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

Interview with Robert Agonia

June 29, 2005
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Charlie Deitrich

Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews conducted by an interviewer/researcher with an interviewee/narrator who possesses firsthand knowledge of historically significant events. The goal is to create an archive which adds relevant material to the existing historical record. Oral history recordings and transcripts are primary source material and do not represent the final, verified, or complete narrative of the events under discussion. Rather, oral history is a spoken remembrance or dialogue, reflecting the interviewee's memories, points of view and personal opinions about events in response to the interviewer's specific questions. Oral history interviews document each interviewee's personal engagement with the history in question. They are unique records, reflecting the particular meaning the interviewee draws from her/his individual life experience.

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

Charlie Deitrich: *OK, if you could state your full name and place of birth and date of birth?*

Robert Agonia: Robert James Agonia. My date of birth is August 3, 1938. I was born in Garden Grove, California.

Were you raised in Garden Grove?

Yes. I spent all of my earlier years there and went to high school there—well, grammar school, high school, and graduated in 1956, and then went on to Orange Coast Community College for two years, and then Long Beach State which now, I think, is California State University, Long Beach. They've changed their name. I graduated from there in 1961.

What was Garden Grove like back then? It was small—

It was strictly agricultural, orange trees, orange groves, eucalyptus trees. It was strictly agricultural, a population probably of 30,000. Very small. One elementary school, one junior high school, a high school. By the time I graduated, there was another high school that was built. But that's, you know, about the time that it started growing.

Yeah. What was it like growing up in a small town surrounded by a fairly, you know, metropolitan area?

Well, Orange County at that time, you know, was not a metropolitan area. Santa Ana was the county seat and maybe had a population of 100,000. Anaheim, you know, this was before Disneyland, Anaheim was the same thing. It was an agricultural area for the orange groves and the citrus. Garden Grove was the strawberry capital of California for a number of years, and

there was a strawberry festival that they started there and that still continues, but there's probably not more than twenty acres of strawberries grown in the city limits of Garden Grove anymore.

The land became more valuable as residential—

Oh, clearly, yes. My dad farmed, and slowly but surely the housing developments encroached on farmland and farmland has disappeared.

Your dad was a farmer?

Yes, he was an immigrant from the Philippines and spent years up in Seattle, worked on agricultural areas, worked in the canneries in Alaska, and then moved to Orange County.

So he was born in the Philippines?

Yes, he was born in the Philippines. I think he was about eighteen or nineteen years old when he immigrated to the U.S.

What was his name?

Mariano B. Agonia.

And your mom?

Rose Garcia. She was born in Colton, California. Her parents, my grandparents, were both immigrants from Mexico. My grandfather came over first and then my grandmother, and they met, as I recall, in Colton, California.

Where is Colton?

Colton is out by San Bernardino, Riverside, where the Cement Mountain—there's not much left of Cement Mountain, but there was this huge mountain, pretty-good-sized mountain they called it, and it was where they mined the cement for the—and it's now Portland Cement, but I forgot what they used to call it. But my grandfather worked on the railroad. And Colton was a very small community primarily of Mexican-American folks who immigrated there and lived there

and worked in the cement company. Much like Henderson, attracted an awful lot of laborers from all over the Southwest to work in the plants out there. The same thing in Colton. And Fontana, which was next door. And then Kaiser Steel built the great big plant, and that's where they got a lot of their labor. So, you know, those factories and plants attracted a lot of immigrants, laborers from all over the place.

So did your mom help out on the farm? Is that—?

Oh, yes, we all did. In California at the time, I don't know, they've changed it, but you could get a driver's license at the age of fourteen.

Is that right?

Yeah, if you in fact worked or you were, you know, for your parents or you lived on a farm, whatever, so I started learning to drive a truck, a '47 Chevrolet, a stick shift when I was thirteen-and-a-half, fourteen years old. Now, not on the highway, just around the farm. But I had my driver's license by the time I was fifteen-and-a-half, and so then I started driving all over.

I didn't know that. And so what kind of stuff did you grow?

Oh, primarily strawberries in the spring, tomatoes, string beans sometimes, but primarily strawberries and tomatoes.

Did you enjoy kind of the farm life, growing up?

Oh, it was great. I didn't have to worry about going to get a summer job like everybody else. All my friends were like, where am I going to work? `Hey Bob, can we go to work for your dad?` I said, `Well, yeah, you know, we pay twenty-five cents an hour.`

[00:05:00] *That's great. Did you have a good group of friends, growing up?*

Oh, yes, absolutely. Garden Grove at the time—it still is—was a very integrated community, small rural community. Because I went to school with, clearly, a lot of Mexican-American kids,

but a lot of the farms around there were either owned by Filipinos or Japanese, and so I went to school with—some of my best friends were Japanese-Americans. And we all played together, grew up together, and then, you know. So it was a very small community, but it grew so fast and it, you know, obviously it's changed over the years.

What kind of activities and hobbies did you have as a kid?

Primarily the Boy Scouts. Boy Scouts was a very important part of my growing up. I Went to the 1952 National Jamboree representing Troop One. We were the host troop for the National Jamboree that took place out on the Irvine Ranch. And it was a good part of—added a lot of positive things in terms of values, and it was sponsored by the Methodist Church. Scoutmasters were terrific fellows. One of the things that we did is that we, the troop itself with the Church's support, the philosophy is that once a month we would go camping someplace or we would be involved in something. It was not always the best thing to go camping during the winter, although California winters are not that cold.

Especially southern California's, for example.

Southern California. But yes, every month we would go someplace. And so sometimes when we would borrow my dad's truck and he wasn't using it during the weekend, we'd use the truck. It was a stake bed Chevrolet, so we would put all the camping equipment on there and away we'd go.

Fun. And what kind of places did you go?

Oh, out to the desert, out to Palm Desert and around Palm Springs, down near the San Diego area, O'Neill Park in Orange County, Irvine area. Primarily out to the desert, and then up, you know, around Big Bear. The camp may still be there. I know it was for up until maybe ten years

ago. There was a Boy Scout camp. It was operated by the Orange County council of the Boy Scouts—I don't remember the name of the camp.

That was up in Big Bear they had that camp?

Well, up near the Big Bear area, yeah.

That's beautiful up there.

Up by San Gorgonio. Yeah. Because that was one of the things when you were there for the week, if you wanted to—it became an option. I know when my younger brother went, it was an option to climb San Gorgonio. It wasn't an option for us. Thank goodness it was a two-dayer thing. We would hike up to I think they call it Lost Lake, and we'd camp there for the night, and then early in the morning you'd walk up to the top of the mountain, and I know as we were going up there, we hadn't had breakfast and they'd say yeah, we got a box of prunes. You get up to the top and there's a malt shop up there. When you get to the top, you can have a malt. As ten-and-twelve-and-thirteen-year-olds, I think we believed them. But we got there.

You just wanted to believe them, I think.

Yes. But one of the things that I do remember when we climbed up to San Gorgonio is that we would hear these airplanes, and of course you looked up in the air, in the sky, naturally you would. Nope, they were below you. They were coming through the canyon. Whether they were coming from Las Vegas or not, I don't know if they'd be coming through the canyon.

This is late forties, early fifties, somewhere in there?

Yeah, it would've been the early fifties. Late forties, early fifties. Because we lived out, well, it was about two miles out of Garden Grove, then we moved into Garden Grove in 1949. But we lived out in the rural area part of town.

Sounds like a pretty fun childhood.

Oh, yeah, it was a lot of fun.

And when you were in high school, did you have any kind of—I'm sorry, did you have brothers and sisters?

Yes. I had two brothers and a sister.

Can you tell me anything about them?

Henry was the next brother; he was two years younger than I was—excuse me, four years. He lives in Sacramento. You know, we all kind of went through the same pattern: Garden Grove High School, Orange Coast College, and then he went to Orange Coast for a couple of years, then he went to Cal Poly [California Polytechnic State University], got a degree in parks and landscape and went into—

[00:10:00] *Is that Cal Poly Pomona?*

Yes. And eventually, you know, got into the park administration, got his master's degree from Pepperdine University.

That's a good job, in Parks, yeah.

Yes, good job. He did very well for himself.

Sounds like it.

Yeah. Eventually I think maybe probably about late eighties, early nineties, he became the Director of Parks for the State of California.

Wow. That's an impressive gig.

Oh, yeah, it was impressive. A political appointee by Governor [George] Deukmejian, you know. I think he had been a Democrat up till then, but he quickly became a Republican, and still is.

Well, yeah, you know, you got to know which side your bread is buttered on, I suppose.

Right, yeah.

And your other brother and sister?

Younger brother Marion, same thing, same pattern, went to Orange Coast. He's a great tennis player.

Is that right?

Yeah. We keep telling him, Hank and I keep telling him that yeah, you learned from what we taught you and that's why you became better than we did.

Did he play tennis in college?

Yes, at Orange Coast. We all played tennis in college. But he did a lot better than we did. He ended up playing—by that time, the tennis team at Orange Coast, you know, tennis became one of their, not a major sport but they had some great teams and they ended up playing teams like UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] and USC [University of Southern California], which clearly we never did when we were playing tennis there. But I know he played one of the top USC players, you know, when you go to USC on a tennis scholarship, you're a pretty good player. And as I understand it from what he told me, and I saw it in a write-up in the paper, that he gave that young fellow a run for his money.

Well, good. And then what eventually did he do?

Well, he kind of followed in the same footsteps that Hank did, and he ended up in the landscaping business, and he and his wife have a landscape maintenance company down in San Diego. And he got into the nursery business, growing for retail, and in wholesale down in the San Marcos area.

San Diego's beautiful. It's a good place to have a business.

Oh, yeah, it really is, yeah. And my younger sister, she went to, same thing, Garden Grove High School, Orange Coast. Worked in the mortgage industry business for a long time, and for the last

eight years, I think, she's worked for the Orange County Sheriff's Department. She is a community liaison, I think is her title, and she works out of a substation down in Laguna Niguel.

OK. And then when you were in high school, did you have a sense of, you know, for lack of a better question, what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Oh, really, I wanted to go into teaching.

Oh, is that right?

Yeah.

What subject?

In the biology, in the science area. So I majored in biology and zoology at Orange Coast, then transferred to Long Beach. Same major.

When you were in high school, you enjoyed your science classes and that's—is that where the interest took hold?

Yes, that's where the interest—I had a biology teacher and he was a very—I mean, he had that knack, you know, that some teachers do and some don't, motivating us. He had only graduated—he was a young teacher but had a lot of drive. And having spent a lot of time down at the beach, of course, you know, Newport Beach and Huntington Beach and whatever, so I did a seashell—a shell collection and labeled it, did the research in finding out—up until then, anybody who went down to the beach [would say], oh, this is a pretty shell, but you didn't know what animal may have lived in that shell at one time or another. And that's where I, you know, it kind of piqued my interest in science and that's where it took off from there.

OK. So basically it starts with this inspirational teacher and it kind of goes on from there?

It started with that, yeah, but by the time I got to Long Beach and had to take some of those classes to become a teacher, like audiovisual, how to operate the slide projector and the movie

thing, and some of the other theoretical classes in education, I said to myself, I don't think that's what I want.

So the teaching aspect kind of diminished.

The teaching aspect, it went bye-bye.

But you still enjoyed biology.

Oh, yeah, I still enjoyed science and I was a lab technician. And by the time I got to be a junior I worked in the science lab. I also was an instructor for the undergraduate students in science in the Biology laboratory, I think making seventy-five cents an hour.

It was more than your friends were making on the farm.

[00:15:00] Oh, yes, you know, it was quite an increase. I told my dad, hey, I'm making seventy-five cents an hour.

You want a raise during the summer.

I want a raise, yes.

As somebody that has avoided science his whole life, what aspect of biology kind of attracted you? If there is an aspect. I'm not even sure.

It was all aspects of it, but primarily the animal life, zoology. At Orange Coast, one of the things that I—a good friend of mine, he lived in Laguna Beach, and he wanted to be an ornithologist. I'm sure he is. I have lost contact with him. But he did some part-time work for a professional bird photographer up in Los Angeles. And since I had an automobile and he didn't, we'd go out together and he would collect birds using a mist net, a very fine net. And depending upon the bird that this photographer needed we would find out where they were at and he would go out and if we caught one, then there was a special box that he would put them in. We'd go to the nearest Greyhound Bus station or whatever and ship this bird in this box up to L.A. where Don

Bleitz who was the photographer would photograph. And his technique was—because they were in the box, so they were in the dark. When he'd open up his studio where he photographed them, it was completely in the dark. He knew what kind of bird was being shipped, so he would have the right environment, the right branch or whatever, to put this bird in this natural setting, and then put the bird there, and then take the photo, and then turned the light on before the bird could go haywire or whatever. To this day, I still don't know—obviously he let the birds go but, you know, some of the birds that we'd caught down at the Salton Sea, which was a couple hundred miles away from L.A., I mean I guess they found their way back to where they were. I don't know.

Did he put them back on the bus and send them home?

No, he didn't put them back on the bus.

Gave them a bus ticket and said, you know, have a good life.

Yes. He also had a piece of property—well, probably had rights to, so he had some small little cabins, huts out at Twenty-Nine Palms, inside the federal, you know, the park area, the national park. It wasn't a national park at the time. I don't know what it was. But it was all federal land. And that's where we caught most of the birds, strictly during the migratory periods.

During the early years of your life, was there a big historical event that you remember, something that really made an impact on you?

Well, a couple. As I said earlier, one of them was, you know, I mentioned the strong experiences in the Boy Scouts, and I recall even to this day that one of our scoutmasters, his last—Northcutt. Earl was his son. I can't even remember what Mr. Northcutt's first name was. Russ. Yeah, Russ Northcutt. I remember when he passed away. We were all probably, what, fourteen and fifteen years old and went to his funeral and, you know, clearly a sad day, but I recall that Dr. Null, who

was the senior scoutmaster, he was a doctor, said to us, Yes, but, you know, this world is a better place because of Mr. Northcutt. And, you know, what he gave back to the community. And that stuck with me, and that's part of my philosophy and outlook on life, to leave this place as a better place.

Another thing, and it kind of has a tie to this museum, although it's all clearly accidental, but probably 1946, as I said, we still lived a couple miles out from downtown Garden Grove, and I remember we used to catch the bus right on the corner where we lived, and there was probably seven or eight of us would get on the school bus every morning. And this one morning, we got on the bus. The bus driver drove, because he was kind of parked in the intersection, drove the bus up just a couple of feet and then stopped. He said, OK, all you kids be quiet. I'm going to tell you something. He says, Up here, we're going to stop at this house and this little boy is going to get on. And this little boy is Japanese-American and he just came from a camp in–I think he said, I thought it was in Arizona **[00:20:00]** where he was at. And we kind of looked and didn't know what he was really talking about. [And he said], So I want you all to be nice to him because he's going to be going to school with you. OK. So he drove up maybe another fifty yards or so, and there was this Japanese-American couple standing there with this little boy. The bus driver opened the door and he got out and he talked to Jimmy's parents for a little while, then he got on the bus. And I happened to have—there was no one sitting next to me, so Jimmy ended up sitting next to me. His name was Jimmy Yoshida. And we became the best of friends. He was a year older than I am. He graduated in '55; I graduated in '56. He ended up in the military, in the Air Force as a career officer. And the last I heard, which was years ago, he was stationed over in England.

Did you guys ever talk about his experience being interned?

Yes, we did and, you know, I came to appreciate the issues. He didn't see it, I don't think, so much as a negative because he was so young. I had, you know, another very similar experience, the Takahashi family were three brothers. We were basically the same age of my other two brothers. We were all within a year of each other. And they lived a couple of blocks from our [house]—in Garden Grove. And we all went to the same church, so we walked by and picked them up and walked across the street, go to church every week. But their parents, they were interned in Poston in Arizona. And one of the things that they did, he was a gardener by trade when he was interned, but apparently she learned how to paint. They would go out into the desert and they found some plants, some bushes that had very fine limbs on them. He learned to carve small birds. She learned to paint them. And they made pins, lapel pins for women.

And they learned this while they were in the camp.

He learned it while they were in camp. So when they came back to Garden Grove, instead of going back into the landscaping and gardening business that he had been before, they started this business, and they made a very comfortable living. I mean she ended up, people would come to the house to buy the birds. I mean, I know my mother has—we'd buy them for everybody, and my mother had them, my aunts, everybody had these. I mean they were exquisite birds that she'd learned how to paint. And it took them a month or two. He would carve them, he would sand them, she would lacquer them, and I forgot how many coats of paint and lacquer on those things. And then she ended up shipping them all over the country. But I remember they used to tell us about growing up in Poston. They clearly, you know, they thought, well, I guess it was OK. I mean, we've got this business that we learned. And I know Joe and Jimmy and Tommy, they thought it was fun. They used to laugh, yeah, we used to get to go down to the river, Colorado River and go swimming and that. But I suspect that internally to them it was clearly not the

greatest experience in the world, despite the fact they liked to remember just the good old times, you know, playing and not having to go to school so much.

Because you said there was a fairly large Japanese-American—

Community in Orange County.

Community in Orange County. So I would imagine you knew quite a few people that had the internment experience, given the time, you know.

Oh, we had a large number of them, yeah. Yeah, that I would, you know, there were the Takahashis, Yoshidas, and then the Yoshiyokas was the other family. We were all the same age. And they all had the same experience.

Yes. That's interesting. Any other kind of, you know, seminal historical events you remember, growing up?

