

Leonard Wedel Henry Lee Kage Interview

Introduction

This is Mrs. Kearney Keegan, Sunday School Board archivist introducing Leonard Wedel, director of the Board's Office of Personnel and Henry Lee Kage, long-time Board messenger who is retiring July 30, 1972 after working here for 46 years and 5 months. During this interview, we want to record interesting and important historical events and changes, also hear some of Henry Lee's entertaining stories about people and things at the Sunday School Board through the years. Take it away, Leonard and Henry Lee.

Wedel: Henry Lee, it's not going to be very long before you're going to be saying something to the Sunday School Board that's different than "Good morning everybody." And you've been a longtime employee. Exactly, when did you begin work at the Sunday School Board?

Henry Lee: Mr. Wedel, I began work here in 1926 on March the eighth.

Wedel: In 1926 on March 8?

Henry Lee: Yes, and I started in the Mailing Department where we would load mail on a truck and send it down the shoot. Of course, when I started here as an extra here the superintendent did not see me until he came from lunch that afternoon. I was hired about 10:00. So he thought, when he came in, that I was too small for that type of work that I were doing.

Wedel: How old were you then?

Henry Lee: I was eighteen at the time I started. And Mr. McDaniel, who was the superintendent, said that he didn't know whether he could use me or not because I was too small for the work. But, being a boy from the country and always had worked, I must have held the job down pretty well.

Wedel: Did he take you, then, or did he sort of have to wait a while just till you proved yourself on the job?

Henry Lee: In about the first week we began the quarterly mailing. The quarterly mail began in March and they sort of had to have somebody right then, and I guess I done the job to suit him so the foreman on the floor asked him, then, if he could keep me for a messenger since I was small and I could move like he wanted me to move.

Wedel: Who was the foreman?

Henry Lee: His name was Mr. Baker at the time. And a Mr. Powell.

So working up in the bookstore they had a sales department, and in this sale department she would pick out whatever you wanted from there and would order it from the Shipping Building if it was in the Shipping Building, and I would take the packages to the customers who would order these things. And I would get them over in a certain time and I worked until he was satisfied with my work.

Wedel: And you say you took these packages to the customers. You say that you delivered them outside the Board or inside?

Henry Lee: These I would deliver inside and outside. People would order things here in town I would deliver them downtown to them the smaller package, and a lot of times to the churches by street car.

Wedel: I see, you would just take the package on a street car with you and deliver it to the church.

Henry Lee: I delivered it to the church if they ordered something they had to have I would deliver it by street car.

Wedel: Do you remember some of the churches you delivered to?

Henry Lee: Well, to Judson Memorial and Belmont baptist Church well all of the churches around the city that called for something they hhad to have.

Wedel: Who do you remember working with through the years? You know there are a lot of them we have had through the years, Dr. I. J. Van Ness. Were you here when Dr. Van Ness was here?

Henry Lee: I came during Dr. Van Ness's time here, and he was a very fine distinguished gentleman we all accepted him as being one of the greatest men I guess we ever knew.

Wedel: Do you remember anything particularly about Dr. Van Ness that sticks in your mind?

Henry Lee: No, I believe not, Mr. Wedel, at that time you didn't get too close to the executive secretary. We worked with his secretary who was Miss Ethel Allen.

Wedel: Oh, tell me about her.

Henry Lee: She was a very graceful young lady at that time and Miss Ethel was the lady who did all the bossing of the Sunday School Board. Whatever she said . . . everybody went to her for whatever they wanted. It was rather interesting that if anybody would come in the front door Miss Ethel instead of telling them where to go she would take them and she was a receptionist as well. And it was a wonder how she ever got any work done, but I found that Miss Ethel

would do her work at night and all through the day she would entertain the visitors and carry them wherever they wanted to go.

Wedel: I see. You were here, also, during the tenure of Dr. Holcomb, do you remember when he came?

Henry Lee: Yes, I remember when Dr. Holcomb came. We didn't know just how to accept him. He was such a small man by the side of Dr. Van Ness. Not in mind but in stature. He was great and everybody just began to love Dr. Holcomb. I think they still love him. We thought he was a wonderful person.

Wedel: And then, of course, there were some other people like Dr. Hill and Dr. Hite C. Moore, how do you remember these people?

Henry Lee: Dr. Hill as you know and everybody knows he was a very distinguished man, and they always looked at him because all the women thought so much of Dr. Hill. They just thought he was sometimes we'd almost feel like he was a walking God. They were talking about him even before I knew who he was. I find that Dr. Hill was one of the most outstanding men at the Sunday School Board. But, Dr. Hite C. Moore was a personality that you would never forget. He never was too busy to stop to talk to you when you needed to talk to him about anything. And I thought he was one of the finest men I ever knew.

Wedel: And of course you knew Dr. Aldridge.

