

Nevada Test Site Oral History Project
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Interview with
Bennie Reilly, Sr.

May 10, 2004
Ely, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Renee Corona Kolvet

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The material in the *Nevada Test Site Oral History Project* archive is based upon work supported by the U.S. Dept. of Energy under award number DEFG52-03NV99203 and the U.S. Dept. of Education under award number P116Z040093.

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[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disk 1.

Renee Corona Kolvet: *Good morning, Mr. Reilley. Thank you for agreeing to do this interview.*

We normally start by discussing a little bit about people's backgrounds and their families and that kind of sets the context for the rest of the interview. You had mentioned to me earlier that you were raised at Duckwater [Shoshone Reservation]. Can you tell me a little bit about where you were born and a little bit about your parents?

Bennie Reilley, Sr.: OK, I was born July 29, 1943 in Ely, Nevada, down here by the duck pond.

The old hospital is still sitting there. And we lived here until 1947; then we moved out to Duckwater. Then I stayed and went to grade school in Duckwater for eight years. Then after that, for high school, there was no high school nearby, so I went to a boarding school in Stewart, Nevada. So I was over there for my high school years. But I came home every summer when I was in high school.

Did you have any siblings? Any brothers or sisters?

I had one brother, yes, a year younger than I am.

And did he go to Stewart Indian School too?

No, I don't think he did.

What was it that made your parents move from Ely to Duckwater?

That's when the land assignments first came up. And there, they got a land assignment over there.

And did they like it out there?

Well, they stayed out there for quite a while, so—that was just a, you know, a living. That's where they were at.

Did they live in the Indian colony before they went to Duckwater?

Yes, we lived up there on Pine Street, up there on the—it was the first old Indian colony up there. We lived up there [Ely].

And you said at some point you moved back to Ely. Was that recently the Ely Shoshone Colony?

No. No, I moved back here in 1975, and I moved back here. That's when I got this house. I was living at Reno at that time. But when I got this house here, then I moved back here, and the family, we moved back to Ely.

Your parents too?

No, my parents, they stayed out in Duckwater, and I think it was in 1969 or 1970, they left Duckwater and they moved to Lund.

I just drove through there yesterday. Nice little town.

Yes, they lived there because my stepdad was working there at the dairy, and they lived there until the 1970s, until these houses came open, and that's when they moved up here.

OK. I wanted to ask you a little bit about your schooling while at Duckwater, and then again I didn't realize you went to Stewart Indian School, which that's very interesting in itself. Out at Duckwater, I had heard that there were some Native Americans and even a few non-Native Americans going to school out there. Do you recall that?

Yes, I do. A lot of the non-Native were the ranchers down below us, their kids that were going to school there, so....

OK, so you went to school....

Yes.

It didn't matter, Native American, not Native American?

No. No.

And who were the teachers?

We had different teachers that come from different areas. They signed contracts. They stayed for two years, three years, you know, down the line.

Was that a positive experience, you think, at Duckwater?

Yes, it was.

Was it?

Yes.

You said high school was at Stewart Indian School.

Yes.

Now did most of the children from Duckwater end up at in Stewart?

Yes. Yes, most of them, you know, my age went to Stewart, the boarding school. It's an all-Indian school.

And that would've been in what, the 1950s?

Yes. I went away in—

Wait a minute, no, high school you would've been....

I went away in 1952, I think, 1951 or 1952. No....

It would've been later.

Nineteen fifty-nine.

Nineteen fifty-nine.

Nineteen fifty-nine.

So in 1959 you went into Carson City and you stayed there—

Nineteen sixty-two.

[00:05:00] *Oh, OK, through 1962. You must've played sports?*

Yes, I played baseball and football. Track.

Track. I went out to the Indian School and saw a lot of the photos out there at Stewart. Pretty interesting place. So then after you were done at Stewart, then did you move back to Duckwater?

Well, I kind of moved around in the state, you know. I had a lot of friends. Lived in Fallon for a while. Lovelock. Winnemucca. Then I came back here in 1964, back to Lund where my parents were. Then May 1, 1964 I enlisted in the Marine Corps.

In 1964. OK.

Yes, I enlisted in 1964.

Where did that take you?

I ended up down in San Diego for boot camp. Then I went back east to Quantico, Virginia to go to school back there. Then in 1965 they wanted some volunteers to go to Vietnam and they said, People that want to volunteer, take one step forward, and there was three of us Native Americans, and we was the first ones to step across. Then the others followed.

Is that right?

Yes.

And do you know why you were so interested? I mean at that time there was a lot of controversy over the Vietnam War.

Yes. Well, I just got tired of going to school over there, you know, because you go to school eight hours a day, carrying books about six, seven inches high, you know, and all that.

You mean in the Marines?

Yes.

They were training you?

Yes, I was at the Quantico Marine Corps schools.

What were they training you in?

I was training in ammunition technician.

So you wanted to practice what you learned and get out of the classroom. [laughter]

Yes. Yes.

Let's go back to your parents a little bit. I didn't get their names. Is it Reilley or—?

Yes, my mom's maiden name is Patty Mike. And my dad's name is George Reilley. And my brother's name was James, but he's deceased so....

He is? OK. Was he older than you or—?

No, he was a year younger than I am.

What did your parents do? You mentioned they lived in Ely and then that they went down to Lund. What did they do for a living, or your father anyway?

Well, my dad worked in a ranch out here at the Shoshone, and up at the mine. Up here at the mine. [Nevada Consolidated]

Oh, did he work at the mine?

Yes.

Did they ever live or interact with people down toward the test site, like Reveille Valley or Monitor Valley or anywhere, or were they pretty much, this was your home area would've been around Duckwater and Ely?

Well, my mother, they came from Monitor Valley/Smoky Valley.

Oh they did?

She came from there, and that's where she was born at.

OK. I had read that Duckwater Reservation was kind of formed to bring a lot of people in from Big Smoky Valley.

Yes. Then my mother's mom and her husband, they moved to Duckwater. That's how my mom ended up in Duckwater.

So she came with her parents.

Yes.

What did her parents do before they came to Duckwater?

They were living over there in Smoky Valley. All the Indians lived over there in Smoky Valley.

Most of the people that's living in Duckwater came from that area.

From down there, yes. Did your mother ever mention how they felt about moving up to Duckwater?

No. No, never.

I know that from things I've read that there was some opposition at first but, you know, because the Big Smoky Valley was their home, but that I've heard Duckwater's a pretty nice area too. I have not been down there, but there was some ranch land there. So did they do any ranching once they got there?

Yes, they got sixty acres each rancher, and grew alfalfa and the vegetables and everything, you know, themselves.

Do you remember working on their ranch when you were—?

Yes, I do. Yes, I remember going out there milking cows, feeding the pigs, doing the chores, you know, working in the garden, things like that. Plus going to school, grade school. And our bus stop was about almost about a mile from where we lived. We had to walk down to the bus stop. Sometimes snow was real deep, knee high, you know. Quite an experience.

Where did they take you to school then? You said you had to catch a bus.

The school was just right there on the reservation.

Oh, it was? OK.

The old school. Then later, I think it was 1956 or 1957, they built a brand-new grade school further down, off the reservation.

OK. Now your mother was from Big Smoky Valley. Where was your father's family from?

My father's family was from here.

From Ely area?

Actually they came from Skull Valley, Utah. That's where they're originally from, but they moved here.

They moved here.

Yes.

And I assume your parents are around, or deceased, or—?

They are all deceased.

They are deceased.

Yes.

So it's you, and you have one son, or you have several?

I've got one son and two daughters.

And two daughters. And do the daughters live here?

Well, one daughter lives in Reno and the other one lives down in El Paso, Texas.

Oh, so that's why you go to Reno a lot, too. You have family.

Yes.

Let me see here. I had wanted to talk to you about what you recalled, since this is a study of the Nevada Test Site, what you remembered, since you were down at Duckwater during the early 1950s and up till the late 1950s when a lot of that nuclear testing was going on at Mercury and actually Yucca Valley [Flat] and all those areas at the test site. What do you recall of that as a child? Do you remember seeing anything or do you remember your parents talking about it?

Well, I was about seven years old when they started the testing down there. And I remember listening on the radio; they'd make an announcement when the blast was going to go off. I remember we used to get up four o'clock in the morning and we'd all run outside and we'd watch the blast, because we could see the big orange flame go up and later on you could see the big old white cloud just go straight up in the air, then watch it break up. But usually, see, a lot of that used to go kind of south to an easterly direction, sometimes straight north. Once in a while we'd see it go toward the west. Southwest.

OK, so it went all different directions, depending on the wind.

Yes, depending on the wind.

