

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

Interview with
Robert Curran

July 19, 2005
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Suzanne Becker

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

Suzanne Becker: *Great. So if you would again state your name.*

Robert Curran: Robert Joseph Curran.

And we're picking up from where we left off, beginning toward the end of your stay here at the Nevada Test Site.

In about October [1957] Yes, units. I think everybody thinks the only people that came to witness things were like Twelfth Infantry Division—I know they came—and units. But there was also individuals. And out on the test site, they had trailers, little trailers—

Individuals from the community or individuals from the military?

No. Military. And they had trailers. And these people were colonels, generals, people like that that came out, that stayed in a trailer. I have the letter of commendation from Colonel [Dan] Gilmer which I think you have, is that correct?

Yes.

And he was Eisenhower's secretary, I guess you want to call it, in World War II. And he was one of the people that went back to Washington. Actually he wrote some of the orders that went into the invasion, Normandy. But then he came back and was one of the guys that started Civil Affairs that went over to set up governments in Germany and places like that, which they would help the country, after they recaptured it, reestablish itself as a community. And then he was a big hero in the Korean War, known as Standing-Dan-the-Ring Mountain-Man, for whatever reason. I haven't found out yet. But he was the commander of the Seventh Cav[alry]. And General Walter A. Jensen was the commanding officer, actually out of Camp Irwin [California].

And he called me into the office one day and said, This is my former commanding officer. They wanted to go to Death Valley. There was a couple of colonels. And I couldn't get them a car because this is July in [Las] Vegas, I mean north of Vegas, and there was no way. He calls me and he said they want tickets to see shows and so I told him what shows were there; and I remember a Jeanette MacDonald-Nelson Eddy-type show was there and that's the one they wanted to see. And the general gave me his phone. I mean I was the God-danged man, let's be honest about it, I knew where to call, and I got them reservations to see the show. And the general jokingly said, I got a car. You don't have to worry about that, Lieutenant.

So they went in. And Colonel Gilmer came back and stopped by my office the next day and he said, That was unreal. He said, Who do you know? We were in the front row.

And I said, Well, I told you you would be in front of the generals.

And so I was getting ready to go to have a meeting on the show coming up, which was Jack Benny. And he said, Can I ride along with you?

And I said, We can always use a little rank.

So he rode along with Sergeant [Bob] Little, who we talked about yesterday, and myself, and we got in there, and I want to think the guy's name was Harry White. I can't remember. He was from the Desert Inn and he was the head of the variety club. And they got talking about how Jack Benny was in the show for Colonel Gilmer's troops when they were in Korea. And he said to Colonel Gilmer, Why don't you just stay in here and play golf?

And he said, All my stuff is out in the trailer.

And then I said, Would you like Sergeant Little--? If you give us the key, we can get whatever you want brought in here, including his golf clubs.

Anyhow, he had a golf date with Debbie Reynolds' father, I remember that, and he got to go to the opening of the show. And he was there for shot Priscilla. I can tell you that was the shot he was for, because that Sunday he helped me go get the show, which was supposed to be Teresa Brewer and Kay Brown, and I've told you the story about Kay Brown falling asleep on my shoulder. He was in the other side of the car when that happened. He was with me. He was having a ball doing all of that. And so he went, and of course you've seen the letter of commendation he sent back. As my wife said, You were full of it then and you still are. She was more explicit than that. You know what she said, don't you? And I said, It was my job. I mean this was a guy who was a war hero, who was highly placed. He was [00:05:00] teaching leadership to colonels and generals. That's why that letter about the leadership of a lieutenant was important, because that was what he was doing.

He's the one I remember specifically. But there were people of that rank and that caliber that were coming in like for one shot and that. And then we had the troops. And I think I told you about the, I think it was the Twelfth, kept on complaining about the dust problem and they got the rain. Yeah, I told you about that. But those were units that came in.

And when I was outside when they read the letter and it said shot Diablo, he said, That's the one that didn't go off. Remember me saying—did I get it confused? Because I know the one I'm writing about is Diablo. I'm right. Diablo *didn't* go off. And the guy out there, I can't remember, it was the man that was standing behind the counter—

Right out here?

Yeah. He said, That's the one that didn't go.

And I said, Well, it did eventually.

And he said, Yeah.

But that's the one we went out and we took prisoners, quote unquote, you know, and we interrogated them, and people told us about they had been so indoctrinated at what was going to happen that they thought they had exper—

Talk a little bit about that. That's really interesting, and you don't hear about that too often.

But, you know, it's like anything else, they'd been trained and trained, and these were troops.

These were not staff, these were not people, these were not scientists. These were foot soldiers.

And they had been told what they could do, because they were going to get up and march toward ground zero, right? And they were drilled, drilled, drilled, drilled as to what was going to happen and the flash and how you protect yourself. And nothing happened. But in their minds, something happened. And they would describe things to us.