Henry Lee: Dr. Aldridge and Dr. Homer Grice and Dr. Burrus. But one I was trying to think of has still left me. You could always hear Dr. Burrus whistle before you could hear his speech. He had a whistle in his voice and whenever we heard that whistle, we knew that Dr. Burrus was coming down the hall. He was a man you always could hear the whistle first. You could hear the whistle before you could hear the voice, but he was a great man. I think he wrote the book on our 50th anniversary which I have at home now.

Wedel: How well did you know William C. Phillips?

Henry Lee: I knew Mr. Phillips very well. He was a great man. He always thought a lot of me, I think. I knew Dr. Phillips and Paul, who was his son. Just a little boy he used to follow me around. I'd probably have to spank him sometimes to get him out of my hair.

Wedel: Did you have hair, then?

Henry Lee: I had hair, then.

Wedel: Of course, you remember J. O. Williams and Jerry Lambdin, Dr. Barnett and some of these people.

Henry Lee: I came remember when Dr. Joe Williams was business manager at the Sunday School Board. I think at that time it was during the Second World War, and that was the time that I was first ill, and my wife came here to see Dr. Williams and he ran into her finally and he told my wife that anything she wanted to come and see him and we never wanted for a thing, and after that even jobs were offered to me and I thought so much of the words that Dr. Williams said that I stayed with the Sunday School Board regardless of how much better I thought the job would be. But I don't think there's been no job I could have got that would have been better than the Sunday School Board.

Wedel: How about Miss Robbie Trent and Miss Emma Nowland or Miss Mary Alice Buybe? Did you . . . you knew her, too, didn't you?

Henry Lee: I knew Miss Buybe, yes, in the earlier days and Miss Noland was one of my good friends I believe she traveled all the time. Miss Trent was very neat, I used to be with her and worked with her and she was wonderful all the time.

Wedel: In times past, Henry, you and I have talked together aaaaaabaout the early days, and I recall your telling me some rather humorous incidents which happened to you. I recall you told me about the time you went to Gracae's store to pick up the package and can you just kind of tell us about that? What happened because this was a part of your messenger job wasn't it?

Henry Lee: Yes, I had to return things that people would buy something that one of the ladies had bought she wanted me to return. She wrote a nice little note to the teller and when I delivered the package she opened the package in my presence and it was something that I wasn't supposed to see, I don't think. It was quite funny because they were opening packages you were asked to return.

Wedel: And on this particular one do you remember there was one time they had sort of a strike going on at one of the stores and wasn't there a black man with a union card that stopped you out in front of the store when you came back out with the package and you sort of felt that he was pretty big and that he was going to sort of whip you. But somehow you got around him.

Henry Lee: That was during the time that they were picketing the store and I was sent there for a package because this was part of my job or I would exchange it for somebody. When I came out he didn't want me to be buying anything. He said he didn't want me to buy nothing in the store and he said that he could stop me. And I had to tell him that I was a messenger for the Sunday School Board and I was picking up a package for somebody else because I understood at that time they were taking packages away from people who bought them in

that storelllllllll.

Wedel: He kind of frightened you, though, didn't he?

Henry Lee: Yes, at first, quite so because I didn't know what he might do to me because I was a pretty small man to the size of this man.

Wedel: Do you remember the time you told Al Crawford's children who you were?

Henry Lee: Yes, two little girls got on the elevaaaaaaaator with me and when we got off, I asked them who they were. One of the little girls said this is Al Crawford's daughter, and I said oh you are, you're Bobbie's little girl. I said tell your mother you saw your granddaddy when you were up here.

Wedel: Did that ever get back to you?

Henry Lee: I've never heard whether the little girl told her mother or not, but she gave me quite a funny look.

Wedel: It just was unbelievable.

Henry Lee: It was unbelievable but Barbara was Chester Ellis' daughter I used to carry her around in my arms when she was a baby. I think they're still accounting for a pair of glasses that she broke by pulling them off when she was a baby.

Wedel: Do you remember the time the Sunday School Board Trustees were in a closed session on the third floor and you went into the room to deliver some papers and I was standing out there along with Dr. Lambdin and Dr. Earl and several others. Do you remember what you said when you came out?

Henry Lee: Yes, as I came back out . . . somebody told me as I started in that I couldn't go anywhere and so I just kind of walked on in and when I came out I said "Recess is over now, you little fellows can go in." But they didn't know that Dr. Sullivan had sent word for me to go to the lawyer's office and get something and when I got back to bring thaaat right in, and when I got ready to go out he told me to tell those fellows outside to come in which was a good chance for me to tell them who was who.

Wedel: By the way, I understand that you had to get one of Dr. Sullivan's checks cashed for him when he was a newcomer. Didn't you have to get a ticket or something when he came here?