Now when you heard those radio announcements, did they give you any warnings? Did they tell you to stay inside, or were they just letting you know it was going to happen?

I don't remember if they gave us any warnings, but I do remember they just made announcements, you know.

That it's going to happen.

That it's going to happen. And I know all the kids on the reservation, that was a big thing.

They'd all run out there four o'clock in the morning, you know.

To watch.

To watch.

And it just happened, what, let's see, ninety times at least during those years, so it must've been like a common occurrence.

Yes, it was.

Did you ever feel rumblings of the ground or anything?

Yes.

You did?

Yes. Yes.

Virginia Sanchez mentioned that some of the elders had talked about seeing animals kind of burnt or sick. Do you remember seeing anything like that up at Duckwater?

No. Never.

What were you, about a hundred and fifty miles north? I was trying to figure out.

Yes, something like that.

Something like that, north of where all this was going on. Do you ever remember seeing any scientists out in your area, checking radiation?

No. No one. No, I never did see any.

Because I've heard they would occasionally go out in different places and check the radiation afterwards, trying to reconstruct what had gone on.

[00:15:00] *During the early 1950s when you were still living at home, how big a part of the diet was eating rabbit and wild foods back then?*

Yes, we ate quite a bit of that, you know, the rabbit. You'd go rabbit hunting and all that. You know, that was a part of our regular diet. And the deer. Sometime antelope. Then we butcher our own beef, and the pig, our own pigs. Then we ate our own food that's out of the garden.

Vegetables, yes. We grow mostly a lot of stuff. And like the meat, the deer. We did a lot of

canning the fruit and all that, we canned, and we had a cellar. Put them in there, you know, for the winter. That's what we used during the winter.

What percent of your diet do you think, though, was still—I know then that wild foods supplemented what you were raising on the—do you think maybe 25 percent or what, you know...?

Well, I'd say about maybe thirty, maybe. Thirty percent, I mean.

Yes. It gave variety, and you liked it, didn't you?

Yes.

I mean rabbit, you know, a lot of people still eat rabbit and like to hunt rabbit and continue to do that. You mentioned that it's not as big a part of the diet anymore for Native Americans in most places, is it?

No. The only place I see them serve that is at like at a traditional gathering, the pow-wows. Even as of today they still—

They'll still—?

Yes.

OK. Well, that's interesting.

I went to one in Reno last year and they had rabbit there.

They did have rabbit?

They had rabbit there.

Did your family go in the fall on a lot of these excursions up into the pine nut areas and gather pine nuts? Do you remember that?

Yes, we didn't have to go too far. It was just up about three, four miles up there, yes, west of our house, because that's where a lot of pine nuts. In those years the pine nuts used to be all over.

What range was that, do you remember? You said it was just west of—?

Duckwater.

Oh, Duckwater range?

Yes, on that side, yes. Over here at Currant and up White River area, up in there, you know.

There's still—yes, I noticed there's a lot of—that's a big forested area. And was that still a social event? I mean you didn't just go up to get pine nuts. I mean would it be like a community event where people would get together and go up?

Well, mostly it was just like a family—

Event.

Yes.

So like extended family?

Yes.

And that was kind of like something you did every year?

Yes, every year.

Do you remember any of the, I say "women" but I assume it was mostly the women, doing a lot of grinding of pine nuts and making it into meal?

Yes, I remember my grandmother used to grind pine nuts and use her winnowing basket like that to clean them.

Oh, yes. Yes, get the shells. Yes.

Yes, get the shells out.

And how did she prepare them?

Well, she made a lot of that pine nut gravy out of it, you know.

Did you like it?

Well, when I was young, I didn't really—it was eatable, but I like it roasted better, you know, plain.

Oh, me too. I love pine nuts that way. I've gone only a couple times but I always got very sticky and dirty. But it was still a fun exercise.

Yes.

You mentioned on the phone that you're considered an elder with the Western Shoshone. Can you explain a little bit about what that really means to you and to your tribal groups, what that means when someone considers you an elder, and what they expect of you as being an elder?

Well, right now, in this area here there's a lot of elders here that's not traditional, you know.

They're elders but they don't carry the Indian ways, traditional ways. My wife and I are about the most traditional people here, so we have a lot of people that look up to us and they're always asking us all kind of questions and we're glad to [00:20:00] help them. And they ask questions,

How do you do this? How do you do that? Can you remember stories? And we're always giving them advice, you know. And lately we've been running into some controversy

because a lot of people are jealous, you know, reservation to reservation, there's a lot of jealousy that's going on because they know you're doing a lot of stuff for your community. Then there's

some people that don't appreciate it because they've gone away from the traditional way; they've gone into the modern thing, you know. But now some tribes are trying to bring all that back.

Like here in Ely we've got a language program that's trying to teach the kids the Shoshone

language, coming back, and right now my wife is taking a class. She understands the language

but she can't speak it, because when she was small her parents used to talk all the time but they

never did try to speak the language. But she understands it. But now she's having a hard time

because your tongue is not doing right when you're old, but when you're young your tongue is just—they kids, you know, they go right into it real easy.

You mentioned your wife trying to learn the language. She remembers some of it. What is her background? What tribal affiliation?

She's a Shoshone and she was born in Duckwater.

Oh, she was?

Yes.

OK. Did you know her when you were growing up?

Yes, I knew her when she was growing up.

Oh, so you've known her most of your life.

Yes.

Well, that's interesting. So she remembers some of the language. And how about you?

Yes, I'm a fluent speaker.

Are you? You never gave it up then?

No, I didn't. No.

When you went to Stewart, now I've heard stories of Stewart Indian School, this might've been back before you went, where they really discouraged people from speaking their native tongue.

Did you find that when you were there?

No, that was before I went, because I remember my grandfather went over there in 1894 when the school first started.

He was very early.

Yes. My mom went to school over there too.

Oh, both your parents.

Yes, they went over there.

Oh, so they were the ones that would've experienced—

Yes. I know they said they used to get in big trouble.

For speaking. But you didn't find that.

No.

So by the time you went, if you wanted to speak your language—

Yes. A lot of that, you know, the Shoshones would be here talking, Navajos here, Hopis there, Apaches here, Paiutes over there.

Everyone speaking their own tongues. [laughter]

Yes, all things, you know. But a lot of the tribes, only when they're really speak, you know, their language most was the Navajos. The Navajos had their own school [at Stewart] because they'd teach them in their own language. They had their own school. But the others were all mixed up.

We were speaking English pretty good, you know.

How did you get along with the, say, Navajos or people that are way from distant areas away?

I got along good with them. We all intermingled together. No problem.

No problem.

Yes. But they just had a little trouble with the English language, the Navajos, but the other tribes, they're all, you know, they speak English and also their native language.

What is your wife's name, her first name?

Geraldine.

And her family name was—?

Thompson.

Thompson. OK. That's interesting. I'm trying to remember when they closed Stewart Indian School, but it's been a while back. I drove through there not long ago and it was boarded up. Have you been out there lately? It's kind of sad.

I think it had closed in 1977, I think. Somewhere in there.

And the children now that live in all the [Indian] colonies, do they just go to school in town?

Yes, they go to public school now.

Just public school.

Yes.

Very good. Getting back to elders and being an elder, people come to you for information, you say, about the old ways and the way people—

Yes.

But some of the elders are just elder because of their age and they really haven't maintained their—so that causes a little animosity maybe?

Yes.

[00:25:00] *Have you ever written up anything for the tribe on—do they want you to do that or is it just a verbal thing that you share?*

It's just mostly verbal stuff, you know, that we share.

Do you remember a lot of the stories and songs? I mean do you remember your parents—obviously it'd been passed on from your parents and you remember that—and did you teach your children? Or are they interested in knowing?

No, not really.

OK, they aren't. OK.

No.

But they will be some day. They may be at the age now that—I know my kids are off in their own world, especially at the young age. OK, let's see. I asked you about the tests. Let me see what time we have left here. [Pause]

I wanted to talk to you a little bit about the esophageal cancer we had mentioned on the phone. You were diagnosed in, you said 2001?

Yes, it's June 2001.

OK, and how long before that did you realize something was wrong?

Oh, I'd say about six months.

About six months?

About six months before I was diagnosed.

Now when you finally realized that you needed some kind of care, did you go to medical facilities here at the Ely Shoshone Colony? I mean did they have the infrastructure to handle medical problems? Was this your first step or did they send you off to—?

Well, they send you off to a specialist, most of them. They sent us up to Salt Lake City at the university.

OK, in Salt Lake City.

But when I first found out when I was sick, I went to the veterans' hospital in Reno, and I went there for about like three, four months, you know. And they keep saying they didn't think it was cancer. They thought I had a reflux disease, you know, and they said it'd be caused from being a diabetic, and just on and on. They ran all kind of tests on me and never did actually diagnose it.