So this was an exercise that you did.

Yeah. We were going to do it if it went, don't get me wrong.

Right. But the shot didn't go and you did it anyway.

Yeah.

And so you rounded up these troops as if they were prisoners.

Right.

And asked them about the shot and what they saw?

Yes. And I was one of the interrogators.

And they told you, even though nothing had happened.

That's right. I always found that fascinating. The human mind can play those tricks. It can see a bomb go off that didn't go off.

Or like you said, they were so indoctrinated to what they were going to expect that this is what they said.

They did it, yeah.

There was a girl who I went to college with. Stephens College is in Columbia, Missouri. My wife, who is from the West, said little rich girls went east to Stephens College, which was in Missouri. We're not talking about going east to Harvard; we're talking about going east—. Anyhow, there was a girl who was from Vegas who dated a friend of mine. A lovely girl. And she was part Indian. And she had to be a little rich girl because she was from Vegas and her brother was an attorney, and I want to think he was either *the* city attorney for Las Vegas or an assistant.

What was their name?

The name is Ousley. They're still in the phone—there's still that name. And Jo or Josephine, who I knew in college; I get out here, and all of a sudden it dawns on me, I know somebody. So I look them up in the phone book and I called them up. And her father said, *Well, she's back in college. Why don't you come out? We're having a barbeque and a party, and he gives me directions and go to this what was [a] rock-walled community. The house next door was owned by a guy by the name of [Milton] Prell who owned one of the casinos at the time. The story I later got, I don't know because I didn't ask the people then, her mother's family was American Indian. Her father was an electrical contractor. Her mother's family owned property on Highway 91 South, which is The Strip. And the contingency to buying that property was you did your electrical contracting with—*

That's really interesting.

So is that true? I don't know, except they were extremely nice people. Then I get out to their party and they say, *Oh, we forgot to tell you. She's married. I mean I wasn't*

romantically interested, don't get me wrong. But I said, well, you got me out here and—.

....

So they were nice folks, though?

[00:10:00] They were nice folks. This was a rich family, but everybody treated people in uniform that way. The old man in the bar bought you drinks. I don't think we ever paid for anything.

So it was very well respected.

Yeah, very well respected. The military was respected. We're still getting the slam off of World War II.

Yes, at that time.

We're still getting the prestige, whatever word you want to use. I use the slang word. The prestige and the reputation.

Well, this is post-World War II, pre-Vietnam.

Yeah, this is before the riots. This is before—you volunteer. I mean if I had not volunteered—I have a friend who was a year older than me and we graduated the same year at college, to this day go to lunch once a month. And he's a lawyer, I'm a lawyer. He graduated from law school when I graduated undergraduate. He's a year older than I am. And he got drafted.

For Korea?

No, we're after Korea. We're '56. We're after Korea. Korea's over. There was still a draft, and if I hadn't gone to ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps]—

They would've drafted you.

I would've been drafted. I mean everybody went. It wasn't a question of do you go or don't you go. It was a question, when? And so I mean I'm in ROTC for various reasons, one of which I

didn't want to get drafted and blow my chance for my college education, to be perfectly honest with you. And a lot of guys were there, went through the ROTC, but I knew that coming out the back end someplace I was going to have to give my two years to my country, which is what I did and why I was there. But everybody did that. And I got to be very honest, I was a little bit of a, playboy's not the word—

Player.

In undergraduate school. I wasn't very serious. I didn't buy books one semester. I did all this kind of stuff. Played games. Of course, grades now and grades then were different, because we graded on a curve. So if you were too bad, you were gone. But I probably had a 2.75. But then in law school I got a 3.5. Going at night, part-time, working forty hours a week, going against guys that are in there.

Well, you got much more serious and from day one you were determined to be a lawyer.

Yeah, the military developed it. Well, I always was, I tell you.

And you think the military helped—?

The military matured, that type of thing. I mean you can tell in the one letter there, I want to get back home and go to school. I wanted to go to law school since I was, what, six years old or something. And I did it. As I said I always wanted to be a lawyer. I loved lawyers. I admired lawyers. And one day they put a cap and gown on me and they handed me that degree and I didn't feel any different than I did the day before. It was sort of disappointing. I was supposed to be like imbued with something wonderful when I became a lawyer, but I wasn't.

It's like graduating, I guess, anything, it's sort of you work to the pinnacle and then you're done.

There you are.

When you become Dr. Becker, you will have the same and have that hood and all that wonderful stuff on and you'll be the same way, right? OK. Now, where do you want me to go next?

Well, talk about you leaving the test site. So your time at the test site came to an end and that was at the close of a series, at the close of [Operation] Plumbbob.

Yeah, of Plumbbob. And I mean I still had, let's see, that was October, I had to go till the end of April. And then I left there and I went back to St. Louis. And what I remember vividly—a couple of things. I went back and I drove twenty-four hours and got to Dodge City, Kansas. I think I went to Dodge City. Then I went into Mizzou [University of Missouri] for a football game on Saturday morning. And I went in to visit my parents.