No, other than obviously graduating from high school and going to college. I think those were probably some of the key events. Well, growing up in a small community like that, we didn't venture too far, although when we became a little older, during the summer for whatever, the family would go down, you know, we'd go on a vacation for a couple of days. I know we went down to San Diego a couple of times. Down in Ensenada [Mexico] a couple of times, and **[00:25:00]** Tijuana. I remember one trip to Tijuana, in one of the little store areas they were selling puppies, you know, so clearly we had to have a puppy. I know my aunt was with us and so she had the puppy and we were carrying him and, you know, because she obviously spoke Spanish, some guy told her, says, you know, `You're not from here.`

[And she says], `No, no, we're from the Orange County area.`

He said, `Well, you know, you can't take that dog back across the border.`

And she said, `We can't?`

[And he said], No, they're not going to let you. They're going to take that puppy away.

[And she said], Oh, no, we can't have that happen.

So when we started crossing the border, she put the puppy in her coat pocket. Because they asked us to get out of the car. And the little puppy didn't make a squeal or nothing. And so we jumped back in the car and we took off.

So your aunt smuggled a puppy across the border.

Right, yeah, an illegal dog in today's vernacular. And it turned out to be a female and it started a little family of Mexican dogs in the Agonia household for I don't know how many years.

That's funny. Oh, man. Just because we're here at the Atomic Testing Museum, at the time, do you remember the testing? Did you have a sense that the testing was going on in Nevada?

Yes. I recall in *Santa Ana Register* periodically—this would've been early fifties—that there would be an article in the paper, there's going to be a test out at the Nevada desert, you know, and so if you want to get up early in the morning, you may be able to see the light from these tests. And so I remember a couple of times getting up, and I swear that I saw this light. Now, whether it was or not, I don't know.

Well, so it was basically presented as more of a kind of an event to witness.

Yes. Right, yeah, it clearly was. I mean I recall a couple of the articles were fairly lengthy articles about what was happening and why they were doing it out in the desert, you know, why the Atomic Energy Commission [AEC] was doing what it was doing.

I know you were young at the time, but did you have a sense of the Cold War with the Russians, you know—?

No, not really.

Did you guys ever have any drills in school or anything like that?

No, I don't recall that we had any drills. I'm sure, you know, we were aware of the thing but I don't recall any drills other than just the fire drills that everybody had—[that] we had any that had to do with the atomic testing or the Cold War or anything like that.

Well, we liked the fire drills because it got us out of class for a while.

Well, that's true. Yeah, it did. It was not unusual for somebody to ring them right before a test.

Funny how that always happens.

So yes, we have to have the test tomorrow. Oh, good.

That was great stuff. So you're at Cal State Long Beach, or Long Beach State at the time. It became Cal State—

Yes. Long Beach State at the time. Right.

And do you eventually get your degree in biology?

No. Math was never my strength, so I really struggled to get through trig[onometry]. I said, I'm not ever going to make it through calculus. And so I switched majors in my junior—well, I was almost going in my senior year, and I said, I've got to get out of college. I didn't come here to flunk out. So I switched over to social science because I'd already taken a lot of classes in history and geography and whatever. And so I went to summer school that one summer, switched majors, came back in my senior year in the Social Science Department. And I think the profs, the professors and even the Dean thought that I was a transfer from someplace else and didn't realize that I had been on campus for over two years. And I ended up taking a lot of the history classes. And I know when I filed my application for graduation that next year, I remember I got this letter from them, come to the Admissions Office, "we want to talk to you." So I went to the Admissions Office and they said, We've checked your transcripts. You've taken all the required classes to get your degree in social science with a history major, and a minor in economics. They said, We don't know how

you did it. And the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts wants to talk to you because some of the professors are saying, oh, wait a minute, he got the grades. I took Russian history, both semesters of Russian history at the same time, which was very unusual, you know, you're supposed to take one and then you take the second one. [And they said], Normally needed to have somebody in the department for two years before **[00:30:00]** they'll give you the degree. I said, Well, where does it say in the catalog that you have to have been in the department for two years? You have to take the classes, but it doesn't say you have to do it for two years. I guess they just finally gave up, and so I got my degree in social science.

Was there any sense, because you said you were working in the lab and teaching some undergrads biology, right?

Oh, I was still working in the biology lab. Yes, I helped started the ichthyology collection, the fish. And I just saw in the paper the other day that Long Beach State has a—I forgot the name of it but they specializes in sharks.

Is that right?

Yeah, so, you know.

Was it tough to kind of give up biology and—?

It kind of was but, you know, it wasn't life-threatening or anything like that. And I was working at a soil and plant laboratory. I started working there my junior year at Long Beach. There was a little thing up on the board about—and it was in Orange, which is about five miles from Garden Grove. And so I ended up working in this soil and plant laboratory for three years, all total, working in the laboratory. It was a soil and plant laboratory. Their emphasis was supporting the nursery business, so there was the natural affinity there. So I worked in the laboratory and cultured bacteria and other kinds of diseased plants that the technicians would bring in from

all—most all of the growers in the southern California area, primarily down in San Diego. The Ecke poinsettia, the Ecke Farm was one of their clients, the San Diego Zoo, the racetrack at Santa Anita and at Hollywood Park. There were growers in central California, in the Watsonville area, back east in Ohio. We'd get the soil samples to do the analysis for nutrition. But in the back where I worked, it was strictly for the bacteria and the nematodes and the diseases of the plants, that I would culture for a plant pathologist who would come from UCLA. She would come about once a week, and then she would make the diagnosis of what disease the plant had, write up the report. We had a large—fairly good-sized greenhouse in the back that I took care of. So that was a fun job.

It sounds like your life experience with the farm and then your education with biology, there was a nice confluence there.

They all continued to meet.

I guess the question I would have is, considering the farming and biology, it seems like kind of a hard turn to go history and economics for your degree.

Well, you know, the history was just because I had an affinity for history, I mean for reading. It was an outgrowth of reading. I recall in the seventh and eighth grade, before when I went to high school, that I read every book in the little library in our classroom. I started in seventh grade, and then so I went to the eighth grade room and I started reading those books. But I said [to myself], wait a minute, I don't want to become a bookworm so I started slowing down when I went to high school.

And economics?

I think it was the business aspect, you know, from the farm. I recall at that time the wholesalers from Los Angeles would come out. They would pick up the produce from the various farmers

out in Orange County. I mean there were literally hundreds of farms, small farms. This was before the agribusiness took off in California, at least in Orange County. And I remember the driver, one of the drivers, we became pretty good friends, and he would bring the price report from the prior day—he would take 100 flats of strawberries and say, OK, we sold them and you get $1.75 a flat, which was twelve little boxes of strawberries. And I said, Oh, OK, fine. Well, you know, over a period of time he'd say, Oh, there was a good market yesterday. You're going to get $2.00. I said, Hey, well, **[00:35:00]** OK, and tell my dad, and OK, fine. And then one day we were sitting around talking and I said, Now, wait a minute. If we're getting $2.00, how much did you sell them for? He said, Why do you want to know for? [And I said], Hey, you know, I'm just curious.

How old are you when you're having this conversation, do you remember?

Well, I would've been in my senior year in high school, yeah. Probably '56, '57, and just going to college. Well, as it turned out, their margin—you know, the farmer always got the short end of the margin. If the price went up and they made fifty cents more a flat, they'd share maybe 10 percent of it with you. When they took a cut, you know, you took the biggest cut. Kind of the plus to that, one of my early inspirations or motivations to go to college was this fellow, and I don't remember his name. He was a Japanese-American. He was a graduate of USC with a degree in accounting. I said, Well, how come you're driving this truck?

And he says, Yeah, because I can't get a job as an accountant. He says, They don't hire Japanese.

I says, What?

He says, But, you know, you still need to go on to college.

So I went to college. But I still remember that. He was a great guy. I used to help him load the truck. Didn't have to but, you know, just get there to get the report from yesterday.

And so that's where you—I mean that sounds like your first economics lesson.

That was my first lesson in economics. I said, you know, boy, this is going to be a nice world.

Well, if you know the rules—

Well, yeah, I ended up knowing the rules.

And how was it that you ended up taking the two halves of the Russian history? Was that just curiosity?

Well, no, that was just to fill the classes, to get out, you know.

I gotcha.

But, you know, going along with the field in agriculture, the paper that I had to do for the one class, the title of the book, it was by [Naum] Jasny, the author, I still remember the title of the book was *Socialized Agriculture and Russia*. [*The Socialized Agriculture of the USSR*] And the one thing I remember from the book, in the early 1920s, even the 1930s, the Russians spent, I forgot what the percentage of their economy, buying agricultural equipment for their farms. And their population was starving to death. But they needed that equipment for their socialized agriculture.

Yes, that's interesting because as you had, you know, you dipped your toes in economics a little bit, obviously capitalist economics, you had spent a good portion of your life around farms in that economy, and then you read about socialized agriculture. What kind of distinctions did you make?

Well, the one distinction that I made was hey, that's nice that you're buying equipment from other countries to mechanize your agriculture, you know, but at the cost of human life, your own

citizenry? I said, that ain't right. Mr. Northcutt, that's not the way he presented things in life. He's not leaving it any better, you know, than for having been there.

And so as you're nearing graduation, do you have a sense of what you want your career to be?

No, not really, other than hey, I'm going to be the first college graduate in the family. I had two uncles, let's see, and an aunt that had graduated from high school, but none of them had gone on to college, so I was going to be not only a high school graduate but I was going to be the first college graduate. So I said hey. Because I recall, growing up, one of the things my dad used to tell primarily me and my other brother, Hank, when we were old enough, he said, You have to go to college, and you have to graduate, and you have to make $10,000 a year, he said, because I don't make $10,000, but *you* need to make $10,000 a year. We said oh, OK, fine. That was 1940s, yeah, $10,000 was a lot of money.

Well, and that's every parent's dream is to have their children do better than they did, you know.

Right, yeah. Because he had a third-grade education and my mother had an eighth-grade education. That was it.

But it sounds like they did great for themselves.

They did very well for themselves. We ended up talking him into selling the piece of property, the farm, which was maybe ten miles from Disneyland, you know, but it was on a major thoroughfare, Harbor Boulevard. And he bought seven-and-a-half acres. And within a couple of **[00:40:00]** years—this would've been the early fifties, mid-fifties—he sold two—

Because Disneyland opened in '55, right?

Right. He sold two-and-a-half acres, and from the two-and-a-half acres he paid off the seven—cleared the seven-and-a-half, and so he had five acres free and clear. And so he ended up selling that in the probably the late fifties, maybe around '60, '61. He went to work at another place

doing landscape maintenance, then eventually went to work for the City of Garden Grove, probably in ‘60 or ‘61.

He must’ve made a nice profit off of selling that land, given its proximity to—

Yes, all totaled I think he sold it for like—well, I recall that in the bank they had something like $45,000, which was clearly a lot of money. So we figured, well, you know, Mom and Pop are set for the rest of their lives.

Do you ever go back? What’s there? What’s on the land that used to be your father’s farm?

There’s a park.

Oh, it’s a park?

Yeah, which is kind of a neat thing. As a matter of fact, I visited a couple years ago. I took a drive, you know, kind of a nostalgic drive down through where we had farmed, and there used to be a dairy in one that’s now all houses. But the one place, the one that he sold, is a park. And it’s kind of run down. They haven’t really taken care of the ball fields. The rest of the park looks OK. But I sent a note to my brother, to Hank up in Sacramento and says, Hey, you must have some influence with the Park people in Orange County. The park needs to be rehabbed. The soccer field was more dirt than it was grass. I mean, gee whiz.

Did he—was he able to—?

I don’t know. This is just about a year ago and I haven’t been able to follow up with him and ask him whatever happened.

What was it like—I mean you’re so close to Disneyland and you were there when it opened. What was that like as a fairly young man?

It was years, for whatever reason, I don’t know, I was not taken with this new Disneyland. It was probably two years before I even went to Disneyland. Now, my brother Hank, he went the first day. And his birthday had been in May and I think it opened probably in June of the year before.

He had this brand-new bicycle, and the end of the day when he came home, he was riding with this friend of his on another bicycle. I said, What happened? He said, Somebody stole my bike. Brand-new Schwinn. Ooh, man!

So it took you two years to go. That's interesting.

Yes, I think it was at least two years. I've only been there a couple of times, and one of the times that I know that I went, this was some fourty years ago, whatever, is because—now, my younger brother Mugs, he ended up working there in the Tiki Room. That's where all the birds are, you know, and he was the ham of the family. He did a great job. I kept listening and he'd keep telling us how wonderful he was, making his presentation with all these birds.

There's this theme of birds with your family, with the Tiki Room and then the figurines and—

Yeah, right. Right. So we ended up going and he did a good job. But my niece, she's the oldest niece, she went to work at Disneyland and became one of the little animals, I think Alvin or whatever one there, but she eventually became Mickey Mouse.

Is that right?

I thought that Mickey Mouse was—I says, wait a minute, how could she be—she's not a male, she's a female. He says that doesn't make any difference. She ended up becoming Mickey Mouse. She played Mickey Mouse for probably about two or three years.

That's pretty cool.

Yes, it was. So we went, you know, I took my mother one time to go see her, and she gave us her itinerary, where she was going to be at during the day, so we went around and watched her. She really enjoyed it. And of course Hank and his wife, Marlene, my sister-in-law, I don't know that there's anybody that goes as much to Disneyland as those two do.

Is that right?

Yeah. Marlene ended up working in one of the gift shops for a good number of years. Hank never did. He didn't have the time. But to this day, they go. They lived in Bakersfield. They would come down for the weekend I'll bet you a dozen times a year. Well, they still do. They live in Sacramento. I don't know. I probably haven't been to Disneyland more than a half-a-**[00:45:00]** dozen times.

Me, too. So when you graduate, your college experience, it sounds like a good one.

Good. Yes, especially at Orange Coast.

So you preferred the community college to the university?

Well, for us it was a plus, obviously the economics that is involved, because when I was getting ready to graduate from Orange Coast, you know, a lot of the kids that I had gone to high school with were at UCLA and USC, so I took a trip up to UCLA and went into one of their frat houses where a good friend of mine was and they said oh, you've got to come up here, this is a good life. Because I had good enough grades, obviously, coming out of college. I got accepted to the School of Public Health at UCLA. But man, I looked at what it was going to cost and I said, there is no way. Now, USC obviously was, you know, that was just a social visit because of a friend of mine. So I said, hey, I told my dad, I'll go to Long Beach. I can still operate the farm and just drive to school, just like going to Orange Coast, it was ten miles, Long Beach was the same distance.

And you were the first in your family to graduate from college. That must've been a big deal for everybody.

Right, yes. Big relief. But at graduation all they gave you was a little piece of paper rolled up with this little ribbon around it. And my dad said, `Let me see it.`

I said, `Dad, they're going to mail it.`

He says, Wait a minute. Are you sure you're graduating?

I says, Yeah, I'm graduating.

I waited and waited and waited. God, I think it was probably July before that thing came in the mail.

Did he believe you then?

Yeah, well, he believed me. I says, OK, I told you. By that time, he was resigned, you know, I'm going to or I'm not going to get this thing.

And then what? Are you still working for the soil place?

I'm still working for the soil and plant laboratory.

And that's kind of what you do after you graduate?

And that's after I graduate, that's what I do, yeah.

OK. And what comes after that?

Well, what comes after that, I'm watching the President of the United States, President [John F.] Kennedy making this speech. I think he's at Michigan or Michigan State [University]. And in that speech he mentions about the Peace Corps. And I said hey, that's something I'd like to do. And my dad looks at me and said, You *what*? And I said yeah. He says, No, they don't pay anything. He'd just say that, you know, this was after, he says, They don't pay very much. I said, No, you don't get paid at all. But I applied anyway and I got accepted. I got accepted in late '61. Probably in November or December, I got this big letter, this big envelope, and it said, We're inviting you to go into training for a Peace Corps group that's going to Punjab, which is a part of India. Punjabi. And I said huh? I looked it up on a map and I said, wait a minute. I speak Spanish, and I thought I distinctly, when I filled

out the original application, that I had put—well, I obviously preferred Latin America or the Philippines. But I said I don't think I want to go to Punjab.

You spoke Spanish, Filipino—?

Spanish. No, I didn't speak Filipino. One of the things that I've never done and I don't know why, I should have learned to speak Filipino but I didn't. And so I said I don't want to go to Punjab. So I sent the letter back and said—and it said, you know, just because you say no, that doesn't mean that we foreclose you. So I said no and I put I would prefer to go to someplace in Latin America. So it was a couple of months after that that I got another letter and it said to go to El Salvador. I said, that sounds better.

Right. Was it just—did JFK just—was he the inspiration, or was there something in you that wanted to give back, like you said about Northcutt?

Well, it was primarily to give back and it was, you know, it would postpone having to look for a job for a couple of years. I wasn't going to make a mint, but one of the things that it did say is that clearly they would help you. And I said maybe in two years I'll change my mind and become a teacher, because that was one of the emphases early on in the Peace Corps is they would not only help you go to graduate school, but one of the emphases was if you ended up in a teaching project, that they would facilitate going into graduate school at a teaching college someplace. So I said hey, that's an option. And two years from now is a long ways off when you're twenty-one, twenty-two years old, you know.

Sure. It's an eternity, right?

Yes. So I said hey, I'm not worried for two years from now, despite what Bob Hope used to say on the ads, yeah, seventeen cents an hour or whatever it was.

Yeah, JFK inspired a lot of people to do just exactly what you did.

Oh, absolutely.

[00:50:00] *So you ended up going to El Salvador.*

So I ended up going to El Salvador.

What'd your parents think about that? Were they proud of you? Were they nervous?

You know, my mother was. Yes, they were obviously nervous. My dad was silent. He didn't say very much. But off I went.

That's impressive. That's very cool. So you were there for two years?