Never diagnosed it as cancer?

No. No. Until I got back to Ely here, and one night about ten o'clock at night, my daughter was home for that weekend, I told her, I said, I can't breathe very good. Now take me down to the hospital, down to William B. Ririe [in Ely].

So you felt it in your chest?

Yes. I got to where, you know, that cancer was around my throat, esophagus, and it was tightening up as it was growing, and it was cutting my wind off, and I couldn't swallow anything that was, you know, like meat, anything like that, I had a hard time swallowing. So all I could eat was mostly liquid. Then I got down there, the hospital, checked in and they checked me out, and they wasn't too sure but they said, well, we'll send you to Salt Lake and have you checked.

The veterans' or—?

No, the university. So they Life Flighted me out of here.

Oh, they did Life Flight you?

Yes. My wife went with me when they flew me up. And they took me into the emergency, and that's where they diagnosed it after they ran the tests, saying that I had a, you know, had a thing wrapped around my neck, my throat.

And what tests did they do that showed that? I mean did they do MRIs [Magnetic Resonance Imaging], or do you remember?

They did MRIs and they did X-rays and they put the scope down there and all that.

And they made it sound like it was pretty bad, didn't they?

Yes. They said it was pretty bad, you know.

Pretty bad. So you said you underwent some treatment?

Yes. After they checked me out and all that, they checked me out to see how bad, ran some more tests, took biopsy of that little thing that was wrapped around my thing, and yes, they said it was

cancer, that it was a malignant cancer and all that, you know. And so they took me to the [00:30:00] emergency and worked me over, and then they said they didn't want to operate because it was wrapped around one of the main nerves that was going up to my brain, one nerve, the big one, and they said it was really risky. But they said they still needed more time, so they said, we'll place a stent down your throat so you could swallow better. So they tried that and they stuck one down in there. And I had a problem with that, I couldn't take it and all that, and then back to emergency I went. I think they said that I had a record up there, going in emergency four times in three days, you know, into emergency and back.

Well, if it had something to do with your breathing and swallowing, it's quite frightening, I'm sure.

Yes, it was, yes.

They decided, I guess, that they were going to try to do radiation to shrink it, is that one of the—?

Yes. Well, they talked to my wife about it, and the kids see what the situation was. And I thought to myself, I said, why should they? Let's see, when they cut people, you know, I mean the cancer spreads [into the] blood stream. And I talked to my wife, we talked about it, and we thought maybe it wasn't a very good idea and we could just go ahead and try the treatment, you know, the radiation and the what you call it? The other one?

Oh, chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy. And the wife said Yes. Besides, she said, we'll go the spiritual way and we'll do some praying for you and all that. Get all the spiritual people and have them all pray for you and all that, you know. We'll go that route.

Yes, I said, we'll do that. So I did six weeks of radiation treatment, five days a week. Then I did chemo, I think was something like two-and-a-half days or something like that. It wasn't

very long for chemo. But it was amazing, you know, when I was doing my radiation treatment I didn't lose very much of my hair, because my hair was almost long as what it is now. And I didn't lose any, but a little came out, you know.

But chemo, I think, is the one that really makes it come out too, I've heard. Well, that was good.

Yes. After I got done with my radiation then, you know, then the chemo came next after that.

And I did the chemo treatment, you know, didn't get sick or nothing. Didn't even get me sick or nothing. I had a roommate there, was doing the same treatment. They had him on the morphine where they pump their own pain killer, and he used to lay there and moan and asking for pain pill, but he was always pushing that thing, but they had it set where you're only allowed to pump so much an hour, you know, one pump. That's all you get. And they'd be begging for more. I told them to look at him, you know, I wonder why it's such a big pain, you know, and I'm not in pain. And he asked me, he said, *Are you in pain?* I said, *No.* I said, *I don't feel anything.* So when they took me off my chemo and they took all those needles and everything out, I sat up and got up, looked around, and I walked down the hall. All the nurses and everybody looked at me, and the staff, they all clapped their hand and they waved, you know, looking at me, scratching their heads, you know. And I walked all the way around, exercised my leg, came back and laid down. Doctors came and they checked me out, took my blood pressure and all that, asked me how I felt. Didn't have no pain. Good thing about all that time I was in there, I never took any pain pill, you know, no pain pill.

And you attribute that to the spiritual healers working with you and helping you through that?

Yes. Yes. When I first went in, this one leader in California, she had a vision. She saw me laying on the gurney when they first brought me in. When the doctors were looking at me, she said she could see me laying there. She said there were two white doctors on the end and two Indian

doctors with the long white hair and braid, were in the middle, and them two were looking at me and talking, and these other two were on the side. And that's how she saw me, she said.

And the two Indian doctors were the healers, right?

Yes. Yes.

And then you had your traditional medicine doctors?

Yes, those two traditional ones were in the middle, but those two white doctors were on each end.

OK, yes, the medical doctors.

The medical doctors, and that's how she seen it in her vision from California.

And how did your medical doctors at Salt Lake work with the spiritual healers? Were they open to that? I mean were they—?

No. See, they don't know all this.

They didn't realize it was going on.

No, they don't know all this is going on. That's what they call a miracle. See, they don't know anything about it.

OK. OK. They didn't know. OK. So they didn't—?

And we never tell them either.

You don't tell them.

Yes.

OK. Because I didn't know if they knew that you had spiritual healers working with you.

No.

They didn't realize that. So they think you had a miracle.

Yes. Because when I first went in, I went in there with an eagle feather. I had an eagle feather hanging in front of me on my TV. That was for me. And I prayed to that eagle feather every morning when the sun comes up, every evening, you know. Then we tell people not to touch that feather up there, you know. So they look at it and all the doctors look at it. They ask questions about it and I tell them what it's for, you know. Then I had one nurse. She was a Native American from Alaska, and she used to volunteer to be on my ward to be my nurse, you know, because she knows all about the native ways, and we talked, she talked to me and all that at that time. But I couldn't talk, so I did a lot of writing. And they got to where they put a trach in my throat because I couldn't talk or anything like that.

Are you able to discuss what the eagle feather means? I mean can you, or is that something we shouldn't—?

It's just my spiritual thing that has been blessed, by grandfather, you know, upstairs, like him up there [indicating a picture on the wall], you know, that's yours up there, so it's been blessed by that one, then my wife and all that.

Everyone blessed that?

Yes, it's been blessed and all that, you know. So that's why, you know, that's there for me. That's my power.

Now when was it in all this medical treatment that you underwent, that somebody finally said that this cancer could be related to radiation that you received when you were a child, from the Nevada Test Site?

Well, they didn't really say what caused it. They didn't really tell me what caused it or anything, you know, and all that. Then I stayed in the hospital, I think it was six month, seven months or so, up there.

You were up there that long?

Yes. Actually I was in the hospital, about, I think about two months at the other time. They transferred me to like a rehab center where I went from there to go get my treatments. They said no use for me taking a bunk.

Right, a hospital bed.

Hospital bed when I could be at a care center, but it was a rehab place.

Rehab, yes. So was it when you came back to Ely that somebody finally said, Mr. Reilley, you may have contacted cancer or developed cancer because of what happened to you when you were a child. I mean at some point someone put something together, connecting your youth with the kind of cancer that you had?

Well, after I came back here, then I thought to myself, you know, I served in Vietnam when they was spraying the Agent Orange down there. So I went to the veteran hospital and talked to them [00:40:00] over there and all that, and you know I told them that I had a cancer of the esophagus. And at that time, right away, I took my medical records over there and they looked at them and all that, you know, at that time. But they still wouldn't admit that it was caused by the what you call it?

Yes, the radiation.

Finally, they said well, since I was a diabetic, it causes cancer, you know, with the Agent Orange. They didn't really want to come out and say it. As of today, you know, this is proven already. So, I came back here. So they give me 20-more percent disability on top of what I had. See, I had 60 percent disability.

From the military. OK.

Yes, because I was wounded over there.

You were? OK.

I was all shot up over there.

OK, well, that's interesting, you know, you did mention Vietnam, and so you're saying that you were wounded in action over there?

Yes. I served two tours over there.

You did? Did you sign up for them?

Yes, I signed up.

You said at first you did.

Yes. Yes.

Two tours, and you were actually out there in the trenches, so to speak.

Yes, I was in combat.

And you were wounded, and you were around Agent Orange?

Yes.

What are some of the afflictions that people get from Agent Orange exposure? Did they ever—?

Well, now they came out with a list.

They have a list. OK.

They have a list, you know, different kind of cancers, you know. If you fall in that category, they can't deny it, you know.