And I recall vividly I'm going back to Fort Lewis [Washington] and I was informed that a fellow who I had gone to college with, who I had dated his wife before he dated his wife, and I [00:15:00] had introduced them, and he was killed. He was a pilot and was killed. And she lived in Heppner, Oregon. She was a Stephens girl, a little rich girl that owned all this property in Oregon. I always said I really blew it. She had all kinds of money. But anyhow. And this guy was an electrical engineer—or no, chemical engineer, excuse me, which was really rare back in those days, and he was being paid half his salary by whatever corporation it was while he was in the Navy. Somebody landed on top of him [smacks hands together]. Anyhow, I had to drive within twenty miles of her home to go back to Fort Lewis.

So did you go visit her?

Yes. Everybody asked me would I go—I mean the girl had a baby and was pregnant at the time we were doing this. Anyhow, and helped her write out the papers and that, you know, because she was very upset. And not too long ago, I was talking to somebody that comes from the little town that Larry, my friend, came from, and I was hearing a case. It was a lawyer that came from

that town. And I mentioned it. And he said, Larry's, you know, Advance, Missouri, he's buried there. He said, You know, his wife comes back every year. And she's been remarried and has another family, but every year, he said, on the anniversary of his death, she comes back to this little town in Missouri. I have no idea where she is. So she was a nice girl.

But that's just an interesting little sidelight, life goes on and people were being killed in airplane crashes because they were pilots and, you know. I think I said yesterday about guys killed in Korea that graduated from high school [with me]. So it was a different thing. We *went* into the military. I know it's hard to explain to younger people since the voluntary [enlistment] that everybody just expected that's what you did. It never changed till Vietnam.

And do you think that that was something, an ideology or an idea, that was maybe prevalent at the test site, too? I don't know how to phrase it other than—

Oh, sure, we were all—

You know, people were out there, and even if you were in the military, this is what you were doing and you did it, as opposed to—

Very much so. We were trying to analyze all my thinking of why I was there, and a part of it is yes, you—I don't know. I gave you some of my stuff like from my American Legion oratory where we talk about not just rights, we talk about duties to go along with rights, and I think that was very prevalent because everybody felt that you had an individual responsibility to serve your country. I find that a little troubling now, that people don't understand what the idea is.

It's a totally different mindset now.

Different mindset. You *knew* you were going, and then you made up your mind, are you're going to fight it or are you going to do it? What are you going to do? And most of us just—we were

there. And did we lose some? Yeah, we lost some. We lost some out here at the test site. We lost some in Korea. We lost my friend Larry on an aircraft carrier.

Sure. Yeah, different time.

But it was a very different time and a different acceptance of things. So I guess we probably did acknowledge it by seeing humor in [being a] guinea pig. Which is true. Which is right, and that's true. But you never really thought of yourself as—

When you look back now, have your thoughts changed at all, or what do you think about it?

I try, and I have tried through this whole thing, I told you when we talked on the phone, I'm trying to put my 1950s mindset on and not be a federal judge in 2005. I'm trying to be a second lieutenant in 1957.

But now, I'm just curious, now that that time has gone and we're in 2005, you're still the same person but different. I mean I think inherently we stay the same.

No, I admire what the young guy did. I can sit there, like the famous letter that everybody loves, I can sit there and say, hey, that guy did a great job writing that letter. You know, like it's not the [00:20:00] same person, if you know what I mean. I can look at it in that sense.

Right. But what do you think now, you as you now? I mean we all change, we all—

Well, do you remember John Glenn went back out in space when he was seventy-seven? If they told me there was going to be a bomb shot off tomorrow and could I go out there, yeah, I'd do it. Am I afraid of it? No. Now, I'm really not afraid because I made it this far. I'll either make it further or I won't, you know. I'm sort of fatalistic at this time in my life. Well, I evidently was then, too, the way I recall.

But I think you were a little different. Vietnam changed a lot of thinking patterns. And of course I'm a prosecutor in the Vietnam era. I'm getting spit on by people who were protesting

and this, that, and the other thing. So I have a real—the famous word “dichotomy” in that era where—I was not a big Martin Luther King fan, I’ll be very frank, because I thought that the nonviolence got a little too violent for my taste when I walked down the hall. What he was saying, when you take it in context, was fine, but what people were doing in practice was not always the same. And as a prosecutor, I had certain duties and responsibilities. The-guy-that-got-the-death-penalty-and-didn’t-believe-in-it-type of thing. My job was to try that case because of my ability. I did it and I got it. My job was not to convict the innocent. In fact, a lot of people said that—when I was the head prosecutor in Jefferson County [Missouri], a young guy by the name of Tim Patterson was now a judge. And I told him, I said, When you sign a warrant for somebody’s arrest, if your pen doesn’t stop right before you hit the line, get out of the business because you don’t have the proper conscience for it. Did that make any sense to you, what I’m saying? You know, that your responsibility is great because when you sign that, somebody goes to jail.

