

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

Interview with
Helen Draper

June 24, 2004
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Joan Leavitt

© 2007 by UNLV Libraries

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.

Produced by:

The Nevada Test Site Oral History Project

Departments of History and Sociology
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 89154-5020

Director and Editor

Mary Palevsky

Principal Investigators

Robert Futrell, Dept. of Sociology

Andrew Kirk, Dept. of History

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

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in these recordings and transcripts are those of project participants—oral history interviewees and/or oral history interviewers—and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Energy or the U.S. Department of Education.

Interview with Helen Draper

June 24, 2004

Conducted by Joan Leavitt

Table of Contents

Introduction: Mrs. Draper reviews her family history and memories of growing up in rural Utah and Nevada.	1
Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company [REECO] hired Mr. Draper to work at the Nevada Test Site, so Mr. and Mrs. Draper moved to Indian Springs, Nevada.	5
Mrs. Draper discusses her education and family history.	7
Mrs. Draper shares her memories of ethnic and religious tension in Utah and Nevada during the Great Depression and the Second World War.	9
The presence of Communist groups in western mining towns often led to tension and violence in the 1950s.	13
Mrs. Draper describes the living conditions, secrecy concerns, and social aspects of life at the Nevada Test Site in the early 1950s.	16
As a REECO employee, Mrs. Draper worked in the payroll department. She discusses the working environment for women employed at the Nevada Test Site.	17
Mrs. Draper describes the social life and community activities organized for test site workers.	22
Mrs. Draper shares her reactions to witnessing atmospheric nuclear tests at the Nevada Test Site. She stresses the important role that nuclear testing played in winning the Cold War and suggests that the benefits of testing far outweighed the social and environmental costs.	25
The Joint Verification Experiment (JVE) brought Soviet scientists to the Nevada Test Site.	30
Mrs. Draper discusses Area 51, the secret facility at Groom Lake, and the role of espionage during the Cold War.	32
Mrs. Draper describes the management and organizational structure of REECO, focusing on several individual managers.	35
The evolution of office technology affected the working environment at the test site.	37
Mrs. Draper recalls the living conditions and dining facilities for workers at the Nevada Test Site.	39
Mrs. Draper reflects on her life, family, and accomplishments.	41
In the early 1990s, Bechtel replaced REECO as the primary test site contractor.	43
Mrs. Draper discusses the slow inclusion of minorities in the test site's workforce.	45
Conclusion: Mrs. Draper again reflects on her life, work ethic, and family history.	46

Interview with Helen Draper

June 24, 2004 in Las Vegas, NV

Conducted by Joan Leavitt

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

Joan Leavitt: *We wanted to start with some of your background. You said that you were born in Midvale, Utah.*

Helen Draper: Yes. How far back do you want to go?

We can start with your young growing up, your mother, your father. I'd like to know about your mother and your father, your background—

Let me tell you about my grandfather. He came to this country from Germany when he was ten years old, and he made his way from New York to Utah. Over time he became the superintendent of the Eureka Standard Mining Company in Eureka, Utah. He married my grandmother there, who was also of German descent.

What were their names?

His name was Paul Troester, and my grandmother's name was Sophia Moedl. They met and married and he was, as I said, a mining superintendent and an assayer. He had nine children. Most of the male children went into the mining business. My father was the oldest one, Paul Junior, and he became a mining engineer. They traveled from Eureka, Utah into Nevada. They were in the area around—it was White Pine County, although then it was still part of Utah Territory. They went to a place called Cherry Creek, where Dad and Grandpa had a mine. Then they journeyed as far south as Tonopah, and they had a mine in Tonopah, the Brougner Divide Mining Company. Then he went to Battle Mountain, Nevada, where he also was in the mining business. That's mostly what I remember, is coming to Battle Mountain—well, first coming to

White Pine County, and to Ely, Nevada when I was a child, and then Battle Mountain, Nevada. Eventually I went to work at the Copper Canyon Mining Company.

How old were you when you first started working with the mining?

Oh, it was after I graduated from high school and had a couple of years' college [from] LDS [Latter-day Saints] Business College.

OK, you had a business background then.

Yes. I went to school in Utah, and I came back to Nevada after the war [World War II] and went to work, as I said, in a mining company. Met my husband [Floyd Draper], who was in an entirely different field. He was in the road construction business and their headquarters was in Fallon, Nevada. I met him in Battle Mountain and we married and we started traveling in the road construction business. We lived in *all* these little towns in Nevada, from Wells, Nevada; Lovelock, Nevada; Reno; Fallon; down into the south. What the company would generally do is try to find work for the men in the southern part in the winter, and then go back up north in the fall.