OK, so Agent Orange also causes the cancer.

Yes.

So you were exposed as a child from the test site and also during your tour of Vietnam.

Yes.

That's pretty amazing. You mentioned that at some point you applied for compensation because there is compensation available for victims of the test site radiation exposure.

Yes, after I come back from Reno there, the hospital—[at this point, Mr. Reilley seems to have difficulty speaking.]

I'll take a break.

[00:42:29] End Track 2, Disk 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 3, Disk 1.

OK, we were discussing the process that you went through to get compensation for the cancer that obviously at some point people realized, the medical field must have realized that it was related to your early years at the Nevada Test Site, and probably from that exposure, and then did anyone bring up the Agent Orange? Was that a problem for you? In other words, was there some argument over which type of exposure could have given you the esophageal cancer?

No. No, nobody ever did tell me where it came from. As of today, all I know is they don't know where it came from.

But it was not a problem for putting in a claim for compensation from—?

Well, then in the early nineties I got a call from Virginia Sanchez when we first started this nuclear risk. At that time, I think it was known as a CANAP [Citizen Alert Native American Program]. Virginia called me up, asked me if I wanted to be on it, you know, be one of the committee members. And of course then I, you know, I thought about it for a while. Yes, I guess, yes, why not? So I've been on the nuclear risk [committee] for quite a few years.

Oh you have? OK. So you were on it before you were diagnosed.

Yes, I was on there.

So then all of a sudden you realized then before you were diagnosed that people at Duckwater and other areas around here were getting cancer from high doses of radiation.

Yes.

OK.

Yes, then when they finally came out with the compensation, they came out with a list of a type of cancer for Downwinders, and Tricia [Patricia George] had the list over there and we was looking at it. Right on that list was esophagus cancer, which I had. Then she said, well, let's put in a claim. [Referring to the U.S. Dept. of Justice *Radiation Exposure Compensation Act*, or RECA]. And there was another Native American lady that put in for that claim before I did, and she was back and forth fighting, you know. Then we got mine in there and we sent it in and all that. I did the same thing, I sent a form in and all, and then I sent it back to me, then they sent it back. Yes, it took us about nine months to finally get my—because a lot of the stuff they asked for is all original document. If you don't have original documents, it is tough. They don't take photostatic copies or anything like that, or affidavits, things like that. They accepted my grade school transcript, which was a real important thing. Those were the years I spent in Duckwater, '51-'57, and Nye County School District, they put them on a what do you call it? Like that.

Oh, they did? Oh, they—OK.

They had it on there.

You had to prove you were there. Yes.

Yes. And they ran them off there and, you know, put them on pieces of paper and they stamped it and all that, and they accepted that, the Justice Department. Department of Justice was doing the reviewing, and they were doing the paperwork on it.

And other than they made you give all original documentation, did you feel they worked with you on that? I mean did they work well with you, trying to get this claim through?

Yes, you know, they wanted new information or whatever. They'll write a letter to me, you know, they send that and whatever they're asking for. Always sent it back to them certified. Always. Everything, you know, is certified. That way then I know they got it, because you know how government is.

Were they in Washington, D.C., do you remember?

Yes, right there at the Justice Department.

Oh, OK, in Washington, D.C. And then how long a process was it, do you remember? Did it take like months, a year, before they actually sent you the compensation?

The whole thing, nine months.

Nine months.

Nine months, the day I got the dollar. And they give me a choice: You want a check or go to your direct deposit? So I just said, Direct deposit. So I never did see the check, so it just went right into my checking account.

[00:05:00] *OK. Oh, that was nice. I mean it doesn't make up for all the suffering but it's something. I mean do you know many people that you went to school with at Duckwater or lived in and around the Ely area that did get cancer? I mean is it fairly common?*

I think there was one in Duckwater who wanted to put in for it but he had a different kind of cancer. It wasn't on the list.

But it wasn't on the list. How about any of your family members or relatives? None of them came down with it?

I had an uncle that worked on the Fallini Ranch.

Fallini. Yes. By Railroad Valley?

Yes, he worked down there for forty years, then he died from prostate cancer, from that, and then it took off and then it got into his stomach, and nobody ever found out exactly what he died from. His family never put in for it or anything.

They didn't.

No.

I wonder what happens after the fact. I guess it's for the afflicted person, not—I mean if they died and the family tries to put in a claim later, does that—?

Yes, they could get it.

Oh, they could? OK. So they could. They just didn't.

No, nobody applied for it, you know.

Didn't do it.

Yes, I want to talk a little bit about that, like my wife is a spiritual leader, healer, and when the doctors told her that, you know, we don't expect your husband to live more than five years, you know, That's all we give him, and at that time, then, the doctors were saying, well, they couldn't figure me out why all this thing was happening to me, you know. So after I got out I was home for a good two months. My wife goes out every morning, she prays, every night, she prays.

One afternoon she came in and she said, Oh, she said, I got a message from Grandfather, she said. He wanted me to pass a message down to you.

And I said, Well, what is it?

She kind of look at me, you know, she said, Grandfather sent a word down to me to tell you that you are lucky that you are spending your money the way you want to spend it and spend it the way you want because there's a lot of other people that put in for it, don't get to spend it because they're deceased,

they're gone, and the other families, the extended families, they spent it for them.

And he said that I was one of the lucky ones that, you know, that got to spend it. And she said, Spend it the way you want, you know.

So when she says, Grandfather says, now is she speaking really of your—?

God, up there.

OK, that's who she's—?

The God.

OK.

Yes, the one we call Grandfather.

OK, Grandfather.

God. Yes.

So she said that was the message, enjoy your life, and you're one of the lucky ones?

Yes. Yes. See, when she prays she communicates through the eagle, and they say the eagle is the one that carries the message up. Yes. So every time we're going down the road, we see an eagle and we'll stop and she'll talk to him, pray to it, and all that, you know, tell him to carry all the messages, you know, all her prayers up and all that. It's always being answered and all that, you know. It's quite an experience to see her do that. Lot of times, I see her talk to an eagle. I've seen her talk to an eagle on the side of the road and we'll stop, eagle'll be sitting there, she'll open her window and get out and talk to him, and they'll sit there and look at her, you know, turn their head around and all that, you know, and all that, listen for a while. Then they get up and take off. Or sometime they'll be sitting in a tree and they'll squawk back at her, this and that. That's a neat experience because they talk her language. And she's had another good experience in that she talked to a buffalo down there at Warm Springs, a live buffalo down there. And she was

talking to them and thanking them, you know, for the buffalo horn, because with her doctoring she uses eagle feather and a buffalo horn that was given to her by a Sioux spiritual leader that [00:10:00] used to be here because she was, what do you call it? A mental health counselor, but she moved on and she had this buffalo horn and she gave it to my wife because it was a spiritual thing, so she's been using it. So we stopped down there and she thanked the buffalo for, you know, for the horns and all that. And she said that the buffalo came over and talked to her. She said that that buffalo's got a real low-toned voice, she said. But she doesn't tell me what they say. It's her own thing. So the other day they had that walk by the test site down [from] Johnnie Bobb [Yomba Reservation].

Yes.

That morning, and we're laying in bed and I thought, well, I can't make it down but I had a meeting down there that Sunday. Then I said, Well, I could go to the meeting and then stop and see the buffalo. My wife said, You know what? She said, I had a dream this morning that we was going to go down that way and I would stop and ask a buffalo if I could have some of his buffalo hair. And I said 'yes,' so we went down there.

They've got four of them down at the Lock's Ranch. So there's two of them were sitting down and two of them were standing up. So we parked over there and I got my camera out. My wife walked over there and she was praying to the buffaloes. This one buffalo, the oldest one, standing there watching her when she was talking, the other one sitting down like listening. And the younger one, he was standing on the side. And she was talking to them for quite a while. Finally the older one walked away and the young one came over real close to the fence that when my wife just walked over to the fence and plucked his hairs out and he stood there and look at

her. Then she took her hair and all that and she got done. Took pictures of it. Then they walked away. It was quite a neat experience. Had that on the camera.

When someone is a healer, are they just born that way or do they have to study or become almost like an apprentice under someone who's already a healer? What is the process?

You know, actually you have to be born with it, to start with. And when you're born with it, lot of times it's kind of you have to get somebody that's been in there to help you along, you know, to get you started. Because you got the powers already, but you need somebody to guide you through the steps, you know.

Does she have many people ask her for help, or does she usually offer it when she sees—?

Yes. We get calls from all over. She's healed some people as far away as British Columbia, up into Canada, Wyoming, Idaho, all over. California, Oklahoma. So we get a lot of calls. And she works through prayers. She doesn't have to be there. All they do, they call her up, she'll take her eagle feathers out there, get the thing going, then she'll pray for them and all that, you know.