It’s somebody else’s life.

Somebody’s *gone*. You better be sure what you’re doing. And you have a responsibility to the people, the victims, but when you’re representing the State of Missouri, the defendant is also part of the State of Missouri. Don’t ever forget that. We’re not playing good guy-bad guy. We’re legal. And I really find that offensive today, there’s so much good guy-bad guy and the press always damning somebody without—this Aruba thing that’s going on right now [missing American tourist in Aruba]. They’re condemning the Aruban people. If that was in America, these guys would’ve been out on the street a long time ago, because we can only hold them seventy-two hours, not seventy-two days.

I thought that was an interesting fact.

And there's no thing there. But they're not doing the legality of it. They're playing this-guy's-got-to-be-a-bad-guy, you know, [and] you haven't any proof that guy's a bad guy. We don't know.

It sort of seems to be the state that we've gotten to or evolved to, this political structure.

Yeah, it's a good guy-bad guy.

So you didn't see that so much, though, back when you were—in '57, '58.

No. But we're still pragmatic, don't get me wrong. We maybe were more pragmatic then than we are now.

I think we approach things very differently now.

Yes.

We've got a lot more information sometimes than we used to.

Yeah, we were—oh, well, this has really raised my—I am one, I think computers are wonderful, but computers only do numbers. Computers can't measure what we're trying to measure here. Can't measure human response, emotions, anything like that. And we have developed and sometimes have given those human emotions away to the machine. And we've *lost* that. We've lost that thing.

Yeah, and I think you're right. It certainly reflects our society and our ideologies.

But there are things, like I found out about the guy that wrote "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," how did I do that? Going on the computer and finding out. OK, a lot of stuff that I did in here, that singer, I was trying to find her, I did it on the computer. You know I did.

[00:25:00] *Well, they're wonderful aids to a lot—*

I needed your e-mail address. My twenty-eight-year-old daughter Googled you and found your e-mail address, you know what I mean?

It's a little frightening. But yeah—

Well, like I said to my daughter, I think I wrote this down wrong, or something like that. She said, Ehh, she flipped out it and Googles you and said, Here it is, Dad, and it was right. But I mean we're all there and we're all available now and we weren't then. We could hide. Even in the desert with the bomb you could hide. I wasn't hiding. Go ahead.

Well, I was just going to ask, so where did you end up after you left the test site and you were sort of making your way out west, it sounds like.

OK, I go back and I wind up at Fort Lewis, Washington. And because of Special Services, I wind up being the athletics director.

You talked about that a little bit yesterday.

We talked about basketball and [how] we won the game—but the guy that wound up being a general, you know, and all that kind of stuff, which I think is interesting—we really were for Bruce [Palmer] because he was six-three and could dunk a ball. He wound up a general, so I guess he had more qualifications than we gave him credit for, right? No, he's a *very* nice guy, don't get me wrong, very bright guy.

OK, then I leave the Army and I go back to St. Louis. My dad dies while I'm in the Army. My dad dies in December of '57. I go back. I file and run for office and I get beat. In the meantime, I take the LSAT [Law School Admissions Test] or whatever it was called in those days, and I go to work. Well, one thing I remember, and just throwing this in, I'm looking for a job and I go to an insurance company. I'm going to be a[n] investigator, a claims adjuster. And the guy said, Oh, man, what great credentials. You're a former Army officer, you know. You're going to law school and that. And he sent it to New York. The guy had hired me. And it bounced back that you had to be five-eight to be an adjuster.

Why?

I don't know. But anyhow, I didn't get the job, so I went to the City of St. Louis and I took a test. And I wound up assessing property, appraising real estate, while I was going to law school. I did Anheuser-Busch. I did Ralston Purina. I was on the big stuff. Yeah, I was on the big stuff. I wasn't alone, don't get me wrong, there were other people, but we were on the big stuff and we did that. And that's what I did through law school. I was a deputy assessor for the City of St. Louis.

That's good. It got you through.

It got me through law school. And then I practiced law for about two or three years and made no money. Had a good friend of mine, got elected circuit attorney in the City of St. Louis, and said, You always wanted to be a trial lawyer. And there I went.

What type of law did you initially practice?

Just civil. But I did some criminal because you always were appointed in those days. They didn't have public defenders; they'd just appoint you. And I did some of that. But then I was a prosecutor, and I started in '65 and I was there through '69, and then they had the law enforcement federal money, War on Poverty, [President Lyndon B.] Johnson, and they asked me to be the executive director of it. And I'm the one that got it all started and got everything in there. And then, to be very honest, this thing came through one day and I started to write the check and the guy says, Don't do that. You're going to get in trouble. He said, You're in the bureaucracy now, and the word under bureaucracy is CYA, cover your ass. [Pounding on table for emphasis] And I said, I don't do things like that. I quit and went back to being a prosecutor.

