and not holding some ideological line. "To hell with it, let's do it", you know? If there had been some big meeting of the editors or whatever they probably said "To hell with it, let's do it." Sam

Jones covers, whatever, farming, very well, and has all the sources, let's take him off the weather beat and let's get on with it. Very pragmatic decisions.

Dawson: What did you cover for your criminal justice investigative reporting?

Swickard: Afterward?

Dawson: Yeah, afterward and recently.

Swickard: Let's see, still a lot of dope gangs, a whole lot of dope gangs. There were a lot of investigations. The main one was, David Ashenfelter and I did an investigation of the police shootings in Detroit. We had identified a police shooting, a non-fatal one, which was the largest settlement in a non-fatal shooting. so we did an autopsy of that case, how the police screwed up and how this person got this money and it turned into an examination of the police department and how it investigated its own shootings and was covering them up and how it wasn't holding officers accountable and revealing officers weren't trained and led to the consent decree with the Justice Department coming in and holding Detroit to task with that. We did that investigation in '99 and 2000. The federal investigation took another few years for Detroit to sign the agreement and they still haven't gotten their 100 percent and continue to make improvements. We were giving 6 to 8 months of reporting time and about a year's worth afterward. We focused on bad cops, bad shootings, police cover up and we were given free rein on that and given the resources and time.

Dawson: If you could give advice to any newspaper employees or to anyone newspaper unions thinking about potentially striking, striking right now or having any labor problems what would be your advice to them?

Swickard: That the old fashioned labor strike where you are going to shut down your paper doesn't work anymore. The delivery system is going so far away from print and a physical product; you can't strike or shut down the web. What the advice to unions and Guilds is what happened at the *Free Press*. [The Guild] membership was down to about at 50 percent, but then grew to 80 or 90s [percent] now, that is because people saw that representation of the individual employee was necessary and whether you get in trouble over work rules or being treated fairly by a supervisor, to insurance coverage and to personal time, the individual voice; or some people say "Oh, I don't need a union! If I need something I'll go tell the boss." And I'm thinking, "yeah, what kind of insurance are you going to get or sick leave?" I think the Guild was very smart, at least at the *Free Press*, showing that you were needed and that the Guild was needed and they came in and took care of insurance and took care of employment questions. Insurance coverage was a major issue and a number of people who were not members still got the same benefits and even if they got in trouble at work they still got the same representation and there was a drive to say, journalists don't take free lunch but what are you doing about the insurance. There was no strong arming, a little bit of—people don't like is a letter saying "is this freeloading? We don't do that." Your brothers and sisters are doing this for you, so step up. so that is the advice. Walking around with a picket sign isn't going to happen anymore and I think it won't happen anymore in the online era. I have no idea. How do you strike against twitter?