Two or three days later she'll check up on them and see how they're doing, and she tells them if something comes, touch you, one or two o'clock in the morning, don't get scared. That is Grandfather coming to heal you. She warns them of that, because we've had people that something—you're sleeping two o'clock in the morning, something touches you, and it scares you. And some people have turned white because, you know, you're asleep, something touch you, you look around, nobody's around. So usually we tell them when they get doctored, this will happen most of the time, you know.

Now on your treatment, I assume you're still seeing the doctors in Salt Lake periodically.

Yes, I go up there every three months. Think my next one is June 11, 12, or something.

And how do they check you? How do they check the cancer to see—?

[00:15:00] Well, I go to the Huntsman Cancer Institute, and what he does, he just check me, you know, feels around, and they do an MRI. They do that, not all the time, you know, but they take X-rays then to see if there's anything coming up.

And they think it's shrunk.

Yes, it's gone now.

And they're not aware of the spiritual healing.

No. No.

But you continue. You will continue with that too, right, to make sure it doesn't return and—?

Yes. Yes. Then I go to the ear, nose, and throat doctor and I go to them the same day. They're the one that stick their instrument down and they're the one that checks my voice box. I have a permanent damaged voice box, they told me.

From the cancer.

Yes, they said from the cancer. Well, they didn't really say from the cancer, but one time I was sleeping, I heard the doctor—well, I was supposed to have been asleep. I heard the doctors; they were talking about it. That was caused from that instrument and that stent they were putting down in there. Damaged it, yes. They damaged that, you know.

OK, they damaged it. So you think they probably created the damage.

Yes. Yes, they did. So they say that I'll never talk again, you know. But right now they're kind of amazed why I'm talking loud and noticed that my voice is getting louder all the time, you know.

Yes. You're healing.

Yes, my spiritual healer, she's saying that, *You'll be talking.* But one of my voice box is frozen. See, you have two voice boxes. When you talk they go both—?

Yes, they vibrate. Yes.

Yes. One of them is doing it; the other one is frozen. One side.

Oh. So does it make you kind of tired to talk a lot?

Yes.

It does. OK.

Then I have to be real careful how I eat because, you know, I got a real small opening because they don't open on one side.

OK. So you don't want to wolf down your food. That could be serious.

I used to choke on things, you know, especially water. Even water.

Was this before you knew you had cancer? I mean is that one of the symptoms you were noticing?

Yes, that was way back. Yes, that was some of the symptom. As of today, if I don't watch it, you know that liquid is the hardest thing to swallow.

To swallow?

Yes.

I didn't know that.

Yes. Even the doctors told me, they said—

Yes, be careful with that.

Yes, liquid, or it'll go down the wrong pipe.

OK, I'm going to stop this and change, then, so go ahead and—

[00:17:53] End Track 3, Disk 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 4, Disk 1.

OK, Mr. Reilley, I kind of wanted to touch on the Nevada Test Site again and here we are many years after the testing, nuclear testing is over, and a lot of people have found that they have various medical afflictions, not only Native Americans but a lot of people downwind. How do the Native Americans, particularly the Western Shoshone, view the damage and things that happened to the homeland, which that is traditional Shoshone territory all through the test site, and on up here and the people that were downwind? Do people talk about it much? I mean what do they think about what happened there, and I mean are they worried about this occurring again?

Well, my stepfather was, you know, from down in that area, down at Ash Meadows?

Ash Meadows.

Yes, his family was down in that area, and they've lived up there at the test site.

They did live there. OK.

Yes, they did live there, the family and all that; they lived down there until they got run out of there.

Oh, they did?

Yes.

So they lived at Ash Meadows and then the military and DOE [Department of Energy. It was the AEC at that time]

Yes. What happened, they lived up at the test site, you know, and then when they left they went to Ash Meadows.

OK. Did they say where they lived on the test site, what area, which one of the valleys?

It was just the whole valley there.

The whole area. OK. They lived around there. And then they were told to leave. Were they resentful about that?

I don't really know. My step dad is ninety. He just turned ninety. Had a party for him last week.

What's his name?

Jack George.

OK. Is he related to Patricia at all?

Yes, the grandfather.

So he's ninety. They had a party. Does he live—?

Yes, lives right down here.

Right down here? Is he in good health and spirits and—?

Yes, he still rides a bicycle and walks and all that.

Oh my gosh. So he remembers actually being forced to move.

Yes.

Does he ever mention any resentment, or do you think he just accepted it and left, or do you know?

He don't really talk about it. He told me one time he knows a cave down there that's got all the artifacts in there where the Indians put all their stuff in there, and I think as of today, I don't think it has been found, he said, but he wasn't sure.

I'll bet he'd like to go back down there. I wonder if he could find that.

Well, they gave a tour down there that one time. I know some of the elders went back and all that, you know. They were down there looking around but they never really could remember anything, you know. They just remember, saying, Well, this, I remember this was there, and this was there. Not the same no more, you know.

It's not the same, yes. Did you ever go on one of those tours?

Yes, I went down there on the reading of the petroglyphs down there. My interpretation of the petroglyphs.

OK. I saw that "Storied Rocks" report, I think. Isn't there one called "Storied Rocks"? I might even have it with me. That, yes, went to all the different petroglyph areas down there and gave some input on the area, what you thought they, you know, the relationships with the land and the plants and—So you were there. OK.

Yes. This was done by Richard Stoffle.

Stoffle, yes.

Yes, he's the one that took us all down there. Various representatives from various tribes. And I went down there as an Ely [interpreter], down there. Interpreted some of the rocks. They had a couple of books out of it so....

I do think I have that report. It was good and I use it in my job, too. Did they take you to any of the areas where there'd been above ground tests, or even below ground tests? Did you see any of the damage that was done from these explosions?

[00:05:00] We seen where they went off, you know, where it dropped? Drop areas and all that, you know. Then lot of mostly what we seen, petroglyphs, you know.

Yes, it was mostly directed to that and not the—

Yes. Some of the caves where the Indians lived, we went to some of those.

Overall did you feel that they were pretty well-preserved, considering what had gone on around them? Did you see any direct damage?

Not really, but we don't really know what it looks like on the other side. They was saying they got craters and all that, you know. But these were one of—I think it was the smaller tests that didn't do too much damage, what they've been showing us, you know.

Dr. Stoffle has been real involved in taking Native Americans out for studies of plants and the landscape and various studies, and it's been real useful to people trying to understand how people lived out there. Now as far as what you know from people like your stepfather, did many people live out in that area, or what did they do in and around the test site mostly? Was it big residential areas or would they have just used those area to procure pine nuts or, I'm trying to think, or was it, you know, traditional gathering areas or village areas? Do you know what they—?

I don't really know. I haven't really asked them what they did down there, but they had areas where the lived down there, doing their pine nutting. But I don't really know what they did.

And there was various tribal groups that do claim some kind of ancestral ties to that area, even Owens Valley Paiute, Southern Paiute, Western Shoshone, various people. Do you know if they have any more studies planned for that area? Have you heard of—?

Well, I haven't heard anything.

These were DOE sponsored mostly. What are the feelings? Do you feel like the Western Shoshone have any real hard feelings toward the government? I mean I know that there's some peace movements and I know there's been some demonstrations going on lately. What's planned? I mean do you know what direction they're going as far as what the government's doing down there, in the past or the future?

Well, you know, talking to some of the people that's been down there, and with me being down there, the people are telling me that now since the testing stopped, lot of the plants are coming

back, and I notice like that Indian tobacco up there. And they're coming back down there. And the sagebrushes are, you know, are coming back, and some of the native flowers are coming back, after they stopped the testing.

Now have any of the Western Shoshone, as far as you know, asked to be able to go out there for gathering purposes or hunting purposes? Have they ever expressed any interest in using that area anymore, or have they just decided not to and go somewhere else?

Well, in the early 1990s I used to go down there and protest down in Mercury at the gate there. At that time, that's when they used to be pretty tough with us, you know, you cross the cattle guard, you're getting handcuffed and get hauled to Beatty, Tonopah, get thrown in jail. You got to find your way back, you know. But as the years went back, you know, they started kind of a thing and kind of went easy on us, you know, but they still had a holding pen there and take us into Mercury and take our pictures and all that, you know.

Really, they did? Just because you were—?

Yes, you crossed the line.

Were you causing problems or you were—? What were they doing out there? Can you describe what a protest would be like?

They would just go across the line and sit on the other side.

That was it. So you were there but you weren't supposed to cross the line.

Yes. Yes. Not supposed to be on that property.

And if you did, they'd arrest you or take—?