So what highways did he work on then? Was it the major interstates or—?

Yes, we came down here one winter and we built the Maryland Parkway. We came down here one winter and we built the highway to Boulder City. We built strips at Nellis Airport. But in 1950 we built the access road into the test site.

OK, so most of the highways that he built then were between 1947 and the 1950s, are those the highways that we're talking about?

That's right. That's right. Yes. And we came down here in 1950 and built the access road, as I said. Then we went back up north and we lived in Lovelock for a while, Wells, Winnemucca.

But we would come down here every winter and they'd build something more at the test site, or an airstrip at Nellis. That way they kept the men busy all year.

[00:05:00] *But you traveled with him instead of him going off and pretty much leaving you. Well, was that unusual for a construction wife or—?*

No, no, there were several of us. Mainly the people that had the, I don't want to say "better jobs", but the jobs that were year-round. My husband was the master mechanic and there was the grade foreman, and people like that had trailers and their wives went with them. That's what we did. When we came into Indian Springs in 1950, there was no place to park our trailer. So the men who had the lease on Indian Springs gas station let us use the land between the gas station and the air base, and the company put up a trailer court. They put a pump down a well so they could have water, and they laid lines for water. They laid lines for electricity, and we lived right there on the verge of the airstrip at Indian Springs.

Now were there others who also were in that same—?

Yes, there were eight or ten trailers. I don't remember how many. They put up a wash room and everything, so we had all of the amenities.

Did you often follow each other? The same little group went up north and—?

Oh yes. Yes.

And so it was a mobile community for you then.

Yes. Yes, it was. Dodge Construction had some trailers that they put bunks in for their men.

They had trailers that were parts houses. The rest of us had our own trailers and of course they had their own equipment that my husband worked on.

Yes. Now you grew up then—if this is the 1950s, you said, and you were born, let's see—

Nineteen twenty-six.

Nineteen twenty-six. So you were a little youngster during the Depression.

Yes. Yes. My family wasn't really involved in the Depression because the mining business went on.

You were doing well?

You slipped from one type of mine to another type. For instance, they went to gold and silver mostly.

So as a child did you do a lot of traveling [with] that same kind of mobile life that you and your husband experienced?

Well no, not really. My father kept us in school in Salt Lake.

So he moved and you stayed—

We went to school in Salt Lake and came out to Nevada, whatever community they were mining in, in the summer.

Oh OK, so the mining took place in the summer. I was wondering—

Well, the mining was all year round. No. My dad was at the mine—and sometimes my mother—but we were in school in Salt Lake, and then we came out in the summer while school was out and stayed with them. We lived in Ely one summer and we lived in Battle Mountain most of the time. Then when I married Floyd it was just a continuum of that, living in one Nevada town after another. Sometimes I can't keep them straight, I lived in so many.

Yes. Well, you weren't very old then, probably a teenager then, when World War II broke out.

Oh yes.

Do you have any particular memories of how you experienced that?

Well, I remember my cousins going to war. I eventually worked at Fort Douglas for a while, and I worked at Hill Field, which was an air base; it's Hill Air Force Base now, but it used to be Hill Field. I worked there.

So you were part of the home front work force then.

Yes. My mother was a telephone operator at Fort Douglas. My aunt worked at Fort Douglas. We were all involved in, I guess, the war effort, you know, working. We had top secret clearances.

Oh, all of you did?

Yes.

Oh, so you were very used to this idea of security and clearances and things from way back, then.

Oh yes. Yes.

Well, did you have any siblings that—?

I have a sister; that's all, a sister that is four years younger than me. She never worked out there but her husband worked in the same industry as my husband, so we were together most of the time.

OK. So in the 1950s then you moved to Las Vegas. And when was it that you started at the test site?

[00:10:00] Well, we worked and lived at the test site—or Indian Springs I should say—off-and-on until 1954.

And now was that part of his work or did you also work too?

Yes. His. No, I didn't work at the test site then.

At that time. OK.

In 1954 we came down here, and Floyd was working at the test site. They talked him into quitting the company he had worked for, for all these many years after the war, and going to work for REECo [Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company]. I got a little bored sitting home in the trailer doing nothing, so I went to work at the store at Indian Springs as a cashier. I had only worked there a couple of months when the paymaster, a gentleman named Jack Moe, came through the line there.