So I was an assistant prosecutor until '72 in the City of St. Louis. And then got married in '69, so when we got married, that's what I was doing. Then they needed a full-time prosecutor in

Jefferson County, which was the sixth-largest county in the State of Missouri, immediately south. And they had a search team go out to look for people. And I had one daughter [al]ready [00:30:00] and one on the way, and I sort of wanted to move to the country and out of the big city, and so I went down as a prosecutor. And I professionalized their office, and Tim Patterson, who I talked about, who was a local boy, came on, and two years later when the judgeships opened I said, Are you going to apply for judge, Tim? He said, I'd rather be the prosecutor. Why don't you be the judge? And we backed each other and I became a judge and he became a prosecutor. And I was there for nineteen years, ten months, and eighteen days—or twenty-two days, excuse me.

Not that you were keeping track.

Well, I also was involved in the writing in 1979 of the criminal code of the State of Missouri, when they rewrote it. I was a prosecutor. And the story about why I know the exact thing is on the nineteenth year, the tenth month, and the eighteenth day (that's where I got mixed up), the girl that had been my clerk for all those years comes in and says, I don't know whether to show this to you or not. You've been reversed on a criminal case. You know, civil case, if you'd been—I mean she said—guy that knows criminal law backwards—You've been reversed. And she said she didn't know, because I was leaving four days later. But what upset me—and she said, I laughed. And I said, It took them that long to catch up with me. And she said that was the reaction, that after all these years they finally found something. They couldn't reverse me for nineteen years, ten months, and—

And now they finally found an in.

They finally found it. And so I left four—the reversal was correct. I agreed with it 100 percent. It wasn't really reversing me; it was reversing a jury decision, but I agreed with it.

Now, I want to back up just a little bit because we kind of blew through it, but tell me about when you met your wife. Her name's Mary?

Yeah. OK. Well, I wound up with eighteen years in the Res—with my Reserve, sixteen years of Reserve. And then I had the heart problem and it finally showed up on a test.

Took them a while, huh?

Yeah, it took them a while, because normally it wouldn't have shown up. It finally showed up and it was like, hey, you can't serve anymore. I was a major.

Now, were you doing things on the weekends? Were you still actively on duty?

No, I taught. Every Wednesday night I used to teach general military officers' courses. And then in the summer I'd go to Fort Bliss, Texas and I'd teach Nike systems, radars. I was a judge. In the entire State of Missouri, when they needed to have a radar test case, because I was the guy that knew how radars worked, and when they wanted to try a new radar and they wanted to see whether it passed legal muster in whatever way, I'd always wind up with that case; I was the one that understood what was going on, I knew the difference between the type of pulse-beat radars, Doppler radar. I mean I do know all that stuff. But anyhow, so see, I'm a little diversified. And I stayed in the Air Defense and in that it was so different from what I was doing, and I enjoyed it. And I used to teach that, and then one weekend in the summer I'd come into St. Louis and I'd teach methods of instruction. I have a secondary minor in speech. And I'd teach methods of instruction to military people for a week. I did that at home, though. But we used to go down and simulate firing the missiles and all that kind of stuff.

Interesting. Now, this is something you did in Texas?

Yeah. So I'm in Texas, and it was the All-Star Game in 1968, and I go to the cocktail party, and the game went into extra innings, and I got on a, what was sort of cool, a plaid sport coat with—

Swinging bachelor.

Swinging bachelor major, they were referring to it, and so then there was Genaro Fourzan and his wife—Jerry Fourzan and his wife Rita.

What was his last name?

Fourzan. And of course El Paso is 90 percent Hispanic. Anyhow, and my wife, in fact, taught at a school that 95 percent Hispanic, 5 percent black. She never taught an Anglo [00:35:00] kid in her life. Anyhow, I'm talking with Jerry, and Jerry was a lieutenant colonel and I was a major. And I told a joke about a nun, and Rita Fourzan says, You're a major. You got to be over thirty.

I said, Yeah, I'm thirty-three.

And she said, And you are *really* single? Never been married?

And I said, Really single, never been married.

[And she said], And you're Catholic? She said, There's a teacher that's twenty-seven years old (she's six years younger than I am) and everybody she meets is divorced or some idiot down here. She said, She'd love a lawyer and everything.

So I wanted to go down to Juarez [Mexico] to watch the Four Aces break in their act for Las Vegas. And so I said to Jerry, You know, it'd be nice—.

So he called Mary up and she said, A free dinner sounds like a free dinner to me. I'm not doing anything better.