For eighteen months. The first three months, we were in Puerto Rico for one month of training to sort of prepare you for Latin America, and a lot of language training. And at the time, they've changed it but the initial focus on the training for Peace Corps was they used the British philosophy, Outward Bound. In other words, physical challenges to challenge your mental capability of dealing with issues and problems, and obviously the environment was going to be much different than anybody had grown up with. So we went through a lot of that kind of training. The swimming. The swimming clearly was the toughest. Despite the fact that I was raised near the ocean, I wasn't the best swimmer in the world. But Fred Anoue had been the swimming coach I think at Georgia Tech. Well known in the college circles. He was retired, and he was the instructor. But it was survival swimming. In other words, I recall one of the things, they put us in coveralls with tennis shoes on and had us walk to the end of the diving board and jumps off. Now, before that they taught you how to float, survival swimming kind of thing. So now that you guys all know how to float, you know, we're going to do these tests. That was one of them. Tying your hands behind your back so you could learn to float just by kicking your feet. And they said 85 percent of humans will naturally float with about an inch above your nose. So all you have to do is just raise yourself up periodically and you take a breath, if you can do it

without panicking, then you'll go back down. Well, I was one of the unusual ones. I wasn't the only one. The water was above my eyes. So you had to get up higher to stick your nose up there to breathe [laughing]. I remember there was one young girl, Margaret Shutzbaugh. Margaret, practically her whole head was above water, she was that buoyant. We said, that's not fair.

How does that work? Are some people just more buoyant than others, I guess?

Yeah, I guess, because of their body structure and whatever. But some float easier than others. Margaret had no problem.

Was there ever a sense during this of "what have I gotten myself into?"

Oh, well, clearly, yes, especially on the swimming part, because one of the—and after a couple of days, he says, `There's going to be a test at the end of this thing. You can float. You've learned how to. None of you have really panicked that much,` he says, `but one of the things you're going to have to do is you're going to have to swim underwater fifty feet, to the end of this swimming pool and come back,` I mean, you know, underwater. And we said, *`What`*? And there was really no practice for it. So comes the day we're going to do this, I says, Jiminy Christmas, let alone I probably couldn't swim that far above water. But there were a couple of good swimmers, I mean that was nothing to them. I made it but it took me almost two minutes by the time I came back, and they had to drag me out of the pool.

Was this all underwater? You're holding your breath the whole time?

Oh, yes, you had to hold your breath that long, clearly all underwater. I said, my God, where's the oxygen? Jiminy Christmas!

Yeah, no kidding. All right, well, you survived the training.

I survived the training, yeah, right!

That's passing the test enough, isn't it? And so off to El Salvador?

Then spending one night out in the jungle, you know. They gave you this hammock and they took us out in the early evening after dinner and said, OK, here's your spot. Here's your sleeping bag and this hammock, and we'll be back in the morning to pick you up. And then the other thing was a four-day hike. You know, we took some foodstuffs, but out through the jungles of Puerto Rico.

Are you training with people that you're eventually going to go to El Salvador with?

Yes. There were twenty-two of us. Twenty-two or twenty-three. Because three people did not make it. By the time we got to New Mexico, before we finished the two months at New Mexico State, they were sent home. One of them really acted upset. We couldn't understand **[00:55:00]** why—Alex was a Ph.D. from Rutgers. We never did find out why he didn't, but he was let go. And there was an elderly woman whose name escapes me. We understood why she was—she just wouldn't have fit, and she wouldn't have made it. She just would not have made a good Peace Corps Volunteer.

But it was a pretty close-knit—you got after—yeah, after two months, I mean it's—

Oh, absolutely, yes, after two months, then finally there were the twenty-one of us.

You're like a platoon.

Well, in many respects, you know, probably more than a platoon. And because we were a small group, we were in a small country, we saw each other quite a bit when we were in El Salvador. To this day, we've had, let's see, one, two, three, we've had four reunions. We went back to El Salvador in '97, and almost everybody in the group went. There was only a couple that didn't go. We had a reunion here in Las Vegas in 2000. We're getting ready to have another one this next year. We'll probably go back to New Mexico. But it's a very close-knit group.

What was it like when you get to El Salvador? Was there a culture shock moment for you? Was there—?

It clearly was a culture shock. But one of the things that I still remember to this day, growing up in Orange County and south of Garden Grove was this, they called it Mile Square. It's now a huge park. And at that time, it was a training base and there was a small landing strip for the Marine Corps in El Toro to land there. They wouldn't really land; they would kind of touch down. It was an auxiliary fuel for their airplanes, the Corsair, the Navy, and so we used to see these Corsairs. We'd go down there all the time, ride our bikes down there and mess around and do whatever, and we kind of thought, well, we'd knock those airplanes out, we'd throw rocks at them, and you know you'd throw a rock, what, fifty feet up in the air, just kind of dumb but, you know, at that time it was like fun. Well, when we got to El Salvador, they had just had an election of their president, and we subsequently learned that one of the things, if the president stayed in office for 100 days, throughout their history apparently, then the president would serve his four years. So they were in this 100-day period. So as we landed at the airport, we noticed for the next couple of days flying all over the place were these Corsairs. This was the El Salvadoran Air Force. I said, Jiminy Christmas, the U.S., we haven't—that was World War II Corsairs, and here was their Air Force. But they were military people. Oh, there were *Guardia Nacional* all over the countryside. You would see them walking down the streets in the countryside with their rifles and their machine guns, all over the countryside. That was very striking. We said hey, obviously you've got to be careful. The other thing that they told us, that out in the countryside the *campesinos* had no love for folks from the city, so you folks are going to be, you know, hey, not only are you going to be viewed as folks from the city, but you're going to be viewed as foreigners, so you're going to need to be careful with those that don't know who you are. Now, those that you work with, clearly you're going to find these people so hospitable, they're going

to give you the shirt off their back, which they clearly would if need be. So we had to clearly be careful. But the military people around were kind of unnerving.

Was the military presence and the airplanes, was that kind of to guard against a coup in the first 100 days?

That's correct. That's what it was.

Do you remember the president's name? This is mid-sixties, right?

Yeah, this would've been '62, '64. God, I can't remember his name. I know about three years after I came back, I came back in '64, probably '65. Julio Rivera. That was his name. I got this Christmas card from him, you know, from the president.

You got a Christmas card from the President of El Salvador?

Yes, a Christmas card, this nice card and this letter, and I'm thinking, Jiminy Christmas, it's kind of late, isn't it, but hey, you know.

Well, you know, not very many people are getting Christmas cards from the President of El Salvador.

Right. That must've been his last thing. He says OK, I remember those young fellows. We never met him, you know.

So obviously he made it through the 100 days.

He made it through and well, you know, obviously he asked the Embassy for our addresses. And I think I probably still have it someplace.

[01:00:00] *Yes, that would be unnerving, though, to have that kind of military presence.*

Oh, yeah. But those Corsairs, when I saw them, I just laughed. I remember this fellow I worked with, Salvadoran, he says, `How come you laugh so much every time you see our air force?` And I thought to myself, Jiminy Christmas, I'm being a little insensitive here, so I

explained to him and he had a laugh, too. He laughed and says, You thought you guys could knock these airplanes out of the sky with rocks?

Oh, that's funny. Tell me more about your time in El Salvador. What did you do?

Well, this was an agricultural group. There were, what, three Ph.D.s in soil science. There was Mary McNichol; she had a master's degree in chemistry. They assigned her to a laboratory where they did testing of food and the beer, we found out later. It was an agricultural group, and it had been requested by the El Salvadoran government. At the time, that's the way the Peace Corps did business. In other words, the country had to say yes, we would like Peace Corps Volunteers. And so we were to work with the Ag[ricultural] Extension Service in El Salvador, which was patterned after the Extension Service here in the U.S. I ended up, because of my fluency in the language, more so than some of the others, worked in this research laboratory in El Salvador, in the Entomology Department. And so that's where I spent a good part of the eighteen months. I got a vehicle assigned to me, a Jeep. What I ended up doing, you know, I would go out to the various Extension Offices where there was a Peace Corps Volunteer, and would take the research ag scientist from the center, who I found out after a couple months seldom went to any of the little towns to work. The agricultural extension agents would come into town and [say] Hey, I've got these orange trees that have this disease, you know, mites or whatever, aphids, what do I do for them? Well, I would see them come in all the time and we were talking, so they would tell them, and this was not rocket science, you know. And I said, I'm going to take you with me next time. And they said, Where are you going to go? I said, Well, I'm going to go out to Cojutapeque, you know, it's like fifteen miles down the Pan-American Highway and I've got a Jeep. So the guy said, OK, I'll go with you. It was no big thing. So he said hey, this is OK. So I'd take him. And then when we would go out there, the extension agent said to me, Well, you know, if we knew what this was,

and we could show the *campesino* what a diseased orange or what the vegetable looked like and if some insect was eating on it, if we knew what that was, then we wouldn't have to ask you, you wouldn't have to come out here. So can you do something?

I said, Well, sure, we can. I said, Why don't we make a collection of insects? You already know what you need to spray them with or how you need to control this particular pest.

They said, Yeah.

OK, so we make these collections, and we take them to all of these extension agents, so the agent can say to the farmer, you've got a problem, come into the office, or I can take this thing with me, and then we can tell you what it is that you need to do to correct whatever problem you have, and so we don't have to wait a month or two for somebody from El Salvador to do it.

So you're basically teaching them to do it themselves.

It was teaching them to communicate with the farmers. To us, it was kind of rudimentary and very easy to do. I mean we had extension agents for Orange County that would come up to see my dad periodically and say, Mr. Agonia, we got a new fertilizer that So-and-so's now got on the market and we tested it and we got field trials with strawberries and, you know, it's working, so you might want to try it. So we said, OK, fine. So it was relatively simple to us. To them, it was very complicated, and it took a little while. But I ended up putting together with them about twenty-five little boxes with a piece of glass on the top that they made in their shop, and we got the wood from the U.S. Embassy from the Embassy folks, the **[01:05:00]** packing boxes for their furniture and stuff. And, you know, God, this was a big deal for them. We said, gee, this is kind of simple, but it was a big deal. And then the word got around, oh yeah, there's this guy, Bob Agonia, he's a bug guy, you know, he's in Santa Tecla. So I get these calls, hey, we got kids out

here collecting insects for you. So I put together a huge collection, especially of beetles. They had some *beautiful* beetles. Boy, they had some monsters.

Really?

Yeah, they had one, it was an aquatic thing. I clearly had never seen it before. But it ate fish. I mean it had big pincers on it.

How big is this thing?

Oh, God, it was about four inches long. God, I mean, I said, Jesus, this is a—and the rascal was still alive when I went to pick it up. I remember sticking a pencil near it. It was like a lobster, you know, it grabbed a hold of that. Jiminy Christmas!

So this beetle would eat fish?

Yes, or bugs, you know, or insects that swam in the water, but it was quickly, you know, aquatic—I don't even remember. Well, I looked through some of their books and I couldn't find it. By the time I got back to the U.S., I didn't have time or inclination to find out what it was.

I mean it must've really given you a feeling of accomplishment and that you really are helping.

Oh, yes. Right.

Wow. That's some cool stuff. Did you develop a bond with the people there, the El Salvadorans?

Oh, clearly, yeah, clearly did. Especially with the ag extension agents, and the place where you lived, you know, because when we went back in '97, this friend of mine that we had roomed together in this rooming house downtown in El Salvador, you know, we went back to the place. The owner was no longer there. It was a beer bar. Our bedroom was now the salon for this little café, you know, it was a beer bar kind of thing. I said, well, that goes with it, because we drank an awful lot of beer while we were there.

Is that right?

Yes.

It sounds like you guys had a lot of fun?

Oh, it was tremendous fun. I think we used to say that—*La Constantia* was the beer company in town, like Budweiser is here, whatever, and we said obviously the uptake of beer went down when this Peace Corps group left.

Right. Yeah, that must've been a really good time in your life, it sounds, you know, because not only are you helping, but you have the camaraderie of your fellow Peace Corps workers—

Yeah, and as I say, we still get together.

Yeah. That's great! Was there a sense of, you know, how does the Peace Corps work? When your time is up, if you chose to, could you stay longer or—?

At the time, you could, but it was kind of unusual. They really didn't put an emphasis on it, and I think that changed later. Maybe towards the late sixties and early seventies I think it changed because a good number of—I think they started looking and said, well, you know, the staffing of the staff, the Peace Corps staff, the professional staff, you know, we really ought to take advantage of former volunteers. Because there was a couple of our former volunteers in our group who ended up going back to work for the Peace Corps in South America. Reyes Soto, Juan, who was from Puerto Rico ended up working in Ecuador and somewhere on the Peace Corps staff. They also went to work in the training programs here in the U.S. I know Juan did some work at Oklahoma University. Oklahoma University did a lot of training, Peace Corps training in early years.

When you guys leave, is there another group that comes in right on your heels?

Yes. Before we left, there was El Salvador Two. In '63—we left in '64—El Salvador Two came in. And they were primarily the health, and recreation. That was the makeup of that group. So we

helped train them, and then we were there for a year overlap before we left. And then I don't recall when El Salvador Three got there.

So you were there all of '63, is that right?

Yes, the latter part of '62 and '63. I came back in January of '64.

I'm just wondering, you know, how connected to the outside world you are, because that's a pretty eventful time in history. I mean did you have a—the Cuban missile crisis was just before you left, I would imagine?

Yes, it was before we left. We were there during the Cuban missile crisis. I still vividly—

"There" being you were in El Salvador?

[01:10:00] El Salvador. Oh, yeah. I remember seeing the newspaper. I did some—whatever. I used to send articles out of the paper that might have interest to a U.S. reading audience, primarily in the academic world, send them up to the Latin American Center at Stanford [University]. Our Peace Corps Director, Dr. Richard Hancock, and his wife Nancy were both graduates of Stanford in Latin American history and political science. So he had a connection there and he asked me one day, he says, Hey, one of the profs up there, they've got his journal that comes out, I think it was a quarterly journal, *Latin American* Something, and they would like articles that might be of interest to their readership, to send them up there to them. All you have to do is read the paper, cut them out.

So you'd read the local paper and send them—

The local paper in El Salvador, and then send them up there. And then, you know, a month or two later they would send me a copy and I could see what they had put in, you know, what they had published under—I remember there was a section on Latin America and Central America and El Salvador, and I got credits in there for, you know, whatever. So after reading a couple of

them, I got a better understanding—clearly it was the political side, and the economic side, but most of it was the politics, you know, the various political parties and what they were doing or not doing and that kind of thing.

We're coming up to the end of the first CD, so we'll stop it and we can take a little break.

Sure.

[01:11:30] End Track 3, Disc 1.

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

And we were talking about the Peace Corps experience in El Salvador, and I was just wondering, you were there when JFK was assassinated, is that right?

That's correct. Yes.

And he sounded like an inspirational figure to you. Hearing that news, what was that like?

That was unnerving. In the afternoon, I think it was a Friday, I'm not sure, but I know that I was taking a *siesta*. I wasn't going to work that afternoon. And there was a knock on the door of the room that I had, and it was our landlady, and she said in Spanish, she says, *Don Roberto, han matado tu presidente,* they've killed your president. And I said, What? And she told me again. This time she said they have killed, *Asasinado el Presidente Kennedy.* And I said, Oh, my goodness. And I just was in shock, and I just thanked her and closed the door and just lay down on the bed, and I don't know what I thought about but it was unbelievable. And in about, oh, probably an hour or two later, I walked down to the Peace Corps office and Alice, who was a Salvadoran secretary, was there, and Dr. Hancock. But the thing that struck me at the time and still does is that on the walk down, which was probably four or five city blocks to the office, I didn't know these people, I don't know how they knew that I was not a Salvadoran although I had been mistaken for a Salvadoran on a number of occasions, and they were telling me they

were sorry that your president has been killed. And literally people had tears in their eyes. And I said, God, this is—Alice told me the same thing when I got to the office, and I asked her. She said, Well, yeah, but see—. Kennedy had—as we soon learned, and some people knew at the time or had felt that way, you know—he was a worldwide figure, well-respected and loved, but especially in Central and South America. And so that was one of the reasons why. I'm pretty sure I still have a letter from a Department of Education official that I worked with because I taught English in the evenings and other things that I got to—and did some work with their Department of Education. He sent me this *beautiful* letter and I think I still have it. But, you know, the assassination of the president and what President Kennedy meant to El Salvador, you know, it was obviously clearly very traumatic for all of us. And our Director basically sent a telegram to everybody because some of the communities where some of the volunteers lived, you know, probably it might take them a day or two to find out from the newspaper, it would be two days. So everybody came in that weekend. And one of the places where a couple of the volunteers used to stay on weekends, you know, the family had a television, so most of us ended up down there, watched the whole process. So basically for the four or five days, we basically did nothing.

Like 90 percent of Americans—

Yes, just like everybody else but people, you know, even today will ask, well, where were you? Well, clearly that's not hard to remember where I was at.

Yeah. Did you see [Lee Harvey] Oswald get shot by Jack Ruby?

Yes, we saw that on—well, I don't know that we saw it live or not, but we clearly saw the TV, you know. I don't recall if it was live or just on the news, but yeah, yeah, we saw that.

That was stunning, too. I mean—

Yes, that was another one.

I remember my mother telling me she saw it live and, you know, if you think about it, you don't see people die or get shot live like that. I mean just what a stunning seven days that was, you know. Man.