Yes, they'd arrest you. Yes. You were automatically arrested for trespassing. Even though we issued—the Western Shoshone issued permits down there for the non-Indians to go be on the

[00:10:00] test site and all that, you know. So everybody that went across had permits and would show them permits. As of today, they still issue permits.

Who issues the permits?

Western Shoshone.

Oh, OK, so the Western Shoshone—?

That's the Shoshone National Council they have.

OK, and gives people permits to demonstrate or—?

Yes, demonstrate, permission to be on the land.

There's been some talk of resuming tests, nuclear tests, out there. Have you heard anything about that?

That's what I've been hearing, but I don't really know.

Yes, if it's just talk or if there's—I've heard that a couple different times. I asked Mary Palevsky. She'd heard it too. And I'm not sure how serious it is. If you heard that that was really going to happen, more nuclear testing out there, what do you think would be the Western Shoshones' plan of attack? I'm sure they wouldn't sit back at this point.

Well, pretty hard to say because they just had a Mother's Day demonstration down there. Then the Western Shoshone National Council's just had a walk and run from Warm Springs clear down to Yucca Mountain. We do that, it's an annual thing.

Where is Warm Springs?

Down here on this side by Fallini Ranch, in the corner where the highway come in from Alamo. They start from there, then they walk all the way down through Beatty and then on the east side of Yucca Mountain. That's the mountain where they're boring into. We have a gathering on this side of it, on the mountain, every year. They're in their seventh year of gathering there this year.

Then the real tough runners, they run north around through Rachel and then across the desert there, come out down there by a prison down there somewhere. Indian Springs. Then over to—what do you call it—but then to make a complete circle around it, if they don't have enough runners this year they'll go half and next year they go the other way, complete the circle.

And their main focus now, the people that are protesting, is it more to do with Yucca Mountain at this point, the nuclear storage?

Yes. Yes.

Do you feel that the government's listening at all?

My own personal opinion, I don't think so. I think they have a lot of data that they need before they can do it. They don't have very much because when anyone asks for something, they don't have it. There's not enough studies that are being done on that, you know. That's my personal feelings.

Yes, but it's good that people are speaking out but yes, I don't know if anyone really knows where we're heading on that.

Yes. Because we have different native people go to all these meetings and they speak up, but what can you say in two minutes, five minutes or whatever?

Let's check the time. OK, I'm going to stop.

[00:13:56] End Track 4, Disk 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 1, Disk 2.

Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, interview with Mr. Bennie Reilley Sr., conducted by Renee Corona Kolvet on May 10, 2004 in Ely, Nevada. This is disk number two.

[00:00:19] End Track 1, Disk 2.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disk 2.

Mr. Reilley, you mentioned that you were a Marine and went to Vietnam and I think it would be very interesting to get some information on your experience in the American Marines, United States Marines, in the what, 1960s, would it have been?

Yes. Nineteen sixty-four when I went in.

Nineteen sixty-four? And how long were you in?

Till 1969.

OK, 1969. You were in five years. Was that a normal stint in the military or did you re-up?

Well, I was thinking about re-upping but when I went over [my enlistment] because of my hospital stay for recuperating from my wounds. That's where that extra [time] came in.

OK. Would you mind talking about how you got wounded and where you were at and what happened?

Yes, no problem on that. Yes, in 1965 I got wounded while I was on a night patrol, and about midnight we were crossing a rice paddy and they caught us in the cross fire, and I got it right through the chest and my rib and my right arm, and my radioman was right behind me and they got him too. So we got a real big fire fight there, and I went down right on the paddy. And the interesting part about it is that I don't remember going down but I remember when I went down I reached for my side. I felt my side was hot, and I felt that blood was coming out on me, it was hot. First thing came to my mind—I never passed out, I was still conscious—was to move to my side and let the blood drain out instead of going in me, you know. So the fire fight was still going on and I could see the tracer round was still, you know, buzzing all over, you know, and all that, you know. And it lasted maybe about like ten minutes. Finally it subdued. Then they carried me across back on the other side, and they called in the medivac, and they came, and it took about fifteen minutes before they came, and they're trying to come down, and they throw a flare out

there, and they came down, touched, but the firing was so hard, so fierce, they took back off and they went up back around again, and they said, We're going to come back down again.

We're going to touch and go, and be ready, and throw him in there like a sack of potato, you know. They said, OK. So when they came down, hit [banging hand on table], they threw me in there. When we took off, I could hear the bullets hitting the chopper and underneath, I could hear when we was going up, but they had a plate under the bottom of it.

OK, so that kept you from getting hit again.

Yes. Yes. But I was conscious all this time. Then the guy, one guy there, he keep checking my eyes to see I don't go into coma, you know, shock. So he said, Hang on, hang on. We was maybe about five or six miles from a field hospital. So I remember landing there. The nurses came out, and a corpsman. They had a dolly, gurney, a white one. They threw me on and they wheeled me in there, and I looked up and this tent was white, you know. And the next thing you know, they were cutting my clothes off, and I went out after that. And that must've been something like—

You passed out entirely?

Yes. They put something on me because they had to run X-rays and all that out there. So it was about two or three o'clock in the morning, that's when they started working on me. So I was out from three o'clock in the morning, all that day, then I came to the next day about twelve o'clock.

I woke up, I, open my eyes, and all I seen was white, and I said, Where am I? you know,

[laughter] because the tent was white, you know, it's all white, you know, I was wondering.

Then I heard them talking, they said, Oh, he's awake, he's awake, you know. They all ran over. Then I said, Oh, I'm still here.

You're still here. Now I understood from some of the political discussions we've been hearing on [00:05:00] the TV, once you're wounded you have the option of quitting the military or at least getting out of active duty. Isn't there something, once you've been wounded?

It all depends on how bad. How bad are you wounded? So they worked on me and patched me up and all that. Then that same afternoon, then they flew me out to the ocean where USS *Repose* was out there. That was a military hospital ship. That's when I went into the emergency unit out there. That's where they operated on me and all that. They patched me up and all this. Think I was on there for—I was on there for a while.

And then when you were better, they sent you back to Vietnam?

Well, they operated on me and all that. And it was on December 14, 1966, that night, when I got wounded. Then I went out on the ship. Then right after that, the ship went on a cruise for Marines that was on the ship recuperating. We went on a Christmas cruise up to Hong Kong. So we spent something like two weeks up in Hong Kong. And that was the most miserable experience I ever had because they had these all little kids come onto the ship to sing to us, you know, little kids all different sizes, same uniform. And you're hurting, you're sick, they just sat there, they all sing and all that, you know, they sing to us all day long, you know.

You got tired of it?

Yes.

Tell me about the factors that went into your decision to join the Marines, and where did you enlist, and how many Shoshones that you knew from in and around the area also joined?

I had a friend in Duckwater when I was over there, a lot older than me, and he went in the Marine Corps way before. He went in there, serve his time, and came out. And he talked to me about it and I was a kid and all that.

So you were too young then but he was older and—?

Yes. Yes, and all that, you know.

So he obviously had a positive experience because he relayed it to you and you wanted to go in.

Yes. Yes. Then I'd seen the other Native Americans were going into the service too, you know.

In them years, in the early years, lot of the Native American, they went into the military. Then them years, they went into the military, very normal. They volunteered. They weren't—?

Volunteered. They weren't drafted. They volunteered.

Yes, there's quite a few of them off the reservation, they all went into the military.

And why do you think they were interested in the military? Was it something to do? The adventure?

Yes, probably the adventure, something to do, you know.

Adventure. Yes. Got them off the reservation and gave them some training?

Yes. Yes.

You went in, and did you sign up for five years? I mean when you first went down—?

Well, what happened was, I wanted to go in the Marine Corps but what happened was that I got a draft notice from the U.S. Army that said, Report to Salt Lake, you know, you're going in the draft. That's when Ely had a local draft board here then. We had an office here. And they told me to report to Ely and I came in to Ely. They said, You got to go to Salt Lake. I said, I don't want to go in the draft. I said, I want to volunteer in the Marine Corps. He said, Well, OK, he said, go back to Duckwater. So they called Salt Lake up. So the recruiter up there—so next thing, I get another letter saying: Report to Salt Lake May 1, 1964. They bought me a ticket and all that. So I went in there May 1st and took my physical right there. And that same afternoon, there's a whole [lot of] other people, they put us on the plane—

my first plane ride in 1964—from Salt Lake to Las Vegas. And that night it was raining so hard and thunder, lightning, and the plane was just going up and down, sideways. I was hanging on. First plane ride now. I said, Oh, Holy Mackerel! That was quite an experience for somebody that's never been on a plane, you know.