And we went out on Thursday, and then we went out on Friday, and then I left. We started writing. And I was running for state representative at the time, in '68. And we always say, if I would've been elected, probably it would all have been blown away because we wouldn't have followed up. Then she came to St. Louis over New Year's, and then she came up over the

holiday, and this isn't—I don't know. Yeah, I'll go with this. This is a great story. It's true. You know everything I tell you is true. Well, my wife says I don't embellish it, I just know how to tell it. She said, *You really don't embellish things. You just remember details.*

Well, you tell a good story.

Yeah. And she's coming in on a Wednesday night in April, before Easter, because she's not teaching. And on Wednesday night, there was a group of us used to go to the Brat House in downtown St. Louis which had beer – nickel beer for the girls on Wednesday night – they had an oompah German band and you sing along, and this is where you got your date for Saturday night. OK, now, that was it. So we always went on a Wednesday night. So my good friend Charlie Kitchon who's a retired state court judge, and I say to Charlie, I said, *Why don't you go down to the Brat House, and Mary's coming in like at six but it'll be about ten before we get down there because we have to feed her and all this kind of stuff. So reserve some seats.*

And so Charlie says, We'll take care of that.

And then I thought right as I left, I said, You know what, Charlie? It would be neat to have the guys in the band play "The Yellow Rose of Texas."

Oh, yeah, big time! Big time. Big time operator. Right. Anyhow, so I bring her in. Charlie's got a table of thirty people I know. They stand up and cheer. The band stops, announces our engagement (which we're not), and plays "The Wedding March" instead of "Yellow Rose of Texas." And so Charlie is sitting there. I went to the restroom. Charlie's sitting there talking to Mary and he said, I hope I didn't upset you. And she looked and said, I didn't travel 1,200 miles for my health. And that was the night we got engaged, where I asked her the hypothetical question—If I ask you—I'm a lawyer; it has to be hypothetical, right? What would you say? And she said, If you ask me, I would say

yes. And so that's when we became engaged. And I spent two weeks in El Paso in the summer; she spent two weeks in St. Louis and on Labor Day we got married. So we didn't know each other that well. Very different backgrounds. Her father owned a business, but very Republican. My father was president of the labor union, very Democratic. But we could *talk*, you know what I mean? And we were older. We didn't expect to run down the beach like you see in the ads and, ohhh, this romance. You saw me with my wife, and it's just not that way. We just respect each other and—

You are great together.

We know our limits and know what we're doing.

That's good. That's a good partnership.

Did you like that story?

That's a great story.

That is a true story. Now, I can tell you the lie, too, but that is the real one. That is the real one.

No, that's fantastic.

Yeah. So it was sort of a whirlwind, long-distance.

So then, in a way, it's good that you didn't win because you would never have pursued that.

[00:40:00] Well, you know, I was thinking about this last night. You really have to look at your life when you're doing this thing. And hey, I was the hotshot. I was the one that people said, he's going to be the first Catholic mayor of St. Louis, you know, or he's going to be, call it politically active. And see, I then made all kinds of adjustments. I mean, what is a successful life? Is a successful life the one in which I've raised the three daughters? Or should I have been the cutthroat, gone the political way? I mean, what is—?

I think it's a personal choice.

I know, but I'm just saying—

No, it's a good question.

Yeah, have I been a success, in my opinion? Yes. But people thought I would be the name everybody knew.

Well, but you took a slightly different path.

The first girl I dated in high school and college, well, her son is named Robert Joseph, and that was what that was all about, that he's going to be named after this great guy who's going to do all these great things. Now, did I or didn't I? I don't know.

Well, I mean I think I have—

No, I'm not asking you. I'm just—

Right. But no, those are questions to ponder.

Yeah, that was the thought in my own mind, and understand that. Am I happy? Yes, with what I did. But I mean it's like when we got married, I had a canary-yellow '67 Camaro. And in nine months and twenty-nine days, Kathleen Marie Curran came along, and you couldn't put a baby seat in a Camaro, or I would still have it today. And I had to trade it in on an ugly green Impala so we could put a baby seat in there, which didn't go quite as fast. But I had the yellow Camaro when I was single. That was, oh, there's a word for that kind of wagon it was, the girls liked it.

Yeah, the girls liked it. But, you know, and I mean Mary is very, as you've seen her, very average. I mean she's no—she wasn't Miss Las Vegas or what I saw out there, Miss Atomic Bomb, or anything like that.

Now, see, did you—?

I saw her out there and it says 1957 and I don't remember her at all. But of course I'm not—I told you, in fact, I said look for the tall, dark, and handsome guy and then walk right by him,

right? But you have to get yourself into context to where you are and who you are and everything else. What is success? Is it putting the three girls through college? Is it having a good marriage? I mean to a lot of people, a federal judge would make it. See, but to me, it's not.

Well, whatever lines up with your values and what you—

I always joke about the difference between God and a federal judge is that God doesn't think he's a federal judge. But I'm not that impressed with it, if you know what I mean. I think it's your job and you do your job. That's sort of like what I did here.