Yes. And I recall there was a Peace Corps official who had visited with us, and this is prior to the assassination, and he had just come from visiting the Kennedy compound up in the Boston **[00:05:00]** area. And we were sitting around just talking. He was on a review team that was in the country, you know, finding out what we were doing and whatever, and for whatever reason he had asked to speak to me and to Juan Reyes Soto, who was from Puerto Rico. And he was staying up at the big hotel, and so we went up there and we were in the bar having a drink and, I don't know, we started talking about this and he said, `Oh, yeah, I just visited with the Kennedy family and the president just about a month ago.`

And I don't know how we got talking about it but he said, `And I got a couple of his cigars, rum-soaked crooks.`

And Juan and I looked at him and says, `Well?`

He said, `Well, you guys are good guys. I'll go up to the room and get you one.`

I said, `Two.`

He says, `No, you can have one.`

One between the two of you?

One between the two of us. I said, `All right, we'll figure out how we do this` [laughing]. Well, Juan and I, and I don't remember if I took it or Juan took it, but anyway shortly thereafter we smoked that thing. And to this day I said what a bunch of idiots. What'd you guys do that for?

I was going to say, I mean you should keep it as a memento, right?

We should've kept it, you know. By God, it was a good cigar. I'm sure it was Cuban.

Yes, ironically enough, right?

And rum-soaked at that, you know.

Do you think—I'm trying to figure out, you know, the love and respect that the El Salvadorans had toward Kennedy, I mean it seems to me that you guys were the reason primarily for that, you know what I mean? That Kennedy was responsible for the Peace Corps, and the Peace Corps was responsible for helping their lives.

Yes, but see, under his administration there was the Alliance for Progress. So one of the things that the U.S. government, you know, besides the Peace Corps was under the Alliance for Progress, rural health that Juan Reyes Soto was one of the primary volunteers working with the folks in the Embassy to locate these rural health clinics, along with the mobile clinics. It was like mobile health clinic and there were these blue Jeeps, you know, and I still have pictures of them someplace. But so I would go with the Embassy people and take them to where this rural health center was going to be located. Juan was in this—I don't remember the name of this community that was *way* out, almost on the Honduran border, where they were going to open, and we would take people from, you know, and a couple of them, the Ambassador Murat Williams went along with us, and there would be this big opening of this health clinic, and *Alianza de [para el] Progreso,* the Alliance for Progress, you know. And that was an early—started I think in late '62 or early '63. So that was going on. So that was another part of the mutual respect and the interest in what the Kennedys were doing, and what the U.S. government was doing. And there was the new president, Julio Rivera, there was some progress being made. At least there weren't the issues that had preceded him. And so it was a stable time in El Salvador for the two years, and

even after that. It was not till the late sixties and early seventies when they ended up in the civil war. And at that time the Peace Corps was withdrawn from El Salvador.

Is that right?

Yes, in probably ‘72, ‘73, and then didn’t go back, I think, until probably 1980, maybe later than that.

Yes, because it was still pretty dicey in 1980. Because in my memory, it really kind of heats up in the late seventies, early eighties, when you get the Contras *and the* Sandinistas. *You must’ve followed that story closer than most Americans, considering your connection with El Salvador.*

The connection, yeah, we followed it pretty closely, and especially in the last number of years with the Internet, you know, periodic I’ll get on the—pull up the local newspaper as to what’s happening.

Yeah. Oh, wait, the Contras *and the* Sandinistas *were Nicaragua.*

In Nicaragua, right, but there were still—

But yeah, was it a revolu[tion]?

Revolution—the aftermath, you know, was still there. There was still a lot of unrest.

So tell me about how you transition out of the Peace Corps and come back to the States.

Well, we came back and they said, `We’re going to give you a check for $600` or whatever it was, you know, `that’s how much we’ve banked for you.`

For your eighteen months?

[00:10:00] Yeah, for your eighteen months. I took part of the money and went downtown Garden Grove and bought some clothes. At one of our reunions, the last reunion we had here in town, we were showing, you know, we always get together and everybody drags out their pictures and their slides, and somebody noticed, I don’t know who it was, and all these years

we've shown them, that this one guy, I don't even know who it is now, always had on a blue shirt. I think I had two pairs of pants and maybe three shirts. And we used to kid each other, you know, we'd go down by the river going to work. I said, Oh, my God, there's my shirt down there, that woman is pounding on that rock, and later in the afternoon you came back and it's hanging up there on that bush.

But this one guy just had one shirt, apparently.

Well, he had one, it was blue, because all these photos and it wasn't pictures of one day. It was pictures over a year or several months. Same blue shirt.

That's funny. So you buy new clothes. Your family must be happy to see you.

Oh, yeah.

If there was a culture shock going from the States to El Salvador, there must've been another culture shock going from El Salvador back to your home.

Coming back, not as—I don't know, for whatever reason, I didn't have that much of a problem like you'd read about, you know. And I don't recall that there was too many in our group, at least in the years since, you know, that we talked and, you know, within five years after. We had a reunion, our first reunion, in Colorado, and I don't recall any of the discussions that anybody had experienced anything that could be labeled as cultural shock. I think, you know, you came back, a good number of us went back to school, and probably the males, we went back to school to avoid the draft.

Right, because Vietnam, then, was going on.

Yeah, because now we're in Vietnam. Let's see, I know Hondo, he was from Hondo, Texas, and he had no interest in going back to school. He had his father's cattle ranch and farm to take care of. And he got drafted. He ended up in the Army, stationed up in Washington for two years or

whatever. Another fellow, Mike Moore, he quickly joined the Navy rather than get drafted, and became an officer and ended up stationed in Panama. I think he convinced the Navy that he was bilingual, that he spoke Spanish, so they assigned some Panamanian naval officer as his aide, which was a joke. But he sounded good. But out of the group, there was one, two, three, four of the volunteers had early—no, five had already served in the military. So this was before Vietnam. Of course, we had the draft at the time, so they had been drafted.

Yes. And so were you a little bit nervous about the draft?

Kind of but nothing. I knew I was going to go back to graduate school, so I went back to Long Beach. Now, we came back in January, so that was the time to go enroll. And I went back to working at the soil and plant laboratory. And they said, `Well, if you're going to go back to school, you'd better go and enroll.` And so I did, and sure enough—because one of the things, we filled out a piece of paper before we left to say, when-are-you-going-to-get-back-home kind of thing, and it clearly was to the draft board. So we knew what was going to happen if you didn't. So I did, and I probably still have the one letter. I even got a letter when I was in El Salvador that said, your friends and neighbors wish you to report. So I went down to the Embassy and had them send a letter to the draft board saying I'm in the Peace Corps. So then I got a letter saying OK, you're deferred until you come back, then we want you.

Right. When you enroll for graduate school, is it Long Beach State again?

Yes, I went back to Long Beach State, and I was in graduate school for almost a year. And then I figured, hey, you know. And I started to go back into the teacher thing, but I really wasn't that **[00:15:00]** enamored with the whole thing, but that was good enough. But by the time the summer came around I said I got to go get a job and start a career, whatever. So one of the things that we did have, they facilitated Peace Corps Volunteers—it didn't give you any points as such

on the federal service entrance exam but there was some preference in selection, not passing the exam, you had to pass the exam. So I went down and took the federal service entrance exam and obviously got a fairly good grade because within a matter of a month or two in that summer of—well, it would've been in 1965, in early '65, I got three offers: one from the Internal Revenue Service, one from the Federal Food and Drug Administration, and then one from the Civil Service Commission. The job with the Civil Service Commission was in Washington, D.C. I quickly said to myself $4,800 a year in Washington, D.C.? No. Federal Food and Drug Administration, I said, well, that's a possibility, and so I said, well, I'm interested, and I went for the interview. And the job was downtown Los Angeles in the industrial part of L.A. and I said, I don't want to have to drive down to town for $4,800. And the Internal Revenue Service office, when I went to the interview they said, We've got openings all over southern California, from San Diego to Bakersfield. You can almost have your pick. Any particular place?

So he showed me where and I said, Santa Ana? You've got some openings?

He says, Yes. You speak Spanish, and we've already hired this other fellow, Manuel Gonzalez, and we're sending him to Santa Ana.

And I said, If I do OK, you'll send me to Santa Ana?

He said, Yep.

And I said, Fine.

So that's where I ended up.

All right. Close to home.

Close to home. So I worked for the Internal Revenue Service, started in Santa Ana, for a year-and-a-half. And Manuel and I became good friends. And one day he said, Hey, he said, my brother just got a job in San Francisco, and there's openings in San

Francisco with the IRS, especially with the alcohol and tobacco tax, ATF [Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms]. He said, Let's transfer up there.

And I said, Yeah, a good friend of mine works for the IRS up in San Francisco.

So we took a weekend and we went up to visit and looked around. And I talked to this friend of mine that I'd gone to high school with and he said, Well, we normally don't transfer agents from L.A. to San Francisco district because we have this mutual non-rating pack, he said, but maybe I can help. So he did, and so both of us transferred up there. And then Manuel subsequently went to work for the ATF. But we roomed together with his brother and we got a nice apartment in San Francisco.

Is this just you-want-a-new-experience kind of thing?

Just a new experience and one of the things that they had told both of us, You two guys are management material and your language capabilities is a plus, and it's good to have experiences in various districts of the Internal Revenue Service. And I said OK, so we went up there. And I was there less than a year, and I lived in San Francisco but the office was in Richmond, north of San Francisco, so it was an hour drive every morning. It was OK. But I got assigned to not only Richmond but to Berkeley, and this was right in the middle of in the late sixties. This was '67, '68. And what an experience. Jesus. The one thing that I remember about that took the most work, and it was one of those things that you had to do, a lot of the young folks in the Berkeley area, they would not pay their federal excise tax on their telephone bill. You know, they'd pay their telephone bill but they wouldn't pay the extra. It was a protest. And so we would get this tax bill for collecting for a couple of bucks, but we had to collect it. And I'd literally chase this one fellow around Berkeley for months and, you know, I'm there almost a year, and I could never find him. I knew **[00:20:00]** where he lived. I knew where

he banked and, you know, he didn't have any money in his bank account, or I could never find it there.

And this is just to get a couple of bucks?

It was to collect a couple of bucks, but it was a mandate. You had to collect it. You had to. And so every month, the supervisor would review your open case load and say, Do you still have those? And there were a couple of them. I said, Yeah, I can't find this guy. And there weren't too many of us in the office that had—but I had most of them because I had Berkeley and Albany, which is next door, and that's where all these students lived. But boy, I know one Friday afternoon on the way home I said I'm going to stop by, because where he lived in this little apartment was not too far off of the highway. And I stopped and I drove by and I said, oh, my God, there's his car. So I said [to myself], oh, man, this is going to be my day. And so I checked and verified the license plate again. I called the office and I said, I need some help down here. Finally I'm going to get this guy.

And so I went and knocked on the door, and sure enough, it was him. And I said, Listen, hey, you've got this bill, and I've left you I don't know how many cards.

And he said, Oh, I know you. I haven't gotten around to doing it.

And I said, Well, today is it. It's been *months*.

And he said, Well, I don't have the $2.00, or whatever it was.

And I said, Well, I tell you what. I said, Your automobile out there, we're going to impound the automobile until you pay this.

[And he says], You can't do that.

And I said, Well, I can do it, and I'm going to do it.

So I filled out the piece of paper and I gave it to him and I said, See this sticker? It says "Seize for unpaid taxes," federal government kind of thing.

And he said, Yeah.

[And I said], And I'm going to put this on your car and I'm going to go call a tow truck and we're going to tow your car away, and when you pay the tax bill you can get your car back. And it's going to probably cost you $30.00 to get it out of hock, so are you sure you don't—?

He says, No, I don't.

I said, OK.

Well, I walked back to his car and he closed the door. And I put the sticker on there. And then I went down to the corner to call the tow truck. And as I'm walking down I said, he's going to do something. I heard this voice, Come back! He says, I've got the money. Here. I says, OK, fine. So I wrote him out a receipt and took the thing off. God, that was a great weekend! First thing on Monday morning, I went in and told the boss, I says, Hey, this aged case is no longer aged; it's closed.

So you were actually in the trenches, then. I mean your job was to, you know, give it the personal touch.

Oh, we were Revenue officers. We had to collect the unpaid taxes or on people who didn't file their tax returns or whatever.

I can't imagine you were very popular with the people you were trying to collect the taxes from.

Well, it really was your approach. Very few times did I ever run into anybody who was obnoxious. When I was a trainee in Santa Ana, I got this unpaid employment tax, which was clearly the more serious, you know, other than the federal income tax, for taking the withholding tax and not paying it over for the employees. It was a catering service. And so I had the address.

It was out in the farm country out in Orange County where I knew where it was at. So I knew where these folks were at. So I had stopped and asked for the guy. He said, Oh, he's not here. He's over in the other corner of, whatever.

So I drove over there. And I talked to him, you know. He said, Oh, I'll get around to paying it pretty soon.

Well, I says, Well, no, you need to pay this right now. We sent you your ten-day notice a month ago.

And he said, You don't know who I am.

I said, Well, no, I've got your name right here.

[And he says], No. I've been in your office a lot of times. Do you know So-and-so in your office?

I said, Yeah, I know him.

[And he says], Well, I'll tell you what. Monday I'll come down to the office and we'll get this taken care of.

I said, OK, fine. So I'll see you on Monday.

Well, Monday morning when I went to work, I told my boss that So-and-so had mentioned his name and was coming in to see me in a little while. He said, You went where? You talked to who?

I said, I went out and–I don't remember the fellow's name.

He says, Oh, my God! That guy spent time in jail for an assault on a Revenue officer a number of years ago. We're supposed to have a flag on his accounts. Nobody's supposed to go out and talk to him without a special agent.

I said, Well, I'm sorry. I didn't know that.

[And he said], Where's your supervisor for your group, your coach?

[00:25:00] And I said, He's back there.

And he goes, Larry, get in here! How did you let Bob go out there and talk—?

[And he said], Oh, I didn't know he went out there.

The guy came in and he came in with a cashier's check for a *lot* of money and he paid his bill for that. A couple months later, he was back in the same thing again.

That's incredible. It seems as though most of your experiences up to this point have been something with agriculture and, you know, you were the bug man in—

Well, this was clearly accidental. I was not going to go to Washington, D.C.

Did you enjoy it?

Yeah!

And while you were in San Francisco, you enjoyed that, too?

While I was in San Francisco, oh yes, I was living in San Francisco, we had this nice apartment, it was a job, it was an eight-to-five job, you know. It was OK. One of the other things I got assigned, because I had Albany, the City of Albany, was the racetrack. And I didn't know this, but when they assigned me to Albany they said, Hey, Bob, when racing season starts, you're going to get a lot of investigations, so you're going to have to spend time down at the racetrack. I said, Oh, OK. So yeah, sure enough, when racing season came around, here they came. They call it courtesy investigation. Some Revenue officer from wherever would send you this thing, and they were all old. Because these folks that worked at the racetrack, you know, the jockeys or the people that took care of the horses all that, they had traveled across the country, so you'd get one in that started in Florida and went to New York and up to this and he had ended up in San Francisco. So I would get a government car and I'd go down to the racetrack once or twice a week. And the first time I went, you know, the security

guard said, Oh, come on over. You don't– You know, I got in line to go park the car and he said, No, no, no, no, you don't park where the people park. We've got a spot up here by the front and you park there with the official parking. I said, OK, so I parked there.

That's cool.

Yes, so it was OK. I have to learn something about the horse business.

Were you allowed to place bets on duty?

No, no, clearly not.

Did you develop an affinity toward horseracing and horses and so forth?

Oh, not—other than—no, I knew a lot of the people, so I figured hey, the next year which I said, OK, you guys will be back? [And they would say], Yeah, we'll see you next year. And I got to know some of the folks there at the racetrack, so they would tell me, you know, [I would] where is So-and-so, and [they would say] aw, he's over there in the stalls, whatever, he's working for somebody else this time around. That was a lot more fun than trying to chase those protestors. That was frustrating.

How long did you spend at the IRS there in San Francisco?

For almost a year, a little over a year. And then a friend of mine who I'd been in training school with, Bernie Barella, he was here in Las Vegas with another fellow who was one of the instructors. And Bernie called me one day and he says, Hey, Bob, he says, we've got openings in Las Vegas, and we need Spanish-speaking people. I'm the only one in the office. And he said, And we can get you promotion real quickly. Norm is the guy in charge here and we got a good boss. And I said, Well, I'll think about it.

So I talked to my boss up in Richmond and he said, Las Vegas? What do you want to go to Las Vegas for?

I said, Hey, you guys been telling me, you know, because I had been talking to him about getting into the management program, I said, that you need to get around to the various offices.

He said, Well, that's right. So are you going to apply?

I said, I'll think about it.

So I thought about it. And then I came down here for an interview.

Was that the first time you'd been to Vegas?

No, I had been here one other time, just for a weekend. And I came here to Las Vegas and interviewed. And the manager's name was Reginald Jones and he was a character. He walked around the office with a pipe. That's when you could smoke in your office, back in those times. And they took me over to a bar after work, a cocktail lounge, and they said, We want you to meet somebody. I said, Oh, OK, fine. So we're sitting there having a drink, and I had a late flight back to San Francisco, and pretty soon I have this tap on my shoulder and I turned around and I said, Oh, my goodness gracious. There was this young cocktail **[00:30:00]** waitress. And I said, hmm, I guess I'm transferring to Las Vegas. They said, We want you to meet Edna. These guys had, you know, that's why they had taken me over there. Edna, I can't remember what her nickname was, but her breast measurement must've been close to forty. I mean she was a very attractive young lady. And I said, Oh, thanks a lot, guys. You're all right. They says, Well, you showing up here Monday morning? I said.

The rest is history.

The rest is history. So I went back and I said well, I don't know. I'll think about it. But I ended up transferring here. So I transferred here to the IRS in 1968.

Caesars was built in '68, wasn't it, and—?

Caesars and—yes, Caesars was just opening and anyhow, that's when the town was just starting to really grow.