And he said, I understand you worked in payroll.

And I said, Yes, I did.

And he says, Well, how about talking to me about coming to work at the test site in the payroll office?

I said, Well, you know, it just never dawned on me to work out there.

And he said, Well, we're really looking for help, people who have knowledge.

So I took a day off work and went out to the test site and interviewed with him and lo and behold, I was hired.

Now were you doing payroll at this store that you were working at?

No, no. I was working as a cashier. It was a little—it was part of the house actually that they converted into a store. They had a few grocery items. It didn't have any meat or anything. They had a post office in there. They needed a cashier, so I went to work as a cashier.

Well, that's interesting that it was a small enough community that he knew of prior work experience, even before—

Yes, Indian Springs was like a little town. You knew the postmaster, Greta Skank [husband Schyler Shank] I think was her name. And there were people that lived up at the ranch in houses that had been actually converted from garages and chicken coops and almost anything, because

they were desperate for help out there. It was hard to get people to *drive* out there, and hard to find people who would *live* out there. The living wasn't the greatest in the world. They had Quonset huts. They had a cafeteria out there where you paid a dollar and went through the turnstile for each meal. It was like a cafeteria.

So that's interesting that it was difficult to get people to work out there. So where typically did some of these people come from that began to work out there? Were they just from the smaller towns or—?

Well, they came from Las Vegas to go out there, but it was so hard to get certain help that they went off into California for iron workers and for electricians and for plumbers. They called them "travelers." They came up and the union here would accept them and send them out to the job, because all of the union people had to be referred to the job out there. Then they were given an intensive form to fill out with all their background and everything, and then they went to work out there. We had a payroll office, a personnel office, out at the site. Most of the other offices, the top offices, were downtown here [in Las Vegas]. In fact they were on North Main Street there. AEC [Atomic Energy Commission] had an office on North Main Street there. They had a light on the top of the building that went red when they were having a shot. The rest of the time it was blue, but it went red when a shot was imminent.

Well, had you liked business classes? Did you get some of your business training in high school or was this all in the LDS Business College?

Some of it was in high school and the rest was in LDS Business College. When I went to work at Hill Field, I was doing clerical work there, and I went from there to Fort Douglas.

What year did you go to LDS Business College?

Oh gee, in 1944, I guess it was, 1943 and 1944, 1944 and 1945.

OK. My father was there around 1940, so—

It was a little before me.

Yes. I was just wondering how close that timing might've been. Just a passing thought of mine.

[00:15:00] Yes, I graduated from East High School.

OK. Did they have business classes or math or things that made you realize that you liked that kind of a thing?

I had always done sort of statistical work. My father of course had drafting tables and things because he was an engineer. I just always made books and did statistical-type work. I enjoyed that sort of thing. My grandfather had a big library. He was one of the first graduates of the International Correspondence School, which went by another name then. It was Colliery Engineering-or something -school, and he graduated in 1901 from there.

Oh, a long time—

Yes. But he had a lot of books and a lot of things from when he was learning.

Now it sounds like your grandfather, was self-taught by correspondence. Is that what he was then?

Yes. Yes.

Because I know in those early years, it was very, very difficult to get extensive training—

Yes, he came over to the States when he was ten years old, and he picked up his education. He learned to be an assayer and [learned] his mining. I don't know what brought him out to the West, but there he was. My grandmother, on the other hand, her family had been brought over as Mormon converts. Same place. Utah naturally. She was working in Eureka when she met my grandfather.

And what was her name and her family's name?

Her family's name was Moedl. Some of them settled on the banks of the Jordan River there. One of them had a flour mill and one of them had a tanning factory. I remember that we used to go over to the tannery there. But when she met my grandfather, he was Catholic, and she converted back to the Catholic faith.

Oh, she did?

Yes.

That must've been an unusual experience, to be in the middle of primarily Mormons there at that time.

Yes, it was, although I think a lot of the miners were Catholic. They came from Ireland, Wales, Germany, places like that. But she converted back when she met my grandfather.

So was your upbringing then as a Catholic?

No.

Oh, OK.

My mother was a Mormon and so I had a somewhat unique experience. I had Catholics on one side and Mormons on the other side. So I was raised as a Mormon, went to school—because I was baptized as a Mormon—went to Sunday School. And my husband is Mormon.