Well, and you've done your job for quite some time now, so you must obviously have a passion for it.

Oh, the law, yes. Mary says I like people, and they don't have to be Harvard graduates. I like people. I enjoy the person that comes to me that's got the mental problem. Somebody said one day, when I opened a hearing, I'd always look them right in the eye, and I say, you know, Social Security turned you down and I'm aware of it, I said, but don't worry about those people. *I'm* the one that makes the decision. And they said they realized all of a sudden what I was doing was all those people who are a little schizophrenic, you know it's *they* are doing that, all of a sudden I've taken all the "theys" out of it and it's you and I. And one of the guys, a vocational expert, said, All of a sudden I realized, *he said*, I was in a case where I thought, this is going to get out of control because the guy's a real bad schizophrenic. **He [00:45:00]** said, You didn't have one minute's problem with him because it was one-on-one and he wasn't worried about anybody but you, talking to you. **And he said**, I realized that you did that on purpose. **And I said**, Yeah, I did that on purpose. And it always has a point. But that person deserved to be heard, even though he's crazy, if you want to put the words, you know.

Everybody's got a voice.

But you know, I mean he has as much right to exist and be there and be heard as you or I do, so why should I treat him different or badly? I should try to work and try to get him to express to me what his real problems are. Yeah, that's my job. What is the First Commandment? Be kind. Yeah.

Be kind.

So you've talked a lot about having a philosophy. This seems to be a part of your philosophy, consistent all the way through.

It goes all the way back. I've changed, but I haven't changed. The old "dichotomy kid." I changed, but I haven't changed. It's the same. Yeah, it's the same guy. You could probably see me writing that same letter that I wrote when I was twenty-two now. [See Robert Curran letter of July 1957 regarding witnessing 17 KT atmospheric atomic detonation, Diablo, from trench at NTS].

Well, that's interesting because I was just thinking in my head, I'm really curious of just when you look back on it now, I mean we talked about this a little bit yesterday, that this was, in the grand scheme of things, this is just a short, compact period in your life.

Seven months out of seventy-one years, yeah.

Right. Yet it's pretty significant but something that you hadn't really revisited for quite some time until recently.

That's right, till we did this, yeah.

Yeah. So how is it? I mean it's interesting that you were able to find the letter and get a glimpse into then—

Bless my sainted mother.

I tell you, that's rare, because most people talk about it from remembering back but, obviously you have the perspective that you have now.

Well, you saw all the things I have.

Yeah. So you've got quite a bit to draw on and to get yourself back into that mode. When you step out of that and you look back on it now, do you still think some of the same things?

I don't know. That's really a difficult question. How you would've taken things differently. You don't know. You make choices. But see, I don't question. Somebody said as a judge I'm very decisive.

Which I'm glad to hear.

I make up my mind. I make up mind. Now, you know, not necessarily right or wrong. But Mary always said that I walked—I come home in the evening and she asks me what I heard that day and I go, you know, because I've learned that what I did that day, if I did the best job I could, I put it to bed. When I'm at home, I don't bother her or anything with it.

That's a good philosophy.

That's my job and that's what I do, and I do the best? Yeah. Am I serious about it? Yes. I don't take myself seriously, though. Right, again, that is in there.

Number four.

Number four. But personally I don't take myself too seriously. I don't think I'm the genius of the western world or that somebody else can't do—I mean I'm a—I remember the story one time when we—I used to run for office, and the last day of filing somebody said, You're going home early. Aren't you going to wait around and see if anybody files? And I said, What am I going to do about it? I said, If I got killed in a car wreck on the way home tonight, for about three days everybody would be sitting there [saying], *Oh, poor Judge Curran*, you know, and everything. The fourth day, it

would be, *Wonder who the next judge is going to be?* And you got to get yourself in context, because I'm not condemning people when I say that because I would do the same thing. I'm not making moral judgments or anything, but that's the way life is, and you've got to get that all into context. And I said, *The people that would really care, suffer, if I died on the way home are the ones I'm going home to be with, because they are the ones who would long-range regret it or whatever, or celebrate it or whatever they're going to do.*

That's it. That make sense?

Yes.

I don't know. I do have a philosophy of life, don't I?

You make pretty good sense. Which is good, since you're a judge.

Yeah. Well, that's my job.