Yeah. What was that experience like? What was your impression of Vegas when you got here?

Well, one of the things that they had told me in terms of this management kind of thing that I eventually got into the management program is that you are going to, as a Revenue officer, or even with the Revenue agents, you are going to experience cases and you're going to have experiences that you would not have—it would take you like ten years and you would have to go to various parts around the country to experience these various case kinds of things, challenges. And it was true.

Why is that, exactly, do you know?

Well, because I think the nature of the town and the nature of the folks that moved to town or came to town to do business and left or whatever. And the nature of various kinds of taxes that were paid here. For instance, the foreign entertainers would come to town. At that time, they had to pay their tax on a weekly basis, so that they didn't leave town after their gig for a week or two or whatever and then you'd have to go to Britain or go to wherever, and International Operations would try to find the entertainer and say you didn't pay your income tax for the two weeks. Tom Jones used to pay a *lot* of money every week. And we used to send somebody down to Caesars when he was showing to collect the payment. And after a little while, we worked it out, he was obviously not avoiding it but he would send somebody, you know, I can't recall if it was somebody from Caesars. Anyway, every other Monday morning they were bright and early in the office [when] it opened and he would have somebody there paying his tax for that preceding two weeks. I guess they must've paid him every two weeks or whatever.

Was there—with the gambling, did they have, you know, with certain winnings and—?

The gambling had something to do with it, but not so much. I mean, you know, a business was a business, so collecting the employment tax, I mean, you know, the 941 was the form where the withholding tax and Social Security that the employer withholds from the employee is reported. Those are the biggest offenses, and that's the money, you know, because if they wouldn't pay it over and then at the end of the year you file your income tax return with your W-2 and the government says, well, wait a minute, we don't have [it]—we're going to give you a refund but we haven't collected it from your employer. Your employer's been using it in their business and not paying it over. And those are the kind of taxes that they gave them thirty days to pay it. Eventually, over time, there were the requirements now. I don't know, it probably has changed, it's been a long time, there are quarterly deposits where the employer has to go make the deposit every two weeks. Maybe now it's every week; I don't know what it might be. And so, for instance, one of the things sort of meant that the less-senior Revenue officer, generally speaking, always got the less-attractive place in town or in here to work. So when I worked in Richmond, you know, Richmond is heavily populated by African-American, an industrial-area town. Well, clearly it took almost six or seven months after I was there before I got assigned to Berkeley. But I had the west part of town and I had the industrial area, you know, the businesses, somebody would go out of business all the time. And the same thing happened here in Las Vegas. I got assigned to the Westside when I first got here, but I also go assigned the outlying areas: Pahrump, Mesquite. We had, for whatever reason, Ely, Caliente in **[00:35:00]** the northern part of the state, because it's easier to get there than from Reno. And so I had all those assignments. And after I got the assignments, I did—a business is a business. And somebody told me, Hey, but you know what you're going to get when you go up to Ely?

[And I said], What?

[And he said], All the houses of prostitution, that have a federal excise tax on their gaming machines, which it used to be $500 a machine, and their liquor license, you know, there's a federal excise tax, they're going to have to have a stamp that they pay every year, so once a year we check every one of those businesses.

I said, Oh, well, when's that happen?

[And he said], In the fall of every year.

So for a couple of years, that's what I did, besides the regular taxes. But I'd stop at every one of those houses, you know, and ah, I'd say [to myself], oh, Coyote Springs, there's a new one. Sheri's Ranch, I think, was the new one, so I stopped in and said, Hey, do you have your—? I identified myself. And she said, Oh, I know what you're here for, young man. I said, Yeah? What? [And she said], Come on back to my office. Sure enough, she pulled it out and I'd take the number off of it and off of both the federal stamps. And there we went.

So that's an experience you wouldn't get in California, right?

No. And I got to be pretty good friends with Mrs. Acena up in Ely, Nevada. She was the madam for a couple of the houses up in Ely.

It sounds, you know, eventful. It sounds like it was fun.

It was. It was an adventure. Well, I mean it was strenuous as heck because despite what IRS management would say, this business about the productivity, because at the end of every month the supervisors had kept the stats, your closure rate, how many cases do you close. Aged cases, you know, they get too old. The one I mentioned about up in—the protesters, you know, those would go on your list. [They would say] you've got fifteen cases on your aged list. You'd better

get those out of here. And, you know, that was stressful. But at the same time, you had some of these other things.

Why did you leave?

Well, promotions were—I mean you get to a grade 12 and then to get to a grade 13 and a 14 was almost impossible. There was maybe one or two. Because it was the complexity of the work that had the impact on whether you—it was grade 15 work. The work was graded by the complexity of the cases. And so I got up to the grade 12, and a fast track. I mean those of us that got hired in the late sixties, there was kind of a complete reorganization of the Internal Revenue Service. They hired hundreds of Revenue agents and Revenue officers in those years. And for whatever, I don't know who mandated it, diversity was one of the big issues back in those days. And you know this was early for the federal government to get involved in the diversity issues. But IRS had, for whatever reason, the management had people who were enlightened, and the class that I was in, the class of '65, '66, we were a *very* diverse group of African-American, Asians, Hispanics. I mean it was almost like a United Nations. And it struck me. I remember when we went into the class, there were sixty of us in this room like this size. We looked around and I said [to myself], hmm, this is kind of novel. But a friend of mine, some fellows who I was associated with a local Hispanic organization here in town, said, Hey, we've got some openings over at the Atomic Energy Commission. We're looking for an Affirmative Action Officer, you know, labor relations. And I was, in the IRS for about the last year that I worked with them, I was the local EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity], on a part-time basis, officer for the Internal Revenue Service. So I helped with recruiting and that kind of thing. So I had that kind of a background. And I looked at the opening over at the Atomic Energy Commission and they sent me the job description. The other thing that had happened in the IRS, I had gotten into the management program but I was a little disenchanted with the business of the productivity and

the expectation that you had to push people to do things, and I said, I don't **[00:40:00]** know if I really like that. And before that, I had joined the local union, the IRS union, and had represented a few employees in some grievances kind of thing. And one of the requirements for this new job with the Atomic Energy Commission was having some labor relations background. Plus the EEO background. I said, well, I'll give it a chance. I applied and I got selected. So I made the change. And the person who held the job at the time, who was transferring to Atomic Energy Commission in Washington, was a grade 14. OK, so I said, hmm, it's got a lot more potential than over here. It's going to take *years*, you know, and then I know some other folks the same age, same seniority that I had, and I said hey, I think the pasture is a little greener over on the other side of the railroad tracks. So I transferred over to the Atomic Energy Commission in January of 1974.

OK. The office was in town?

Yes, on Highland. Yeah, 2753 South Highland, I think, if I remember the address. Just off of Sahara. That's now the new—well, in the back, in our parking lot, part of the parking lot, I think, is Treasures, the new [gentleman's club]. And there was a body shop, an auto mechanic in that building right now where the boxing club has been, I guess, for the last seven years, because we moved out of there in '92. DOE [Department of Energy] had moved to North Las Vegas.

Is that Sahara and Industrial right there? Is that where—?

Yeah. Well, it's Highland, really, just south of Sahara.

Is that where like the Crazy Horse Too [gentleman's club] is and stuff?

Crazy Horse is up on the other side of Sahara, yeah. Yes, but close by.

OK. And so you're the—

So I transferred to the AEC and I was an Affirmative Action Officer. But it was not internal affirmative action. It had to do with the compliance and the oversight of the contractors at the [Nevada] test site, REECo [Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company] and EG&G [Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier] and Holmes and Narver, all of the government contractors. Under the Civil Rights Act of ‘64, that responsibility for federal contractors was assigned to the agency that had those contracts with those federal contractors, so in this case, AEC. So that was my primary responsibility beginning in ‘74.

So you’re reviewing the contractors that worked out at the test site to make sure they’re—

Their affirmative action plans, checking on their recruiting, and then also at that time, for about four years, was conducting investigations of complaints filed by contractor employees. Instead of an internal complaint procedure, the complaint went directly to the Atomic Energy Commission and it was my responsibility to do those investigations. So from ‘74 till probably ‘77, into ‘78, most of my work was at the test site, or here in town, or at the other facilities of the contractors. For instance, EG&G at that time had facilities in Santa Barbara [California], in Albuquerque [New Mexico], in Los Alamos [New Mexico], and then up in San Francisco in the Bay Area. Holmes and Narver, most of their work force was out in the Pacific on Johnston Island. And then I had to do compliance reviews. So I traveled to all of those facilities.

Did you go out to the islands, too?

Went out to Johnston Island, yes, a good number of times.

But did you say the majority of your time was spent out at the test site, would you say?

Yes, for the first couple of years, it was at the test site, mostly conducting investigations of individual complaints from employees.

So you'd gather information, you'd talk to the person making the complaint, and you'd talk to the—OK.

To the employee and then to the supervisors and to who may have been involved in whatever, and then write up a report and make a recommendation for the contractor to correct the situation, if that's what it required, or if there was no fault with anybody, to reject the complaint and say, you don't have a complaint.

Do you remember the first time you went out to the test site?

Well, the first time was just an initial look around. I went out with some AEC people. But I remember the first couple of complaints that I had, because one of them was from a young African-American woman, she was a secretary out there, and she continuously had complaints. **[00:45:00]** I'd get finished with one and shortly thereafter there would be another one. And even for the three or four years that I had that responsibility, because it '78 it subsequently changed, but she continued to make progress in terms of getting up, in terms of her own internal progress. I never could figure out what was going on. In a couple of cases, I found that some of her managers were mistreating her, maybe not outright discrimination but at the time the test was the effect, the adverse impact kind of thing, and clearly there was some. But she turned out to be a good employee, and years after I kind of got out of that line of work and I saw her and she said, `Mr. Agonia, I want to thank you for all of that,` my help, and I'd tell her, `I didn't do anything.` But she had moved on and she had been promoted. She got out of the secretarial line of work and she was in Procurement and eventually became a buyer for one of the contractors out there. I said, well, great!

Some of the complaints I still remember from some of the fire fighters, African-American, they were the first fire fighters in the Fire Department out there, and you know that

has historically and nationally been one of the—police departments and fire departments, you know, their diversity issues. And oh, man, those were always, you know, they were one complaint after another. One of those individuals eventually got out, became a safety engineer for one of the other contractors. It took him about ten years. But he did very well with one of the other contractors because of the beginning in terms of safety, and became a very well-respected safety person within the DOE, within the Nevada Test Site complex. One of the others eventually gave up. He just said, I can't put up with this, and he went to work for the city [Las Vegas] in the Fire Department. By then it was probably the mid-eighties. The last time I saw him in the late eighties, he was a Captain in the Fire Department. And I was just astounded. I said, oh, my goodness, I heard his name and I said hey, I think I know him. And I subsequently talked to him and he said, Oh, man, he says, God, those were the days, weren't they?

I says, Yes.

He says, Man, did we put you through—?

I said, Yes, you did, but look, hey, everything has turned out well for all of you.

For what little help I could do.

Yeah. Boy, that must've been rough on the first guys that hired in there.

It really was, especially in the Fire Department. And, you know, the firemen out there, including the fire chief, you know, I'd like to believe that they really didn't know what the impact was of some of the decisions they made. Very few. I found some cases of just overt discrimination, you know, but for the most part it [their attitude] was hey, this is the way we've always done business. And we're not used to dealing with you folks, you know, your kind, from your background or whatever, and things that we may have said all these years, OK, we won't say that

anymore, we won't do it. But on the other hand, there were some clearly that were out-and-out discriminatory practices that we had to put an end to.

Can you give me an example?

Well, there were more individuals—it was just individual treatment of how you treated someone while you were a manager. And just out-and-out discriminatory, you know, assignments of work. And you could've assigned anybody to it, but no, this one person who happened to be African-American always got assigned to the worst job, the most hazardous job, didn't get the overtime, or was consistently passed over for promotion. And you look on the record, you go back and look on the record and it said, performance appraisals, everything is OK. This person's are average, but when it comes time to give the job, this person gets the job. Can you explain that? **[00:50:00]** [He would say]**,** `Well, it was my gut feeling`. This was by a contractor, an engineer.

I said, `What do you mean, gut feeling?`

He said, `Gut feeling.`

I said, `OK, well, you're going to have to do better than that.`

And he said, `OK.`

So he ended up sending me a four-or-five-page rationale of what—kind of a typical engineer approach of why he had made this decision, despite the record and despite his own appraisals of the folks in his group who were competing for this promotion. And it was a young woman, an Anglo young lady with a college degree and a master's degree who was a scientist. It was a scientific job. And when I read his thing, it was still, "it was my gut feeling that this guy was going to do better." And I said that doesn't work. And so I wrote it up and oh, my goodness gracious, I thought the world was going to come to an end. I mean even the EG&G manager

called me. He said, Bob, we can't do that. I showed him the appraisals. He said, Well, there's got to be more to it. Maybe he was too easy on her. I said, Well, that's beside the point. That's six months ago when these appraisals went through the same cycle. You know, what are you trying to tell me? Well, she's entitled to the promotion. You going to make it retroactive with back pay? AEC management has already bought off on it. Oh, my goodness.

Wow. Did you get a—I mean did you go through a transformation of your views of things like that from the time you got the job to the time you ended up leaving? I mean I'm getting the sense that maybe—I don't know, I guess what I want to ask is, were you outraged at times?

Oh, clearly. And this was one of them, where this engineer, this scientist, this fellow who should have known better, that that's not the way you ought to be running your—managing. And that's not what we're paying you, EG&G or REECo or whoever, to run the business the way it should be run. I mean we're in the business of testing nuclear weapons or doing research or whatever. We're not in the business of discriminating against our employees. And eventually they promoted her. One of the things that even happened after she complained, projects that they were all working on, there was a big scientific conference where they were all going to. Friday afternoon she calls me. She says, We'll be gone for a week and we all had a review today of the work we left undone for the week while we're all gone, and my boss, the fellow she had already complained about, says I can't go because I'm behind on my project. And I'm at the same stage that the other projects are on. I'm not behind.

And I said, What? Friday afternoon?

[And she said], Yeah, and we're leaving on Sunday, this thing starts on Monday.

And I said, oh my goodness. So I called the contractor manager and I said, Hey, this doesn't look good. She's complained. You know I'm doing the investigation. And here it is Friday afternoon, now she's told she can't get on that plane and go to the conference with her peers on Monday. I said, You need to turn that around.

He said, OK.

I said *tschooo!*

So he called the guy. That guy called me on Monday and he said, You had no right doing that. You went over my head. I said, Hey, you know, it's bad enough that we're in this situation and you're just making it worse.

While you were doing that, did you have much of a sense of the bigger picture of what the test site was doing?

Oh, clearly. Yes.

You know, I mean are you involved at all in that side of it at first?

Not so much at first because I was strictly a professional technical person doing work, and I was not in management at all at that time. This was in the early seventies, mid-seventies. And then in '78, my supervisor, division director, announced his retirement. And there were, what, five of us, I think, in the office doing various—I was doing the affirmative action. I had already started doing some of the labor relations work. The other folks in the office were doing the compensation and the benefits. That's the Office of Industrial Relations. That was our principal **[00:55:00]** responsibility. So he announced his retirement, and he did retire in '78. The Agency at the time was in the excepted service, which meant that they kind of had their own personnel practices and they didn't have to go through the federal process—they had their own promotional kind of process. It was not like some other federal agencies at the time. And so I really didn't

apply for the position, but the assistant manager called me up to his office one day. And the Agency was downsizing, and some of the more senior folks—nobody got laid off but they were kind of encouraged, "well, you're near retirement." So there were a lot of retirements and then he was trying to reorganize the Agency, and so we're reorganizing this division. I was told it's no longer going to be a division, it's going to be a branch, and we're going to attach you to the Human Resources Division, so you'll be a branch and there will be three branches in this thing, and we want you to be the new Branch Chief. Hmm. OK. And there's a promotion in it for you. You'll be a grade 14. I said, well, OK. And I went back to my office and said, man, trying to figure out, what does all this mean?

It's a great opportunity, though, right?

Oh, yeah. And so that's when having focused on compliance reviews and EEO investigations and starting to have been exposed to some of the labor relations issues and the labor negotiations, that clearly had to change. So in response to your question about the bigger view, that's clearly when it started. I had to start taking on a bigger view of what this Agency was doing. So that's when it started. So then I became the Branch Chief for the Industrial Relations Branch at the time.

So now you have a lot of responsibility.

Oh, a lot of responsibilities, including responsibility for four employees and their performance appraisals.

Now you're worried about—

Now, I'm worried about it. I says whoopsie daisy, you know.

That's funny. I bet you that did kind of change your—

Oh, it clearly did. I said, oops, now I'm going to be doing it. I'm not the recipient. I'll be the recipient of continuing to receive one from somebody else, but now I'm going to be responsible for doing these things. And without question, and you can ask any manager or supervisor anyplace, evaluations is still one of the toughest jobs there is for anybody in any industry or any organization. And I don't know that we'll ever, you know, hopefully they get better over time but we've had so many iterations in my career of thirty-eight years or whatever with the federal government that I mean. Still I, not that I dreaded them but we tried all kinds of things. By the time I left, we were doing them on the computer. They were all automated. And then you had to not only, you know, it was the people that you worked with outside of the organization who also had input, and then you had to select some other people that I mean it became almost game-playing.

Did you enjoy this new job? Did you enjoy the new responsibility?