[00:10:00] *Was that the furthest you'd ever—I mean had you ever been much outside of Ely, and I know you'd been to Utah, and I mean had you traveled much before you joined the Marines?*

Yes, like I said, I traveled all over the state. After school.

Oh that—OK, after—that's right, with the sports and stuff. OK.

After I got out of school, and I just went—

You just traveled.

Yes, toured around.

OK, but no plane flights.

No, no plane flight. I had a car.

You had a car.

Yes. Yes.

So they sent you to Las Vegas.

Yes, then we changed planes there, then landed in Palm Springs. Sitting out there by all that green, look real nice, you know. We never got off plane. They just stopped there, picked up some more passengers. Then on into San Diego. No, we flew right into Oakland. Then the Marine Corps bus met us there and they put us on the bus. Everything was nice. You know, the DIs [drill instructors], they picked us up and everything, you know, they were pretty nice, until we got on the base. When we got off, that's when everything hit the fan, you know. Now what did I get myself into?

Oh, you had second thoughts at first?

Yes, and then and all these bad words, this and that, all that came.

Were you homesick at that point?

No, I didn't.

You weren't homesick. OK.

No. No, I wasn't, because I got used to it because I was in Stewart, see, away from home—

Yes, you've been away. Yes.

So that was no problem, me being away, you know.

So how were Native Americans treated in the Marines? Any different than anyone else?

No, they weren't. But once in a while, we had another Marine that was in another squad right next to me, the DI said, *My Indian Marine is better than your Indian Marine.* So they put us to contests, you know.

Boxing?

No, you know, doing exercises, you know, push-ups and things, and we'd say, *Let's do both.*

Let's do twenty, you know, you do twenty. OK, I'll do twenty. We come out even.

And you know, actually they was getting mad at us because there was no winners. Or pull-ups.

We'll do fifty and then he'll do fifty and then we'll be [breathing heavily], Can't do anymore, you know.

What tribe was your competitor from, you do remember?

Well, he was from South Dakota.

OK, Sioux or—?

Yes, he was a Sioux. Yes, I can still remember him.

Is there some competition between the two of you or was it more these guys just putting you up to it?

They were just putting us up to it, yes. They were just putting us up to it, you know.

So when you were in Vietnam and obviously you traveled around at different towns, weren't you? I mean didn't you move around within Vietnam when you were there?

Well, after I volunteered, got out of boot camp, went to school and all that, then we met in Camp Pendleton, California. Then the whole—I don't know how many thousands of us Marines went over. They took us on a ship; we took a ship over, a regular troop ship, takes something like—there was a quite a few of us on that ship.

So that's how they got you there, on a ship.

Yes. I went over on a ship. I think the navy was on top, the army was in the middle, and we were on the bottom. We were on the bottom, you know. And the first stop was in Okinawa. Then I thought, oh, here we got to get off, and I was all ready but I pulled duty that night, so I didn't get to get off at Okinawa.

So you never got off.

No, I never got off.

And then where'd they take you, into—?

Then we went into Da Nang. Then we docked right into Da Nang.

Da Nang. OK. What'd you think of the Vietnamese people and what did they think of you?

Well, you can't understand what they're saying, and they can't understand you, so—. They were pretty amusing, you know.

They'd probably never seen American Indians before either, you know, and—

No. No, they used to point at their skin and point at mine. They say, Same same, you know.

Same same.

Same same.

Oh, that's funny. That's funny.

Yes.

So what kind of medals did you end up with since you were wounded?

Well then, when I got into Da Nang I went down south. I went down to Chu Lai, way down below Da Nang. Then I worked my way up. Our unit, we worked all the way up back to [00:15:00] Da Nang and almost all the way up to the DMZ, then back down again. Then I got wounded in Da Nang.

Da Nang. OK. And then you stayed in after that. Did you have any new fear after being wounded?

No. No, because I got awarded the Purple Heart while I was on the hospital ship. Yes, General Westmoreland, I have a picture of him giving me my Purple Heart while I was laying in the hospital bed.

That's quite an honor. What did that mean to you? Were you proud?

Well, I was just—at that time, you know, everybody knows a Purple Heart is a Purple Heart. It's something that you get if you get wounded, you know.

But it means something now. It really does.

Yes. Yes, then I got the Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal with two stars on the campaign medal, which means I did two tours. Each star represents one tour. And I got hanging up here in my little case up there, displayed.

I noticed you had a VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] license plate.

Yes, I'm a life member of the VFW here, local.

Local? And how many Native Americans are in that group?

Well, from here I think, from Ely area, I think I'm the only one. Then I think there's one in Duckwater.

OK, one in Duckwater, and you.

Yes. Oh, there used to be another one here but he's deceased.

OK, so there was another one.

Yes, he went to Vietnam too. He was wounded down there too so....

Yes, you mentioned the Agent Orange. Did you know that you'd been exposed to that when you were there or is it something you just heard later?

Well, we used to watch it spray.

Oh, you knew they were using it.

Yes, we knew. We seen the planes go by and all that thing, so when they're spraying over the top of the trees, jungle.

So you knew you were breathing it.

Yes, we knew.

Did you have any reaction from it at the time?

No, we didn't at that time, you know.

Little did you know that you were getting exposed to something else again. Now is there any compensation for that, now, if you say, I'm a Vietnam veteran. I have been exposed to Agent Orange, what do the veterans do about that?

Well, that's where they give me 20 percent.

OK, they give you 20 percent of what? Or they give you 20 percent disability.

Yes, 20 percent disability just for that rating, but they didn't say it was caused from that. That's what caused by diabetic, see. They said that's what caused the diabetic. So actually they don't want to come out and say it on a piece of paper.

Well, do you think that's worth pursuing any further?

Yes. Yes, I talked to the counselors down there and they said it's worth it, you know.

Kind of like the radiation exposure, I think the Agent Orange exposure is becoming—people are more aware of it and the government's having to take responsibility for the things that it exposed people to.

When you got out of the Marines, what did you do when you came back?

Let me go back a little bit on this Agent Orange stuff. When you say when you put in for it, the bad thing is the veteran people, they don't have the independent thing, like the Justice Department, look at your claim. They have their own claim people look at it. That's the only bad part about it. They don't go to the government. Even in their court system, they have their own court system. *They* make the decision. Their decision is final.

So it's still the military.

Yes, it's still the military. So a lot of times, you know, you don't get the good decision. If I went to an outside court, I would've got it just like that. But you're going to their court. It's run by the VA [Veterans Administration], by their government, their own people. They're the ones that are making the decision.

Whereas the nuclear, they have an independent—

Yes, they have an independent, yes.

OK, independent group.

See, on this, the military's not independent.

[00:20:00] *OK. But they did give you some disability.*

Yes, they did.

Twenty percent.

Yes, 20 percent.

OK. And was that right after you got out of Vietnam or did you have to wait so many years and then you went in to them and they started giving you disability? Or did you get disability right away?

No, I got disability after I got compensation from these guys.

OK. OK.

Yes, anyway, then I spent something like nine months in the hospital recuperating from my wounds.

From the wounds.

Yes.

OK. They were pretty serious then.

Yes. Yes, I spent some time in the hospital down in Da Nang after I came back from Hong Kong.

At that time, you know, they diagnosed you how bad your wounds were. If it wasn't bad, you know, you stay in the hospitals overseas. If it was bad, they send you back to the States, you know. They come down the line with a clipboard, they came in front of me with a clipboard, I was hoping, I said, Send me back home. Send me back home, you know. He looked down at me, you know. He said, Mr. Reilley, he said, you're going back to continental USA. I said, Oh boy!

You were happy.

Yes. Yes, then that afternoon they loaded me up on a big cargo plane with a bunch of racks in there and all that, flew from there to Philippines. They stayed overnight in Philippines. They did a test on my chest, see if it don't collapse, because they kind of wounded my chest, my lungs. So I passed it. From there I flew to Japan, then from Japan to Travis Air Force Base. From there they picked us up and I ended up down in Oak Knoll Hospital in Oakland for nine months.

Really? Just recuperating.

Yes, recuperating. Therapy.

What year was this now? About what year?

Sixty-eight.

Nineteen sixty-eight. OK. Oak Knoll.

Yes. I was recuperating there. Then they released me and sent me back to temporary duty to station over there in Treasure Island.

Oh, that's a nice place.

Yes, right in between San Francisco and—

So you spent time in Treasure Island?

Yes, I spent a little time there waiting for my final outcome of my evaluation board, going in front of the evaluation board, my documents and all that, medical record.

OK.

[00:23:10] End Track 2, Disk 2.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 3, Disk 2.

I wouldn't live there though.