Henry Lee: That was a time when the banks were closed on Saturday when he went to the air line office he was a complete stranger. They

wouldn't take his check and I was on the way to town and I worked until noon and when I was on the way to town and he said, "Henry, I've got to leave town and he said I don't know what I'm going to do." And I said, "What's the matter, Dr. Sullivan?" He said, "They don't want to accept my check." And I said, "Give me your check." And he did, and I went to the office and asked for his reservation and presented his check and she took the check without a question.

Wedel: What type of things have you and Dr. Sullivan talked about in the halls and the cafeteria besides getting bald together?

Henry Lee: Many, many things but some of the things Dr. Sullivan tells me he tells me I better not tell it so maybe I better not tell it.

Wedel: What type of financial errands were you involved in for the Sunday School Board? What kind of money did you carry, that is, as for whom and what?

Henry Lee: We had a man named Phillips, Charles Phillips, I believe his name was Charles at the time who was the cashier. And he was pretty old when I first came here a few years after I were here and I started then to making the deposits for the Sunday School Board, but you would have to go to Fourth and Church. And we paid off in cash and on a Saturday morning I had to go to the bank to get cash to make up the payrolls. That was the beginning of Board finance that was in. And of course, petty cash. You had to go get that because Mr. Phillips did that before he got too old. He would fall out on his feet, he'd have that fainting spell.

Wedel: How much money did you carry at one time, Henry?

Henry Lee: When I was making a deposit sometimes I would have as much as \$50,000 in cash. That wasn't including money orders and checks. But the largest check that I know about that I carried to the bank to deposit which I picked up from Merrill Lynch was one for \$800,000. The manager of the bank at that time said to me he said, "Henry Lee, wouldn't you like to have this million dollars?" I said, "No, Just give me the eight hundred thousand," and he got quite a laugh out of it.

Wedel: Did anyone ever try to rob you, Henry?

Henry Lee: Yes, I had my baaaag snatched once.

Wedel: That's been recently hasn't it?

Henry Lee: About two years ago but the last of this year two men choked me and tried to take my money away from me I had about two thousand dollars in my pocket I didn't have my brief case with me

that day. They were larger bills and I could put them in my pocket. And since I've gotten older I'm afraid to take my baag unless I have to.

Wedel: You used to make and pick up lots of travel reservations for our workers. Tell us some of the things you remember about this part of your work.

Henry Lee: I had a wonderful time and it was a great experience picking up reservations for people who traveled and the places they went. I remember Miss Alene Bryant we were talking about her saying was that they would go to these little country towns where that if it was raining at night that they would have to stay in the station all night and then they would walk to where they were going which could be two miles. But when we first started buying tickets you only bought a ticket, to where they wanted to go, and we didn't get too many reservations or I don't know whether there was any at that time. You didn't have to make reservations we just went down to buy the tickets just like we did the bus. But I was interested in buying tickets and the places they went.

Wedel: What other types of errands have you been called on to make, Henry, in all of your messenger work besides financial and buying tickets. You've done a lot of other things, what other types of errands have you run for our employees?

Henry Lee: One of the things, of course, is lawyeres' offices and places like that that you go for the Management Service for L. H. and a lot of people of that kind.

Wedel: About how many briefcases or carrying bags have you worn out during these years?

Henry Lee: Six or seven, I think. I make them last five or more years if I can. Sometimes they look pretty ragged. The one they snatched was a brand new one and that's why we got it back. we had it back within an hour after the snatch.

Wedel: Did you have any money in it?

Henry Lee: I had \$350 in it when they snatched it.

Wedel: I understand that Dr. Sullivan saw that you got a new bag one time. Tell us about that.

Henry Lee: Well, Mr. Emmett Golden was the purchasing agent at that time and as everybody knows him he was very tight you'd have a pretty hard time getting something out of him. So I think I told Dr. Sullivan that I needed a bag because mine was looking so bad. He sent word for Mr. Golden to order me a bag. So that's where I got my

new bag.

Wedel: One time when you were ill, Henry, I remember several years ago in 1960 when you were ill you received many cards and letters. Tell us something about that. What kind of experience did you have there?

Henry Lee: I think I received about two hundred cards. My wife counted them and my room was covered with cards. It was like papering a house. She put them everywhere she could around the room. One of the nurses asked another nurse up there who is that man because he got so much mail. He must be somebody to get that much. And I had a cousin who was a nurse there at the time who was talking to her she had the same name, Cage, and she looked at her and said, "Well, he is somebody." And I guess that's all the nurse ever knew about me.

Wedel: Well, tell me about some of the people here in Nashville that you have come to know outside of the Sunday School Board. Any of the people in the city that you've learned to know?