Oh, the new responsibilities became enormous, especially responsible for labor relations negotiations with the contractors and the labor unions. And there was thirteen labor unions that REECo had, the building trades, the Teamsters, the Operating Engineers, the Electricians, the Laborers, and those negotiations came around every three years, wage re-openers, or every four years or five years, negotiating a big contract. And you had preparations that you had to sit in on with REECo to make sure the contractor had a plan. The Wackenhut [Security, Incorporated, WSI] negotiations with their guards was complicated. I mean it was very complicated because if they ever went on strike, who was going to provide security at the Nevada Test Site? So there was a requirement in that contract that Wackenhut had to have 100 individuals outside of the test site from their corporate organization that on a twenty-four-hour **[01:00:00]** notice, you had to fly them into town to take over like on a Monday morning if in fact those guards went out on

strike. And the guards had gone out on strike prior to my coming to work, in the early sixties or mid-sixties, I guess. And so this requirement in the Wackenhut contract, they flew people in from other parts of the country.

Did they have to have these 100 people ready to go at all times, or just once you came down and—?

No. Well, basically at all times because they had to meet the training requirements at the time. On Monday morning when they showed up, they had to have qualified with a firearm. After the years went by, not at the beginning in '74, but by the time the negotiations in the late seventies, the Agency had implemented new physical fitness requirements: being able to run a mile in eight minutes, and so many pushups, and this kind of thing. Well, those 100 individuals had to meet those tests, plus the firearms, so they always had to be firearm-qualified, and that's very expensive, but that had to be done. And so the negotiations of the late seventies, I don't remember the exact year, I know the first time the negotiations came around, I'd monitor them and it was a weekly report to DOE headquarters, especially on the security contract. And I remember it's a Saturday morning and I'm out there cutting the lawn and I had a beeper, you know, they gave me a beeper and God, I detested carrying that thing around, but it went off. I went and answered it and it's call this number. I called the number and it was the mediator. They had called in a federal mediator. And I said, `Yes,` and he says, `God, we're down to the last nickel.` You know, if not, Sunday is the deadline—you know, tonight—well, Saturday night they had to say that's it because the twenty-four-hour notice, they had to call these 100 people and fly them in here on Sunday so Monday morning they take over. I said, `A nickel?` He said, `Yes.` So I came down to the office. I didn't even change clothes. I'm in my shorts and T-shirt and I'm all sweaty and I come down to the office and I said, `Down to a nickel.` He

says, Yes, a nickel more, and it's going to cost so much more if we don't. And I said, Well, the guy who can give the OK, my boss, is out of town this weekend, because he had called me Friday and said, Hey, I'm going to be out of town—

He goes out of town on the weekend that—

Yeah, right. I had a phone number where I could reach him, so I said, Well, let me call. I called and he said, He's left. He's on the way back to Las Vegas. I said, Oh, my God.

This was before cell phones and—.

Yeah, there was no cell phone back—this is '78, so that was probably early eighties sometimes. And so I said, All right, for a nickel we can't afford not to. I mean it's going to cost us more than that to fly 100 folks in here, you know. And I said, Go ahead, give them the extra nickel.

The AEC would have to pay to fly in—?

Oh, yeah, that's all cost of the contract. I mean Wackenhut is not going to send them here free. And then you've got to house them and feed them and get uniforms and firearms and I mean very expensive, but hey.

OK, yeah, so giving them an extra nickel is getting off cheap, then, it sounds like.

Yes, so I said, All right, give them a nickel.

But that's the kind of power you had. You were in charge of the—

Yeah, right, sure, I didn't have the power but I exercised it [laughing]. So on Monday morning I went into the office. I went up to the assistant manager and I told him and he said, I understand, because he had already gotten to work, I saw the guards out there this morning, so there must've been a settlement.

I said, Yep, and I said, but it cost another nickel.

He said, Well, you know, it would've cost us more than that. That's right. So, OK.

Somebody in Boston got on an airplane before they could tell them don't get on. Because they called quickly on Saturday, they called everybody, don't get on an airplane, but this guy got on an airplane, and I didn't know that till Monday or Tuesday, whatever. But they told me, said, You know, So-and-so, and I didn't know who this guy [was], he got on an airplane and we were at the airport when he got off. He got to gamble a little bit but he didn't leave the airport. We put him on a plane and sent him back to Boston.

Wow. Talk about coming right down to the wire.

Yeah. That was too close. That was too close.

Did you evolve into another job?

No, the job just clearly got more complicated. I had not been doing a lot of that work before. And **[01:05:00]** the job changed as the environment and the situation would change. Employee pensions became a *very* big issue. Compensation for executives over the years, in the eighties into the nineties became a *very* big issue. A lot of requirements. Salaries at the time were in the eighties and the ninety thousands. Some of the senior managers were over $100,000. But by the time that the nineties came around, the salaries for some of the executives were approaching $150,000, and I remember even when I left in 2000 there were some of them that were over $200,000. Not just for Department of Energy but other government agencies. And the administrations were saying wait a minute, wait a minute. It now was a national issue, especially with the laboratories, Los Alamos [National Laboratory] and [Lawrence] Livermore [National Laboratory]. We used to have a requirement for over $100,000 salary, or it was even over $80,000, you'd have a list that the contractor would have to provide. Because one of the responsibilities that we had at our office was to approve the salary budget for that contractor for

the next year for all their personnel costs. And that was a big undertaking trying to keep costs reasonable. One of the guiding principles that the Department of Energy had was that we clearly as—while contractors are private employers, they are not to lead the market in their area in terms of benefits and retirement. So we didn't want our Nevada Test Site contractors—REECo, EG&G, Holmes and Narver, or even Bechtel [Nevada] toward the end—to be leading the market in terms of competition for salaries, to drive up the salaries, competing with the county and the state and the school district. The school district is not really comparable but, you know, EG&G engineers were to be paid basically the same for the same kind of work that an engineer working for the state or the county or UNLV [University of Nevada, Las Vegas] or other private industry in town. And so it became a very complicated issue. Retirements became a very big—health costs. Health costs, beginning in the eighties, became a tremendous issue. One of the things that we started, it was very novel in town, a couple of our contractors joined employer coalitions in the early-or-mid-eighties with a couple of the hotels, and they got together in an employer coalition. Then they would go to Sunrise [Hospital] and to UMC [University Medical Center] and the other hospitals and negotiate rates for their employees, at less than the general public was paying. And we were doing almost anything to try to keep our costs down. We started shifting costs to the employees that basically up till then had basically free medical. So we started upping because one of the things we found out, if an employee didn't pay anything out of their pocket, they could almost care less is probably too strong but [think], I don't have to worry what this procedure's going to cost me. I don't have to be concerned that they may keep me in the hospital for four days or five days when they could've sent me home after three days. One of the things that we learned was to try to encourage our employees to ask questions: What is this procedure?

What's the cost going to be? How long am I going to be here? That kind of thing, which, for the most part, the employees or people, individuals don't do. I'll bet to this day they still don't do it.

What were the factors that played into the prohibitive health care costs in the eighties for you guys?

It's just the general market that was going up. We were in a better position to negotiate lower costs because of the size.

Just because of the numbers.

We said hey, you know, our employees will go to UMC or you'll go to Sunrise and we know ahead of time basically what the costs are going to be, and so hospitals say OK, well, your employees are going to come here and so we're going to get volume and so we're in a position to lower the cost for you.

Was there any sense of, since a lot of the work was dangerous and they were exposed, you know, some people were exposed, that that also kind of played into—?

Not really. No. Most of that, you know, because this was years after atmospheric testing, and there had only been some minor incidences, none of any magnitude in terms of any release of **[01:10:00]** anything, exposures to anything, and if there were any exposures, it was to hazardous material, working in the tunnels, the fumes from the dust and that kind of stuff, but not in terms of radioactivity.

Sure. Then how did the job kind of changes, you get into the nineties as testing is kind of winding down?

Well, there was the competition for the new contract. By that time, by the late eighties, we had consolidated and competed the Holmes and Narver and the Fenix and Scisson contract, competed it, and that contract was awarded to Raytheon, I believe in—probably in 1990. Maybe '89 or '90.

By the time ’92 comes around, the decision is made to compete, consolidate the REECo, the EG&G contract, compete it as one contract. That contract was the one that was awarded to Bechtel, the current contractor [at time of interview, June 2005], and EG&G and REECo made the decision not to even compete.

Why is that? They saw the writing on the wall?

No, that was a corporate decision, and I don’t fully understand why they made that decision. Part of the decision, I think, had to do with the Price-Anderson Act which is Congress’s provided liability coverage for contractors involved in the nuclear industry, and there were some changes of the Price-Anderson Act probably in the late eighties. And I know there was one corporate office, an EG&G corporate official said well, if that’s the way things are going to be, we may not want to continue in this line of business because we’re exposing our company and our shareholders to potential liabilities beyond our assets and we don’t know if we want to do the business. That may have had something to do with it.

OK. And we’re coming to the end of the second disc, so I’m going to stop—

[01:12:10] End Track 3, Disc 2.

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

OK. And so you were working for the AEC during the JVE [Joint Verification Experiment]—

DOE, Department of Energy. Yes, because AEC was only—I think AEC, they reorganized and became ERDA [Energy Research and Development Agency] in late ‘74 or maybe early ‘75 [in 1974].

But anyway, with respect to JVE, when it was determined that the Russians had already drilled a hole to lower the U.S. device for the test, that it wasn’t straight enough and that they didn’t have the capability to drill a hole that was straight enough for the lowering of the rack that

the U.S. used for the test. Quickly, we had to mobilize a drill crew and disassemble a drill rig, take it apart and fly it over—we could've put it on a barge; it would've taken forever—and fly it over to Russia to re-drill the hole so that the U.S. could conduct its test. Because the Russians had already conducted their test at the test site.

The role that I and my staff played was strictly to come up with some personnel procedures that would cover the REECo and the other contractor employees. I think there were some Holmes and Narver. I don't know if there were any EG&G employees; there may have been. It was not anticipated that they were going to go to Russia to conduct the test, but quickly had to put them together, and we had to come up with some policies: their hours of work, some additional pay, their benefits, you know, we had to make sure that their health insurance, there was coverage provided to them. And so we played a very small role in that, I think, but that was totally unexpected.

But to see those drill rigs being disassembled and then loaded on those planes out at Indian Springs was something else.

Yes, that's a logistic feat right there.

Oh, yeah. And they were brought back on a barge, though, and it literally took months.

I guess there's no hurry, once you're coming back.

There was no hurry to get them back because the test had already been conducted and it was successful. But, you know, that was one of those unexpected things which was obviously quite a novel thing.

I guess I had just one more question from the previous disc. When you were working for the DOE, what exactly was your role? Help me to understand what your role was when there was labor negotiations going on.

The Department of Energy, our role, the role of myself and my staff, was strictly to monitor—. Well, the contractor would come to us, I think the requirement was almost a year ahead of time, before the expiration of a contract with any of their unions, and lay out a plan as to what were the goals and objectives going to be of the upcoming negotiations? What were the timetables? Who the negotiating team was going to be for the contractor, and if they knew who the labor unions were going to be negotiating, and all that went into a report that went to the local management but also a requirement that it went to DOE headquarters, to the Office of Industrial Relations. And then once the negotiations started, there was consistent reporting by our function to local managers and to the headquarters. Headquarters folks also had a requirement to make sure that the Congress, specifically the congressman, congressional representatives from Nevada were aware of what the negotiations—not, you know, on a day-to-day but to make sure because if there was going to be any work stoppage or a strike, one of the early requirements is that the congressional people did not want to be surprised. The same thing with DOE headquarters. So there was this constant reporting requirement for all of the Department of Energy negotiations of the contractors at all of the DOE sites across the country. And so that was one of our principal roles in the labor negotiations.

To monitor and make sure the negotiations didn't fall off the rails, right?

Yeah, and so the contractor, the first thing that they would do, you know, towards the end of a contract, if it got down to the last week or two, it was almost a daily report, depending upon how things were going, that I would get a call or I would go over to REECo or to Wackenhut and sit down with them. And they would kind of keep me up to speed as to what was going on so that I could make a full report to management kind of thing.

[00:05:00] Now, rather than to skip and let me—I mentioned to you the negotiations that Bechtel entered into and how much different they were and who knows what happens in the future? But when we consolidated the contracts and the contracts were awarded to Bechtel for basically one contractor now for all the contracts at the test site, the negotiations were to start in 1996 and '97, Bechtel with all of the building trades, thirteen building trades, unions. One of the things that occurred several months prior to is the Bechtel labor relations manager, Reggie Phelps, came to me and said, Well, you know, what are the requirements? What do we need to do for these negotiations? So I explained to him what the process was and he said, OK, there's no problem. We'll start working on a plan and we'll get it to you in time so you can make your report. And shortly thereafter, across my desk was an announcement for a labor relations course at Harvard where they had been conducting these courses, seminars on non-adversarial labor negotiations. In other words, negotiations based on—they called it "interest-based bargaining," which was not typical of the adversarial kinds of negotiations that historically have taken place in this country. And I said hey, this looks kind of interesting, so I sent it over to Reggie. And not too long thereafter Reggie called me and he says, Hey, I want to come over and talk to you about this. And he said, You know, maybe we ought to give this a try. Because one of the reasons why we had selected Bechtel is because they were bringing some novel things, in our estimation, to the test site, and so that's one of the reasons why they were selected. And he said, And of course if we're going to do this, we need to take a union person with us. And I said, Well, let's give it a try. So Reggie went over and he talked to some of the unions, and a representative, the business manager for the electricians, whose name escapes me right now, but the three of us went to this seminar for a week.

This is at Harvard?

At Harvard, yes, it was sponsored by Harvard University. There were a couple of hundred people in this seminar for a week—well, about four days. And clearly it was a departure from the normal negotiations of—this was interest-based bargaining, where the parties would sit down jointly and say well, these are our interests; what are your interests? I mean no negotiations, just identification, and can we work out an agreement here based on our interest in the work, as opposed to, you know, kind of a give-and-take and both may end up losing something. And before we left, the representative from the electricians said, Hey, I think we ought to give this a try, because we've got a new contractor who doesn't have a history, like REECo, who—there had been some work stoppages over the years. There had been a major strike in '83 that lasted for almost three months, basically almost closed down the test site, and clearly we didn't want that to happen again.

And so we came back and discussions took place between Bechtel and our DOE management. We encouraged the unions to really seriously consider it. We sent another three representatives, another Bechtel employee, Cheryl Abernathy who was on my staff, and Woody Woodward from the Teamsters, the three of them went to Harvard and took the same course and came back. By that time Reggie said, Well, let's try something else here. Let's bring in a mediator from the mediation service to facilitate these negotiations because clearly they're going to be different. We need a neutral party to facilitate this interest-based bargaining.

And so that's what happened. That's what took place. And so our initial meeting at the Maxim Hotel [and] Casino, we met there for a couple of months. The first session was a get-to-meet-the-parties, this is the Bechtel negotiating team, this is the union negotiating team. And we **[00:10:00]** had a big square table. It wasn't a table where one party sat at one side and the other

party sat in—and they were intermingled. They weren't union over here representing the thirteen unions and the Bechtel group. They just came in and sat down wherever.

And you were there?

Yeah, and I was there with my staff for the first day.

OK. Just the first day?

The first day.

And you're just getting a feel for things?

We're sitting over in a corner. I was there along with Doug Roher who was on my staff and Cheryl. Toby Bickmore may have been there for the first day. And then we brought—the Bechtel manager was there, the DOE manager was there, and he was a brand-new manager, Jerry Johnson. And this was just get to know each other. And things went well. There were introductions, and then [federal mediator] Lavonne [Ritter] kind of set out, you know, review, this is forty years of labor history and there have been ups and downs, and so one of the first things we want to do for our next meeting is, what are our interests? What are the things that we want to work on? So it went well. And then I remember Reggie said to me, he says, You know what? I think it would be good if you and your staff sat in on these negotiations.

And I said, Wait a minute. The DOE and the government is not part of any labor negotiations, and it's a thing that we are stand-off and we are almost hidden in these negotiations. That's been the history of negotiating.

[And he said], Well, this is brand new. We think you ought to be there.

And I thought about it, and I talked to some of the DOE managers, and I talked to people in headquarters and they said, Boy, you are pushing the envelope. Do you really want to do it?

I said, Well, what have we got to lose? We went to this training session. And if things don't go right, we can always pull back.

They said, All right, give it a try.

So from day one, the three of us sat in the corner. We didn't participate but we sat there as observers. And as time went on, there came a time when there would be a question that one of the parties wanted to ask us. And so the first time I recall—I don't recall the issue—well, I do, it was over transportation, busing. The unions asked, you know, Bechtel, could you folks leave? We want to talk to Bob Agonia, ask him some questions. So the Bechtel people left the room.

And they said, This business about busing and its impact on the subsistence at the test site, give us some background on how you, DOE, have arrived at the subsistence that we get paid, because it was $5.00 if you worked at Mercury; if you worked in the forward area, you got $15.00. And they said, You know, when we're working downtown and we travel out to the dam, down to Davis Dam to work on the power plant, we get $25.00-a-day subsistence. You guys are only giving them $5.00 and $7.50, is what it was.

I said, Yeah, but we provide the bus transportation.

And clearly it came, you know, we knew what they were going to ask for is we want the same kind of subsistence that our workers get when they work outside of Las Vegas, the thirty miles or whatever. And so we said—we gave them the background. And then they said, OK, Bechtel, you can come back in. So they discussed that whole issue and went back and forth. Other times, we got questions from Bechtel because they were kind of the new kid on the block. They would ask us about issues that had come up before in other labor negotiations and why we did what we did.