No, you don't want to live there, but anyway, so when you actually got out of the Marines, were you in Oakland? I mean when you actually got discharged, where did that occur?

Yes, finally I got my final orders from the military. On my discharge papers, they said that they would give me temporary retirement from the military for five years. So I was really happy.

They say you're temporary retired with full benefits, just like serving twenty years in the military. That's what they gave me for five years. So I came home, back to Lund. From there, then I went to work down at the test site, the one down there, used to be on this side of Warm Springs? There's one opened up there in 1968 or 1967.

The Nellis—?

No, there was another one there.

Another one.

Yes, there was another one opened up, and they opened for two years, and they closed down.

They closed that down. [Central Nevada Test Site]

OK. So it was another testing, nuclear? OK.

Yes, there was two bombs set off down there. [Faultless was tested 1968 at the Central Nevada Test Area. Shoal had been conducted at a site near Fallon, NV in 1963].

So you actually worked down there.

Yes. That's another claim I could put in for. They have another form that's just came on. If you worked—[referring to Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program]

Oh, because you worked—?

Yes, I worked there.

But you worked there like in the seven—?

No, I worked there in '69.

OK, you worked there in 1969—

After I come right out of the military. That was my first job, yes.

OK, so you might've got exposed while you were working there too due to higher radiation—?

Yes, I think they really exploded it in 1967 or something like that, 1968, but I was a security guard and we went around checking that place. For two years I was down there.

OK. What did you see while you were out there? What did you remember seeing when you were out there? I mean they were doing tests while you were a security guard. Were they—?

Yes, they set one off already, OK? That was set off, and not too far from it, but the ground dropped around about five to six feet where they set off. You know, there's a level and *phew!* Down, you know. And all that. Then they were drilling another one out there. I think it was something like twelve feet in diameter. And I used to sit there and watch them drill, because I worked from six at night till six in the morning. We had twelve-hour shifts.

So you worked there until they closed down that operation?

Yes. Yes. That's where they claim that the first one that they set off, it leaked, and that's when they killed all the sheep in Utah. The radiation.

Really? That one, huh?

Yes, they said that's the one. The one that was set off down there.

That's interesting. So you were there two years, working at the test site. That's—

Used to call it a supplementary test area. That's what it was called. But it still belonged to the same—yes.

Yes, DOE.

Because at that time it was run by United States Atomic Energy Commission. They're the ones that had it.

OK. So what did you do after they closed down?

Then I came back here in Ely. Then I worked for Kennecott here for a while until the doctor told me that the fumes from the sulfur were bad for my, you know, for my lungs. That's when they let me go. That's when I moved to Reno. Nineteen seventy-four, I think.

Is that when you met your wife?

No, I met my wife in 1971.

OK. Here?

Yes. Actually I met her in Oakland. She was going to beautician's school down there.

Oh, and you met her. But you knew her already, but you ran into her again.

Yes, I knew her when I was stationed in Treasure Island. That's where I met her over there.

[00:05:00] Then I left and I came back here. Then she got working down there, and she moved back with her family back to Lone Pine, California. Then her mom died down there. Then they moved back to Duckwater and from Duckwater then they moved to Ely. And that where in 1971 we got married.

That's a long time. That's pretty remarkable. Now your three children, has there been any sign of them having any problems from your exposure to the nuclear testing? Has there ever been any indication that it might have been passed down?

Yes, my wife and I was talking about it here not too long ago. We had another daughter that was in between—let's see, I got my oldest one, then I had another daughter, then my other daughter, then my son, so I had four kids. But we lost that one daughter, that was at eight months. She had seizures. And the doctors diagnosed, she would've been what they call a "lap baby," that she never would, you know—I don't know what they meant by "lap baby." I don't know if she'd never grow or she would have always been a baby. But I have to find out, write to Carson [City] and get the doctors' tests so we could—and actually because there were long words behind that

the coroner uses, you know. What it was, we was talking about it, because at that time that's the Agent Orange thing, you know. It somehow might be related to that, you know. But she had seizures. Real funny part about it was that I was taking her to Salt Lake and when she was in the hospital, weeks at a time, she never had a seizure. But as soon as we take her out and brought her home, she'd have a seizure. We took her down, never have a seizure. Never. Finally she had a seizure and we took her down and they put her in the oxygen, and pneumonia got in with it and that's when we lost her. Yes, she was eight months old.

Well, it'd be interesting to look into that more, into her—

Yes, we was talking about that one time.

Oh boy.

But my other three kids, they're all normal.

They're fine. Well that's good to hear. And boy, I can see, after listening to your story, why they call you a survivor. And you're pretty remarkable. Your life's been very interesting, and thank you so much for sharing it with us. And I think we'll end here, and thank you again.

OK. You're welcome

[00:08:06] End Track 3, Disk 2.

[End of interview]

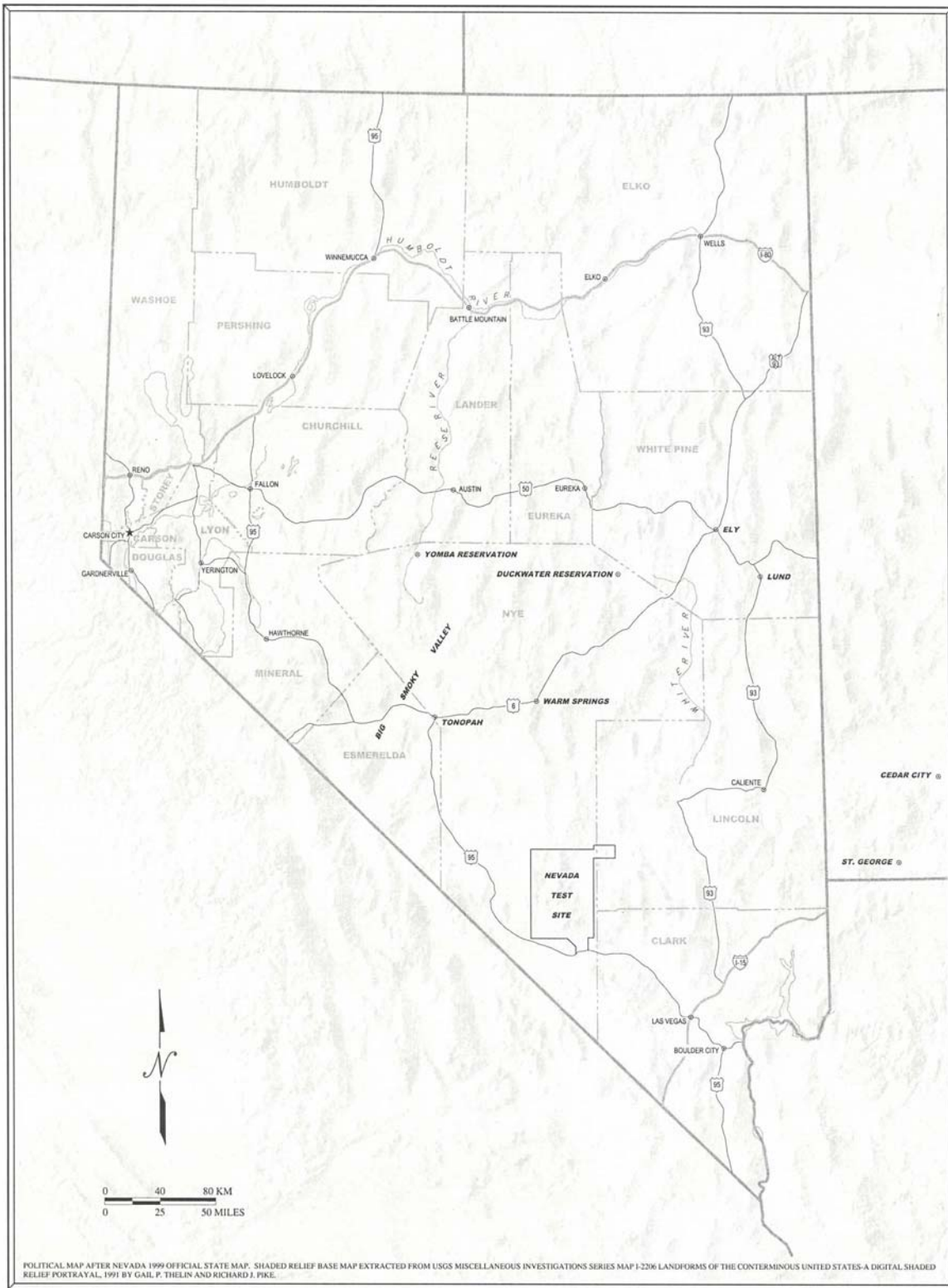


Figure 1. Locations mentioned in Bennie Reilley Sr. interview.