[00:50:00] *So again, short, compact time in your life at the test site, yet very important, very significant. Obviously it had a lasting impact on you.*

Why did I wind up going on my honeymoon to Las Vegas? Why do I go out here? I told you, I don't really gamble that much or anything, I don't drink, I don't smoke. I could be a Baptist, you know what I mean? I don't dance, don't drink, don't smoke. That's terrible; I probably shouldn't have said that on the tape but, you know. But do you think that maybe part of my love for Las Vegas is the tie back to that? Yeah, sure it is. And it all ties in. Because why is there a connection? There's always a tether back. Connection, tether, whatever. There's always a tether back to that. Is it because I'd like to be twenty-two again? For a day or two, yeah. I wouldn't mind feeling like I did at twenty-two. But in a lot of ways, no, because you're so stupid when you're twenty-two, too. But then you have to worry about all those things, and you're asking me questions about, I don't have to worry about it anymore because all those decisions have been

made, and whether they were right or wrong, I made them. But see, decisions, yeah. When my daughter broke her neck, that's where my wife and I always said we learned—our first question, everybody's question when it happens to you is, why me? And so we actually—you gather—we do these things. We talked about why. It was, we could afford it. We were strong enough to take it. OK. But she was there when they drilled the holes and they put the things. I would've been throwing up on the carpet. But the next day, when they decided to operate and it was a question of life and death, she looked at me and I'm the one that signed the paper.

So you guys have a balance.

We have a balance. We really in that more than anything else learned that balance. We jokingly say I earn the money and she spends it. Which is partially true. Which I as a judge don't have any pressure as far as my budget at home or anything, because she does all that. When I said we were going to Vegas, you know who made the arrangements. I didn't do it. I was kidding the other day. Somebody said, *This just says "Mary Curran" here.* And I said, *Yeah, I'm a kept man.* It's all her arrangements and we met in the parking lot. I'm a kept man. But you know, everything in there is in her name because, you know. I know. OK.

She's got the player's cards.

The player's cards are all in her name. Nothing's in my name. If I would die, they wouldn't know I was gone. But you know, that is, and does it bother me that that's in there? No, I could care less. She's good at it. She's good at what she does. That's not my thing. Let her do it. And she tells me where to show up with a suitcase and I show up. Then I go to work and I have no pressure on me. My work is my thanks. Good arrangement. I'm sitting here. I'm dominating.

No. I mean, again, that's part of it. This is your oral history. This is your story, so this all goes into it and, again, when you get a transcript back, if there's anything that you do or don't want, it's very easy to edit.

I am at this point in life, I used to be crazy. Now I'm just eccentric. The point of life. I don't care. I don't think I—I didn't down anybody. I didn't down anybody or anything. I usually won't do that.

No, no. Well, here, we're coming up on an hour, and so I don't know if they're—it looks like they may be getting ready to come in. But so, why don't we just wrap it—?

We want to cut it right here?

Well, why don't we just wrap it up? I mean have we not talked about anything that you—?

I don't know.

I mean I think we've covered quite a bit.

I think I'm looking right now at doing two things out here. One is what we've done here, and the [00:55:00] second thing is what I did today where they want the letter and they wanted—I want to—see, I would like to—you got to be a little arrogant in your life. You got to be a little cocky. If you aren't, you better not be a judge, I can tell you that much. I really shouldn't use those words. If you're not confident. We were talking the other day to some girls that worked for me back when I was a state court judge. And I still call them, from ten years ago, for their birthdays. I know it all. And they came up to visit Mary and I. And they call me "Judgey." Anyhow, and we were talking about one of the other judges, and he just yells at people all the time. And I said, Don't you know what that's all about? He's not sure of himself. He's not sure what he's doing, so he has to—
Yeah, he's making up—compensating.

He's compensating. If you know what you're doing, if you know you got the pen, you know you got the power, you have confidence in yourself. I've studied all these years and I know this law and I ought to be able to do it.

Well, and it sounds like that's your approach to everything. That's again a common thread, tracing it back from talking about your early years, going to school, going to college, working out at the test site, being in the military, law school.

Basically, yeah, I think you probably figured me out a little bit.

Got you a little bit.

And just eccentric now. Not crazy anymore.

Well, that's good, and I think at some point you earned the privilege to be eccentric.

Well, I mean like somebody was kidding me one day and said, You never wear shoes with ties. You always wear that.

And I said, Don't you know why?

He said, What do you mean?

I said, When you're in back of that bench, you're on a case, you know what you can do when you don't have to untie your shoes? You can kick them off.

And he said, You're serious, aren't you?

And I said, Yeah.

I own two suits I wear to funerals and weddings, right? And they said, Well, you work in a (well, I don't have dress shirt on now) dress shirt and a tie every day.

I said, Yeah, but I learned a long time ago, if you buy suits, you wear out the pants because you take off the coat and put on the robe, right? And

you wear them out. So I buy sport coats and I wear slacks, and I wear out the slacks, I still got the sport coat.

Does it make sense? Yeah! I own thirteen or fifteen or seventeen or whatever sport coats, you know, all kinds of sizes and all this kind of stuff. So I mean those are just silly little things but they do show, when you get to a certain point in life and you're independent.

Yes. Yes. Well, I want to thank you.

OK.

[00:58:23] End Track 2, Disc 1.

[End of interview]