So we ended up sitting there. I mean we participated, the three of us, in those labor negotiations for almost three months, almost on a daily basis. And the rest of DOE kept looking at us and said, Agonia, you are messing things—you're going to get caught in the middle of this and the unions are going to want to negotiate with you. And that's one of the principal reasons why DOE always made sure that the feds were not participating because the unions could go around—and they had tried it in the past—and come directly to the manager of DOE, You need to tell your contractor that we need this and give us that or we're going to go out on strike. One of the requirements was that on a weekly or biweekly basis, this report that I previously mentioned that had to go not only to local management [but] to DOE headquarters so that the Secretary of Energy, didn't get surprised by any **[00:15:00]** labor strife or whatever in his back yard or, notify the congressional folks, is that this was a daily report or a weekly or whatever. Right up at the beginning, the unions said, Now, wait a minute. What they were talking about is they wanted to keep the negotiations amongst themselves. They were not even going to go to the public. They were going to minimize their discussions with the members of the unions about what was going on at those labor negotiations. And then somebody said, Well, wait a minute, if we do that, what about DOE? Bob's going to have to be making this periodic report to DOE headquarters.

And they said, What if we tell you you can't do that?

And I said, Well, then, you're telling me that you don't want me to report to DOE headquarters or local management, I guess I won't.

And they said, OK.

Lavonne Ritter who was the mediator said, OK, DOE has agreed they aren't going to report on what's going on in these negotiations. So let's proceed.

And my staff said, You're not going to tell Bob Degrasse, who was the manager of the Office of Industrial Relations in headquarters, you're not going to tell him?

I says, No. I just told them I wasn't.

They said, OK.

So I called him later that day and I said, Hey, Bob, I've told you these labor negotiations are much different than in the past, and let me tell you another thing that I agreed to this morning. We are not going to provide you with your periodic reports that you folks have expected.

He said, You're not?

I said, No. I agreed not to. I can go back and tell them that I have to, but then we're not going to be able to sit there in that room.

He said, OK with me, but you'd better make sure that things go, and no surprises.

I said, Fine.

Sounds like you're getting farther and farther out on that branch.

Well, right, and I said oh, my goodness gracious. Things, they started out very on the rough side. I mean the parties really had to feel each other out because this was not only a new process, a new approach, but we had parties that had never negotiated together. But Lavonne did a *masterful* job of facilitating, and one of the things that constantly was her [point]—we've been doing this this way for forty years. Why do we want to change it? One of the things that they did that the unions really detested was the work rules. You know, it was almost the typical penalty chart. You do this, you get five days. You do it again, you get fifteen days. You do it a third time, you're out of here. That kind of approach. They said, We don't like that. What are

the work rules? We don't even have any. We find out about you've broken a work rule after one of our members has done something wrong, you know, he's backed up the truck and hit a building or whatever. One contractor may give you five days, the other contractor, REECo, you guys send us home, you're fired.

So Lavonne said, Well, let's set up a separate committee of representatives of the company and the union and you guys start meeting on a periodic [basis]. You come up with some new work rules and the old work rules will go away. We'll start over brand new.

A *very* successful approach. And it worked. They came up with new work rules. They threw away that history of forty years of the penalty table kind of thing.

They set up a committee to work on better ways of working together, you know, for managers to manage the work force. Assignment of work. Jurisdictional disputes. Unions would argue amongst themselves, no, that's our work. No, that's our work. Bechtel said wait, we've got to do this differently. So they set up a process where three non-affected unions would make the decision. Let's say the Teamsters and the Operating Engineers were claiming work. And it would go through a process and Bechtel would say OK, fine, we'll set up the process call for three disinterested unions, their representatives, to hear the claims of whether it was the union—what the other union was, and you guys make the decision who ought to get the work. Not us. That is obviously precedent-setting, where the employer or the contractor is giving up the right to make a decision on who does the work. They set up this process. And it's worked. It's worked now for, **[00:20:00]** what, almost seven years all this is going on. So all of that was—and it was so successful that it made national news.

Is that right?

Yeah. President Clinton was here for a visit at the Carpenters' Union hall, and we were invited to go down. And I said, Well, wait a minute. Do we really want to go to this meeting? What is it? Because it was kind of political. And DOE said, No, no, we think it would be good. The president's here but it's an open public meeting. It's really not that political. So we went to the meeting. He was there and he was congratulating the unions on some successes, along with other things that had gone on, and then he said, And I'm also knowledgeable about recent negotiations at the Nevada Test Site between the building trades and Bechtel about a new approach to labor negotiations, and this administration supports that kind of thing. And we were all like, holy mackerel! Who told him?

That's got to make you feel good.

Yes, it did, you know, and Cheryl, Doug—I don't think Doug was there, but Cheryl was there, and Lisa Johnson on my staff, the three of us. But no, that was good to hear.

Do you know if that interest-based negotiation, if that's how future negotiations were done?

Yes, because Bechtel had a wage re-opener after I had already left the Department, in 2000, 2001. Same approach. And that's continued. And the other process that they set up, on a monthly basis the unions and Bechtel agreed to meet on a monthly basis just to enhance their communications. Bechtel could share with the unions, we've got this job coming up down the road, these are some things that are happening. The unions could ask questions or say hey, this thing is not going the way it should be. And DOE, we were invited to those meetings. So for a number of years, while I was still on the payroll, I would go to those meetings and take members of my staff. And even to this day, those monthly meetings continue. And I know that Cheryl, who continued after I left, she went to those meetings. She now is over at Yucca Mountain. She still goes. And we invited a representative from Yucca Mountain because that's different from

the DOE, from the test site. And so she still goes to those monthly meetings. And it's resolved a lot of issues that don't become a problem. They're issues when they come up but—. Been very successful.

Do you know if it's had a larger ramification for labor relations nationally?

Well, the interest-based bargaining has because of the efforts of Harvard and the Department of Labor and some of the other federal agencies who have some cognizance over labor negotiations across the country have continued to push that. But as far as within DOE, I don't think so because starting in the late nineties and into 2000, there was *major* reorganization and great reductions in the work force across the Department and other facilities. And so I don't know that any other field office has adopted the same kind of approach, I mean to the extent that we did here. The principle of interest-based bargaining, I know, continues. I know that there were several meetings here in the community that were sponsored by the Federal Mediation Service and the Department of Labor after those negotiations, some regional meetings, and I know that Lavonne Ritter from Federal Mediation Service conducted a couple of workshops. There were people from Metro [Las Vegas Metropolitan Police], people from the hotels, primarily from Circus Circus, Mandalay Bay, and from the [Clark County] School District. There are other school districts in the country who have adopted that similar approach to negotiations. I know that the assistant superintendent at the school district, Georgeanne Rice, attended a couple of those sessions. I'm not aware, though, that they proceeded beyond just becoming more **[00:25:00]** knowledgeable about the process. The hotels have used it with the Culinary Union, that approach.

Is that right?

Right, with facilitation by Lavonne Ritter and her staff. So it's kind of taken—I don't want to say it's taken root in town, that's probably a little bit too much, but at least it's occurred. It's changed. Let's say it's changed. I don't know that anybody adopted it to the extent that we did, but I know that it's taken place with some of the unions, especially with the Culinary Union and the hotels.

Interesting stuff. You mentioned an exercise?

Yes. Back in the mid-eighties, 1986 I think it was, the exercise was called Mighty Derringer. I've got to be a little careful because it was classified and I think a lot of it still may be classified. But in general, what we were asked to do, employees of the Department, of DOE and our contractors, those of us primarily of Hispanic background who spoke Spanish, we were asked to provide the background for an exercise having to do with the theft of a nuclear device. And the country was called Montrev and it was a Spanish-speaking country. There was a president. Richard Navarro was a DOE employee; he was the president of Montrev. I was named the chief of police, and my name was El Jefe. And we had a trailer that we set up and made it into like a *cantina*. It was Ruby's Cantina. Ruby Ramstead, she was the owner of this little bar-café kind of thing where the bad guys and the U.S. feds would meet in clandestine, you know, public meetings kind of thing when they would talk to each other. I got some Wackenhut guards and they became my police officers and we were the security folks. And it was kind of a stereotypical Latin American country where the chief of police was really the power behind the power and the president was a figurehead. But one of the requirements is we all spoke Spanish, and only Spanish. So the federal representatives from the Department from the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the military people and everybody else who was in the country trying to get this nuclear device back that had been stolen, they had to have their own interpreters, because we would have these

periodic meetings. They would want to talk to the president of the country about you've got to help us get this nuclear weapon back. Those meetings were kind of comical to begin with. But the DOE representative would say, in English, would talk to us and we would answer back in Spanish, so they'd have to have a translator. There was a U.S. ambassador. I mean there were all kinds of folks sitting around this table. And then we would answer back in Spanish. The military general who was the general from the Special Forces out of, oh, I can't remember, what's the military base that's back in North Carolina or South Carolina? Oh, I can't think of it right now. But that's where all of his Special Forces were. And it was a huge exercise.

And again I don't want to lead you down any roads that are classified, but is this what you did all day? I mean does this kind of become your job for a while?

For two weeks, almost for a full two weeks. And we set up this country. So we provided the background and—

So the premise was that the weapon had already been stolen and now—

The premise was the weapon had already been stolen by the bad people, bad Montrevans, and clearly the U.S. wanted it back. And they wanted to figure out how the negotiations were going to, you know, if there was going be any negotiating or if they were just going to take it back. So we ended up putting together a little newspaper that we published. We even had a parade one day in Montrev. And we said we've got to come up, you know, as time went on, how do we provide this background and make this thing realistic? So we had a parade one day. And they **[00:30:00]** assigned me the police chief's car and it had some sirens and lights on it. Periodically I'd be driving along with my driver. We all had uniforms. We went down to the Army surplus. I got myself a uniform that had five stars on it and all kinds of badges [laughing]. And one of the managers, really to make this realistic, Bob Nelson who was our deputy manager, I think, at the

time, I don't know where he got these little Uzis, plastic Uzi machine guns. They were water pistols and we'd carry those things around.

So how was it, being chief of police? Did you like—?

Oh, it was unbelievable. But some of the humorous but not humorous sides of it, people would come up to me, you know, that I worked with and say, Hey, Bob, we've got to have this thing done. We need this or that. And I'd say, *¿Cómo? [What?]* In Spanish. I remember one woman who worked in Security, she got so upset with me, because she did that a couple of times and I'd just tell her, I don't speak English. I don't understand, that for a month or two after it was all over and we went back to work she wouldn't speak to me.

Well, that brings up a good point. I mean what did happen to everybody's workload that was—?

Well, you know, for that [exercise], somebody else had to do the work. I mean this was an exercise—I mean the FBI, the military, the CIA, it was a big exercise.

It sounds, for lack of a better term, fun.

Oh, for us, it was, and for them, because I used to go just on my own and not officially, but these big end-of-the-day meetings where all of the parties would get together and figure out hey, what the progress is. Have we located where this device is? Once we find it, how are we going to get it back without them setting the thing off? And that involved the military and the technicians who were going to disarm it. They didn't know whether it was armed or not. And then finally I remember they said, Well, we know where it's at, and it's guarded by so many bad guys, and how are we going to take them out? I remember the Special Forces they had, the general, you know, he said, Hey, I want you to come and observe how well prepared we are, the U.S., our Army and our technicians, and how we operate. And so I went. They took me to their command center—

Now, did they ask Bob to do this or El Jefe to do this?

No, El Jefe. I'm strictly El Jefe. Strictly El Jefe, and let me explain what I mean, how to the extent that—one night I'm out driving around. We went to one of the checkpoints. Because there were Wackenhut guards that were on my staff, so they were Montrevans. On the other side of the gate would be the regular Wackenhut guards. And so I went out there one night on inspection. And the Wackenhut guards that I had selected were Hispanic, so I'd speak to them in Spanish, and here on the other side of the fence or this barrier is a Wackenhut guard who's not [Hispanic] and I'm talking to him in Spanish. Well, one night I went out there. The Wackenhut guard, the non-Montrevan said, Hey, Bob.

And I said, *Cómo?*

And he said, Cut that out. Wait a minute. He said, One of the lab guys, a photographer, was out here a while ago and he backed up and see this barrier over here? He knocked it over and he broke it. I mean it was in pieces, you know, the wooden horse kind of [thing].

I said, Oh, OK, I'll report it.

He said, Then he took off. He wouldn't stop. We tried to stop him and he just took off.

And so, all right. The next morning, these official meetings that were taking place, we're sitting around this big table and I said, Time out. People looked at me. I said "Time out" in English. And the U.S. ambassador sitting next to our manager, Mr.—I'm trying to think of who was the manager at the time. I can't remember who it was. [Thomas Clark] He said, Hey, he speaks English! And our manager says, Well, of course he does. He works for me and all these other people, they all work for me. But I remember later, you know, the CIA representative, we had gotten along together and he knew a little bit of Spanish, so he kind of used to practice with me and I would, you know, let him know. After the meeting he

[00:35:00] says, You S.O.B., you speak English and you've been making me practice my crude Spanish. I said, Well, yeah, that's what we were supposed to do.

That is a great story. So did the good guys get the bomb back?

Yep, they got it back. That's the classified part that I can't really share with you, how they got it back, but it was something to see how the Special Forces, you know, blowing a hole in the wall in this great big facility where the device was with the bad people in there and how they did away with each one of the bad people kind of thing and how they did that, I think that's still—well, I'm sure—it was classified at the time and it still very well may be classified.

I guess the more important question is, does El Jefe still have his job?

Yes, El Jefe still had his job, and the uniform and some of the other artifacts are now part of the [Atomic Testing] museum. I gave them to the museum.

The uniform's in there?

Well, it's upstairs in the—it's not on display yet. In a year or two or maybe next year we're going to—because I think next year will be ten years, so we're liable to make it a special kind of exhibit and maybe even have kind of like a reunion of all the Montrevans and the folks, because even to this day there are some people who periodically will refer to me [as] El Jefe. Except for the one woman whose name escapes me right now because, as I said, she didn't speak to me for about a month or so.

That is classic.

Yes. But that one was a lot of fun. I mean, and we became so entrenched in, like I say, getting into it, so to speak. It was either the second or third day I, you know, because we stayed out at the test site at Mercury. Those folks, almost all of them, they lived out there at the site, out at Area 25, and they either bunked there—the military people were in bunks and whatever. But we

would go into Mercury at night. And I know one morning I was taking a shower and I said oh, my God, I'm thinking in Spanish. I said I am in trouble. That's going too far.

You didn't have them build you like a palatial Montrevan palace or anything like that?

No. Well, we hung out at Ruby's Cantina, although there was another small building that we set up as our place where we had all our stuff.

That's great stuff. I did want to talk to you about the origins of how you got involved in the museum at some point, so before we transition from your test site experience to the museum experience, is there anything else as far as your DOE—?

No. I think towards the end of my career, I retired in 2000, but in the nineties the labor negotiations—well, I was part of the, we call it the Source Evaluation Board, when we competed the contract for the test site that was subsequently awarded to Bechtel in '96, I guess it was. So for about a year, it took the Source Evaluation Board, it took us almost a year from the beginning of the process till the end, the selection of Bechtel, and so for that year I was at the—down from the regular DOE facility, we had an office set up for the Source Evaluation Board and that's where we met on a daily basis, conducted our business. So I was basically out of the office for that one year up until we selected Bechtel. So basically that, and then the transition to Bechtel once they were awarded the contract and before, then I retired in 2000.

Because at that point, things had really slowed down.

Really slowed down. One of the [things] that was going on at the same time was the termination, layoff, whatever you want to call it, basically, of, oh, gosh, about 5,000 employees. There were special efforts made, you know, on how you were—the benefits to be allocated to them, those of them that were going to be continued employees, but basically—I mean this went out for the entire DOE. All totaled there must've been probably 50,000 employees, if not more, across the

complex that were let go over a period of four to five years. So there were special retraining benefits that, oh, we must've had three or four *huge* conferences at various locations across the country, including contractors and DOE, as to *how* we were going to conduct this **[00:40:00]** transition or this reduction in force. Because it was the first time it had ever happened to the DOE in terms of our complex. So it took years. And there was a special congressional act called 3161 that set out the rules of how folks were to be let go and how long they had to take the retraining benefits, how those were to be administered. And so that's what the last number of years took up most of the time.

What went into the decision of you retiring?

Well, you know, in 2000—I'd put it off for a couple of years and more challenges came around and I said, well, I want to get through this processing-out, helping to process out all these folks, the contractors that I'd worked with for some twenty-five years. Then after they process out, then I'll process out. And all totaled I had thirty-eight years of federal service, so I figured that was enough.

What comes next? How do you go from retiring from the DOE to getting involved in the museum?

Well, probably a year or two before I retired in 2000, Bruce Church who was the president of the board of the Nevada Test Site Historical Foundation [NTSHF] asked me, he said, Hey, we sure need your help with the foundation. We're going to build this museum. And we have a vacancy on the board. And I said, Well, I'd like to but I'm still working yet and I really don't think I've got the time. Maybe after I retire. And so I put him off three or four times, and finally that excuse ran out when I retired. I finally said OK, OK. And Linda Smith who was assistant manager for administration, she had already retired, she was on the board, and she talked to me and I said OK, I'll do that. So I was made a

member of the board and became vice-president of the board. And so that's kind of how it started. But six months—let's see, I retired in January of 2000. Probably about June, in early June, I got a call from Bob Nelson who had been our deputy manager and manager. He called me and said, DOE needs your help.

And I said, Oh oh. What's up?

He said, Are you aware of this new legislation that provides compensation benefits to employees who've been affected by radiation or work hazards or hazardous material?

And I said, Well, I read about it in the paper.

[And he said], Well, there's going to be an office here in Las Vegas that DOE's going to open up with the Department of Labor, and we'd like you to help us get it open and manage it for a little while.

And I said, Well, I'll talk to whoever. I don't really particularly think I want to do that, but OK.