Henry Lee: I told Mr. Jones, who was the manager of the Third National Bank one lady who came out of the bank and spoke to me and he says, "Henry Lee, you know everybody in Nashville don't you?" And I said, "Yes, from the Sunday School Board to the court house." It's no telling how many people I know that I meet them in the street. I meet people who have grown old who was boys in the summer and worked here. I remember a few weeks ago Beau Reece's daddy came in and they were to introduce me to him and he said, I know Henry Lee, I worked with Henry Lee years ago. And sure enough he worked for Mr. Burke in the Multigraph Department when he were a young man and I had kind of forgotten but as soon as he said that, I remembered that we worked together well it was 35 years ago before either of them were born.

Wedel: What changes have you noticed most here at the Board during your work?

Henry Lee: I guess it's the enlargement now. It was much smaller at that time and we would carry our mail to the post office. Well we just got promoted from a wagon to the first truck.

Wedel: They used to have a horse and wagon?

Henry Lee: They used Mr. Frank Cole's horse and wagon. He would drive to work in it and they would use his wagon to take the mail to the post office.

Wedel: Do you remember the name of the horse?

Henry Lee: That was just before I started to work here. They had

just bought their first car when I started work here. It was an International truck with solid tires. I remember the funniest thing about the boy who drove the truck went to the barbershop at eighth and Broad and the truck got away from him and ran into the barbershop and Ben Woodard was the truck driver at that time and Ben woodard was working with him. You remember Ben.

Wedel: I knew Ben.

Henry Lee: When Les got straightened out, Ben was back at the Sunday School Board. He had run off and left Les there with the truck. And we had quite a laugh over that.

Wedel: He was just able to run faster wasn't he?

Henry Lee: I don't know that it done too much damage to the truck it just did the man a little damage at the barbershop that was about the worst part.

Wedel: Henry, why in the world did you stay at the Board forty-six years?

Henry Lee: I don't know, Mr. Wedel, I think that the years passed so fast and at the time, it was the best job that I could get and I have been satisfied at the Board and I think it is because you begin to learn to love the people and they begin to be your people and I think most of the Sunday School people well they're kind of like my family. I think of retirement is just like leaving your family to have to leave the Sunday School Board and I don't know of nobody that I don't love or don't love me at the Sunday School Board. If I have any enemies I don't know it because I try to be friendly with all of them. And so many of these boys that like Jerry Daniel and Beau Reece that I worked with their fathers and they grew up to be old men and Paul Phillips and they grew up to be men. Dr. Daniel and Wilburn Taylor are still employed here. Pat Shelton and I worked together before she married, you know. They come and they are born here while we work together and they come back to us and we just kind of feel like they're family.

Wedel: By the way, you came to know Noble Van Ness pretty well didn't you?

Henry Lee: Oh yes. I found him when I came to the Sunday School Board sort of rough until I was scared of him he would scare me to death. I studied that man, I would report to his office he would say what did I want and he said it so rough and he would say get out of here. And I would leave him and say boy, I hope they don't send me back to that man's office again. Well that rough way he talked, I heard him one day talking with his daddy which was Dr. Van Ness the same way and I said well, that's just that man's way that's the way

he talks to everybody. So I got to know him and we got to be good friends and I found I could kind of talk back to him that was what he wanted he was trying to get you to get back at him.

Wedel: Henry, what are we going to do at the Board here without you?

Henry Lee: You mean what am I going to do without you. I find even when I'm on vacation if I'm not out of town I'm anxious for the time to come that I can get back to work, and I am wondering now what will I do but I will get satisfied. I will get settled down.

Wedel: What are your plans in this for retirement? What are you planning to do?

Henry Lee: I don't know, Mr. Wedel. As I told you, I know so many people in town but I think I would be interested in doing church work, and I'm finding out that if you're going to work in churches it's going to take full time. And I have a friend of mine who has asked me if I will work with her with senior citizens and I am very fond of those people. I just like old people and I think I would enjoy that.

Wedel: You know, Henry, you've been here a long time and I guess one way we've failed, we never have made a Baptist out of you.

Henry Lee: I told Dr. Holcomb, once, when he asked me why I wasn't a Baptist I told him because I worked for them. And it's not really the reason. I think it is because when I came here I really was a Methodist and my parents were Methodists, well my father was, my mother was a Baptist. I guess I just joined the Methodist church because my family were there and I guess that happened to a lot of people. They tell us about where we're going of course, I'm not too fond of water.

Wedel: Henry, would you want to go back to the good old days?

Henry Lee: I don't know, Mr. Wedel, I don't think so. I hear those were the good old days, but times are good now. They're a little different we don't understand. I had some of the young people tell us now that we're getting old or that we have a closed mind, and I guess that's true. We don't think as, well, things are a lot different, but I like today.

Wedel: Well Henry, we'll just close on that. I like today, too, and thank you very much for this interview here today, Henry.

Henry Lee: I have enjoyed it, Mr. Wedel, and I hope some day we can talk again. I don't want to say good bye to you.

Wedel: No, we don't want to do that. Thank you very much.