So they had contracted a small contractor to operate the program, and so I talked to them, and I didn't even have a chance to say yes or no. He said, Hey, we need your help. Can you find us a place where we can open? Before I knew it, I was working for them. So I worked at that compensation office, which is just down the street and it's still open [Energy Employees Compensation Resource Center]. I told him I'd do it for a year when I finally said, OK, I'll do this for a year, but I think I ended up maybe thirteen or fourteen months, and that was enough. s

And what kind of stuff—was it primarily people from atmospheric testing?

What it was, it was helping individuals, former employees, most of them contractor employees, some federal employees, or their families, in many cases widows of former workers who wanted

to file a claim. And so our responsibility was to help them file that claim, to help them find the employment records, their medical records, whether they may have been from the local hospitals or DOE. And that office, like I said, is still open and they're still doing that. A lot of those cases are still pending. A lot of benefits have been paid out to several hundred former workers at the test site. And the claims were not coming just from folks who had worked at the test site [but also from] folks who lived here in town who had worked at other facilities across the country, **[00:45:00]** whether they worked at Lawrence Livermore lab or Los Alamos and they were here and they were living here and retired here.

I don't want to be too general but, you know, when you're talking about the test site, was it radiation or was it hazardous materials or—?

There were some claims. None of the claims that I'm aware of, of radiation exposure, have yet to this day been adjudicated one way or the other. They were to have set up a panel of doctors and the National Institute[s] of Health [NIH] was supposed to gather the exposure data from the test site and make those determinations, and to this day I don't think that's been done on the radiation cases. The exposure to hazardous material, a number of those cases, the former workers have been compensated to the tune of $150,000. That's with the benefit. A small number of employees who clearly could be determined by the medical records and their work history, who had been exposed to beryllium, which is a respiratory illness, those folks were the first ones to be compensated, and there were probably at least a dozen or so before I left there in 2001 who had been compensated. A couple of those employees, I know, subsequently have passed away, because there is basically no cure for the exposure to beryllium.

Did you have much sense of this kind of stuff before you started working there?

Not at all. I recall *years* ago seeing a memorandum almost by accident. It was a copy that had come to our office from DOE asking about the extent of the use of beryllium at all of the DOE sites. And I was copied because of the involvement of the contractor employees. And I didn't even know what beryllium was. So I asked a manager in the Safety area about beryllium, you know, what's beryllium? And he told me what it was, a metal that had been used as part of the device in terms of, you know, and that EG&G had used it to make parts out of beryllium and that kind of thing. And I said hmm, OK. So there was knowledge that beryllium had been used. And so when they started filing the claims and then we look at their medical records, *very extremely* hazardous material. And as it turned out, really, it depended upon the person and their resistance or non-resistance to the material because there was a facility down in Tucson [Arizona] where they used some beryllium making some parts for DOE. The home office, I think it was in Ohio, and they had farmed out some work to this facility in Tucson. And I got a call from a woman down there, and this is not a DOE facility, and she said, I work at this facility and my doctors tell me I have an illness caused by beryllium, and the work we did was for DOE years ago. And she had written to her congressman and her congressman had talked to DOE and said well, that facility is going to be covered. So we ended up taking a claim from her, and we ended up going down there and meeting with the employees and taking claims from them. Well, one of them, a young woman who we talked to, was originally from Mexico. She basically spoke mostly Spanish, so I ended up talking to her. We took her claim. She was already on oxygen. She had advanced berylliosis. And her claim was approved, oh, within a matter of a month or two. Her medical condition was such and she had worked in the facility. As a matter of fact, she worked in the laundry, so her exposure obviously came from the clothing from the individuals who worked in the plant. Not good stuff.

No. I guess I'm looking for like maybe how your perception changed from the time you started to the time—

Well, you know, I still think back about that manager. Not that he just put it aside, `Oh yeah, we've used beryllium`, but I wondered what went back in that report to DOE headquarters of how much beryllium had been used. Because I know early on when we started approving some of **[00:50:00]** those claims—we were taking claims, we didn't approve them, but when the results came back of folks whose claims had been approved, I know there was some former DOE folks that, you know, [asked], `What are you talking about? We didn't have any exposure to beryllium.` I said, `Well, all I can tell you is the record says yes.` And I think some of those former employees, even current at that time, were having difficulty distinguishing that from the exposure to radiation, as opposed to beryllium or exposure to silicosis, you know, the silica in the mines, especially over in Yucca Mountain. Because early on in the late nineties, I know one of the Yucca Mountain managers came over to see me and said, `Bob,` he says, `we need your help. We'd like you to set up a meeting with all the unions because we're going to have to increase the safety requirements at Yucca Mountain because our instrumentation tells us that there is more silica in the mine, in the tunnels than we initially thought there was. So they're going to have to wear a mask, a respiratory thing, depending upon where they work, that we've not required prior to this.` So I helped set up the meeting and invited all the union business managers, and then they gave a presentation on the hazards of exposure to silica and silicosis and explained to them that they were going to increase the safety requirements, so they didn't, you know, tell your employees that come Monday you're going to have to wear a respirator when you're down there working in the mines, in the tunnel, depending upon the machinery and how much dust.

Did they ever ask, Why didn't we have to wear them on Friday?

They asked and they told them, Hey, we didn't know. Our instrumentation did tell us and we now have information that says there *is* more exposure than we initially thought, so we got to up the requirements. So within the last, what, year or two, there's a former employee who is, you know, they're and the contractor at Yucca Mountain, and that case is winding its way through. I went to one of the initial hearings where they testified before [Senator Harry] Reid and some other folks. I think the fellow works for one of the laboratories.

So you worked, what, about, you said, thirteen, fourteen months for the place?

Yes.

Are you on the board at the museum as you're working there or is—?

Yes.

OK. How much time were you able to devote to the museum as you're working for the claims?

It was sufficient at the time because, see, this is before the construction. We were still in the throes of designing the museum and letting the contract for the museum. We had not started construction yet. Let's see, this is back in—this is 2002. So there was sufficient time.

And what kind of motivated you to want to be part of the board to kind of create a museum documenting the test site?

Well, the motivation was not that Bruce strong-armed me but it was that sense of OK-I'll-help-you-guys-out-for-a-little-while-kind of thing and it's going to turn out to be a lifetime commitment, I think. But one of the things that I insisted from day one because my role or what I saw as important out at the test site because of the position that I held was the employees, the workers. So from day one I insisted that whatever we do in the museum, obviously the gee-whiz, the bang kind of thing is going to be taken care of but we have to make sure that we dedicate

sufficient time and recognition to the employees at the test site. So we have that one gallery, especially the one gallery that's referred to as "The Innovators" where it's almost 100 percent devoted to the various employees from the janitors to the cooks, you know, the culinary folks and the fire fighters, to the scientists and the engineers, who basically get a lot of the recognition. But you can ask those scientists and those managers and engineers. They wouldn't have got the work done without the laborers and the folks that operated the drill rigs. And those scientists, they're the first ones to tell you, we never would've got our samples.

Yeah, and the sense of the worker really does come through in the museum. I would've liked to **[00:55:00]** *have been a fly on the wall during the meetings when you guys were talking about what the museum's going to be like because I mean I'm sure there was some pretty controversial subjects and, you know. Did it get pretty heated at times?*

No, not really, because the process, and I know there was a number of us, including myself, that said, is this going to work? Because our approach was sitting down with the Maltby people who we had hired to come up with the design, and for them to hire the subcontractors who would actually construct and fabricate the exhibits and put it all together. We sat down with them and kind of gave them a picture of what the test site was like, and they visited the test site and they talked to employees. *They're* the ones that basically designed what you see. Only from our—unless there were some other meetings, and I wasn't involved in all of them. But Roxanne Dey who was a former employee, now works for the National Park Service, she was one of the initial individuals. Bruce Church, and Linda [Smith] who answered their questions and provided them with this is what we would like you to depict. We're not telling you how to depict it but these are our concepts, these are our thoughts, and these are our ideas. And what you see today is the results of that kind of an approach. And believe me, they did a *remarkable* job. To this day, I

don't know how they did it. I mean they're the ones that researched and went through all of the film and all the photographs. And like I said, Roxanne Dey kind of started it, but Retta Helling, she's a retiree, a *lot* of the credit has to be given to Retta because she had a background in museums. She worked at the atomic museum, I can't remember what the full name for it [National Atomic Museum] was, over in Albuquerque before she transferred here to this office years ago. She did a lot of that work in helping them. I sat down with them and talked to them, shared with them about my perspective of the various crafts and the various individuals and gave them names of people, you know, "you need to talk to this person," and there's about three or four of them that you see on the screen in there, you know, there's an electrician in there and there's an operating engineer who's interviewed and he's talking about what he experienced in his thirty-some years out at the test site. He's now a state assemblyman. And it's remarkable what they've come up with.

Yeah, it really is. Was there a conversation about how to address the more controversial aspects of the testing? I mean to what degree did you talk about it and stuff?

It was the same approach, but yes, we were very cognizant of the fact. And one of the things that didn't happen, I don't know how it would've turned out, but the protesters. Even before I became a member of the board, I know that Roxanne and I know Bruce Church talked with them and an offer was made. I don't think it was in writing but at least there was a verbal offer to the protesters, hey, we will make space available in the museum for you. You come up with whatever you want to put in it. We have the final say-so whether we think it's appropriate and will fit, but you're going to have to finance it. We'll give you the space or whatever. But this was a while before the construction or fabrication even started, and nothing. They didn't take advantage of the opportunity, and so nothing was done. So we had to kind of come up with it

ourselves, and from our perspective, what's in there is you go into the Ground Zero Theater and you see and you hear. I mean there's, you know, Maltby and Company, that video, I mean there's the video of the protesters out there at the gate. One of these days I may just go in there and watch the film, and how much of the time on that eight-minute film or whatever it is is devoted to the protester side of the story? There's a lot more in there, I think, than anybody knows, if they haven't seen it, and a lot of the protesters haven't, or you see it in the media.

It's funny that they never took you up on the—

I know. Yeah. And even after we got to the point—where it really came up is when I came up **[01:00:00]** with this idea of the license plate. And so when that eruption hit the press [laughing].

That was your idea, the license plate?

That was my idea, yes. I don't know where I got that. I just said, Well, we have a license plate and we'll have this contest and we'll have people design and we'll select the design. And we went through that process and we selected a design that had the mushroom cloud. We knew the mushroom cloud, but we didn't realize that it was going to create such an uproar. And I think the principal reason why it created this uproar, it was at the time that Yucca Mountain was really up there. The timing was terrible. And then this legislator from Illinois or Indiana in the Congress held up this picture, because a picture of it had already been in the paper about the license plate, and says, Hey, you know, if they're for the mushroom cloud out there, what's their problem with Yucca Mountain? And the governor came unglued. And we selected it and then I took the design up and met with the Department of Motor Vehicle [DMV] folks. I was still working over at the compensation office. And they said, God, this is the best designed, graphically speaking, not content-wise. They liked it. And I know the one guy said, God, I wish I had one. I may get one of these myself. He said, I didn't work at the test site.

I said, Hey, well, you're in the State of Nevada. You can get one. You don't have to have worked there.

And he said, This is the best-designed, graphically speaking, that we have seen of all the things that have been submitted.

So I came back and said, Hey, things look OK. DMV says they're going to make a mock-up and send it to us, and then we'll send it back and say it's OK, and then they'll give it to the Highway Patrol who will test it and make sure that they can see it at night and that kind of thing.

About a week later, I get this phone call from the Director, I don't remember her name, of DMV and she said, Mr. Agonia, I've just sent you a letter that I'm rejecting your license plate.

And I said, *What?*

Before I knew it, it was in the press that afternoon, which one of these days, if I have the opportunity, I'll say something to her or to my friend the governor and say, you know, that was really a poor way to do business. She could've at least had the courtesy to let me know ahead of time, before she went to the press, and I get the letter about two or three days later, but by that time, the damage was done.

Was your name associated with it? Was there people coming, calling you and—?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, they called me because my name was in there as a representative of the board, and I started getting phone calls, and Bruce, the president, got—we got calls from the protesters. I took a call when I was down the street from a protester who had lived here and he now was in Baltimore. And I explained to him, I said, in terms of the museum, we got talking about the museum. He said, Well, what are you guys going to show in a museum?

Well, I said, we're going to show the—reflecting the history of the test site as we know it. I said, We made an offer to the protesters here in town for an exhibit.

And he said, Well, I never heard of that. Who'd you talk to?

And I said, I don't know who exactly. I gave him Bruce's phone number and says, You can call Bruce Church, our president and he can tell you who he talked to because, I said, I'm a new addition to the board.

He never did call Bruce. And the day we opened to the general public back in February [2005], the protesters who were out there carrying the signs, we went out there, Linda Smith and I and [Atomic Testing Museum Director] Bill Johnson, and I know that we talked to a couple and Linda said, Have you been inside?

[And they said], No, we haven't been inside.

[And we said], Well, do you want to come in?

And a couple of them said yes, OK, so they put down their signs and she took them through, and when they came out they were saying, Hmm, well, I guess it's not as bad as we thought it might be. We asked them for their signs. We wanted to put some of their signs in the archives and keep them. They said, well, down the road we may—

Instant archives.

Yes, right, we might give them to you. But they didn't.

The protest didn't last very long here.

No, and they just carried some signs and people would honk their horns at them as they went by. And we've got a good working relationship with them. It was through *them*, which I think was a *very* fortuitous thing that happened about a month ago, in early May a group of Japanese citizens were on their way to the hearings or the conference on nuclear testing. I think it was sponsored

[01:05:00] by the UN [United Nations]. It's in New York. I think it was UN-sponsored. And they wanted to visit the test site. Well, they were told by the local folks that you can't visit the test site. You can go out there and you can have a little ceremony or whatever, but better than that, why don't you visit the Atomic Testing Museum? They were not aware of the museum, and so they said, well, sure. So when they came into town, we had a little reception for them here at the museum. And it took place in this room. And of course it was all in Japanese. They had a couple of translators. But it was quite an experience. There was the daughter of an individual, I think, as I recall, she said her father was at Hiroshima. He was eighteen or nineteen years old. He was working underground, she said, so I don't know what he was doing, when the bomb went off. He got burned, she said. But he passed away a couple of years ago. I think she said he was—I forgot how old he was when he passed away. But she obviously recognized what had happened. She gave me a couple of the *origami*, which is the Japanese, the little, the birds [cranes] that they put together, the little paper things. They gave us some photographs, a whole collection of photographs. I've got part and we've got some in the artifacts. They gave us some banners and some posters. And we gave them the opportunity for them to share with us and with their own group as to what had happened.

What did they think of the museum?

From what I could tell, because I took them in, the first group, into the theater, and I kind of stood up there at the front and watched. I wanted to see what their reaction was. And their reaction was no different than other folks that I've seen in there, you know, that first couple of seconds, oh, my goodness, that thrown-back thing [simulation of heat wave]. And they sat there in silence. Now, one of the things that I didn't do that I should have, I—you know, my sister-in-law is Japanese, and I should have called Atsuko. I didn't think—because this was a last-minute

thing—to call her and I could've asked her, well, what did they say, because they were talking amongst themselves. But I didn't see anything that would tell me that they were upset or whatever. Because when they left, before they left there was a like a little closing ceremony. They thanked us for the opportunity, and that's when they gave us the photographs and that's when the woman gave me the *origami*. So as far as I can tell, it was well received. At a later date—we're going to wait a little longer—I gave them my e-mail address. We have their e-mail addresses, so we will ask them what their reaction would be.

We're coming to the end of the third disc and we've been at this for a while now, so I guess I would just simply ask you if there's anything you would like to conclude with, any last thoughts.

I can't think of anything more. That really kind of covers my career out at the test site, the latter part of the career. Most of it was downtown, but with occasional visits out to the test site. The visits out to Johnston Island and then the other facilities. What was really kind of nice, just a couple of weeks ago, the EG&G folks had a reunion, and there were about 300 former EG&G folks here, and it was really a good thing to see them all.

They were here?

Yes, they had a reunion here, which gave us a thought, well, maybe REECo needs to do one later this year or next year.

You know, the REECo guys have a breakfast.

Yes. I periodically attend the REECo breakfast.

Have they been out here as a group to the museum?

Not as a group. Individuals. A lot of them are members and they've come here. What we're going to do probably later this fall, I've asked the Bechtel folks to—we've invited the unions to

monthly meetings that—I had suggested that we host them here and give the union folks an opportunity to go through the museum.

What a great idea.

Yes, and they could use this room and have their regular meeting and then they could take a tour of the museum. A couple of the union people have been here and we invited them here a **[01:10:00]** couple of months ago. A small group of them had come, and their reaction was, my goodness, I'm going to have to bring my son over here.

I think it's surprising to a lot of people. I think a lot of people to the extent they have any idea about the atomic testing, it's '51 to '63, and when it goes underground it leaves public consciousness, you know, and I think that's one of the eye-opening things about the tours that have really kind of—so there's a lot of time talking about the underground testing.

Yeah. Yeah. And the other things. Tomorrow, a long-time friend of mine, Wayne Tanaka who is the Honorary Consul for the government of Japan is going to visit. Tomorrow, I'm going to take him on a tour. One of the things that he's probably not aware of, because I wasn't fully cognizant of the work that occurred out at the test site with respect to some of the exposure studies at Hiroshima and Nagasaki that's depicted in the other little film, I don't know, over in the Japanese village. And matter of fact, I'm going to offer him an invitation because I have not been out to the village in years, and I don't even know if it's still standing or what. But he's probably not aware of it, so make arrangements if he wants to, we'll take him out there in the next couple of weeks or whenever.

Well, now, we really are at the end so I would simply say thank you so much for your time.

That's it. Yes.

[01:11:33] End Track 2, Disc 3. [End of interview]