Oh, he is.

Yes. But my father's people were all Catholic.

Catholic. Oh, OK. So—

Never heard an argument. Strangest thing, never heard an argument until my dad died.

Oh, OK. Well, I had been kind of curious about that because Utah does have a lot of migrations and that kind of culture and—

Yes, they sort of kept to themselves. Catholics kept to themselves and, you know, and the Mormons kept to themselves.

Well, the Mormons often, I understood, were more in the farming communities, and I find it interesting to find a segment that became miners.

Yes. On my mother's side, her father was a military man, but her grandfather was a miner. She was born in Park City [Utah].

Oh.

Yes, they were miners from England. A lot of English miners.

I'd really like your perspective on coming into the 1950s. Dina Titus has called it a simpler time.

I was wondering what your perspective might be of coming out of World War II and the 1950s and of your experience in the 1950s.

Gee. I don't quite know how to answer that. I know in our particular group we lived in trailers.

They were nice trailers. They were modern trailers. And we traveled around. And nowadays I'm offended when I hear people refer to it as trailer trash, because we weren't trash.

That was a respectable way of—

Yes, we were well-paid and it was better than going into these little towns where there was little if any homes. We stayed in Tonopah, and my babysitter lived on the second floor of a home that was just, you know, just nailed together lumber. We had such a lovely trailer but we lived there and she took care of my babies for a while.

But your choice to work was not necessarily out of necessity but just—

Oh no. Boredom. Boredom.

OK. Because you could. You had the opportunity and opportunities were opening with the work force broadening and the need for it. But if you had wanted to be a stay-at-home mother, you could've done that. You had that option.

I could've stayed at home. I did for the first seven, eight years that we were married.

Now tell me how people in the 1950s viewed the Soviet Union [USSR]. You remember that far back?

I think we viewed them as competitive but we didn't really know all the issues. We didn't know the people. My family—my father's family for instance—were German, and there were a lot of spats during the war between people of German ethnicity and those people who were of let's say English persuasion. They would have fist fights.

Did you feel that?

I didn't feel it but my family did. My uncle, he got in a big fist fight, I remember, in Battle Mountain with an English fellow.

Because he associated him with the Nazis, then?

That's right. Yes. Germans were bad. And I can remember, my dad was in World War I [served in Pine Tree Division US Army; enlisted from Utah; served in Germany] and he would speak German to my grandfather. Grandfather didn't want to speak German. He was American. He'd come over here and learned the language. Unlike immigrants today, the first thing they *did* was learn the language. And he was American. My grandmother was American. They didn't speak German in the house. They spoke English.

Well, we also had a lot of immigrants who were highly educated scientists that were coming over at that time. Did that have any impact on you and your family?

At the test site? I never met any scientists. I really didn't. I was in an office that was doing strictly clerical work, and I never met any—

Had you heard of Edward Teller?

Oh yes. Yes.

Did you have, I mean, with his Hungarian background and—

Never gave it—

Never gave it a second thought?

—a thought. As I say, my dad was in World War I. My husband was in World War II. You know, I just never gave it a thought. I was used to foreigners. You live in a little mining town and you've got all kinds. You've got German, you've got English, you've got Jewish people, Greek, [00:25:00] you've got—I'm trying to think—you know, there were Slovaks and people from over there, and they were all a little different. There were a lot of Italian miners.

So in your experience, then, immigrants from all around were a normal part of your life.

Yes. Oh yes.

And it wasn't that these people are Americans and these people are foreigners or different.

No, they were all Americans. They all spoke English. They may've had another language they spoke at home but they learned English and spoke English.

OK, so they had a common desire then. The English [language] brought them together.

Yes.

OK. Now how did they feel about the government at that time? Or how did you, you know, what did you think about—?

Well, we were all intensely patriotic, but there were a number of people that I understand joined the Communist Party. They banded together for a common need.

Now are these miners?

These are—yes, miners.

Was it connected with the unions in some way?

No. No. They just—somebody would come in to town and organize these people and sell them insurance or give them money for various things. They sort of sucked them into joining .The United Mine Workers, I think was a Communist group, and there were a lot of people that joined that, not because they were really Communists or disliked the government, but it was a place where they could get together and drink and socialize.

So it began as a social kind of a connection?

Yes, it was like a social connection.

Were there—I want to say—a lot of people who did that? Was it common for you to be aware of people who did that?

Yes.

And at that time was there suspicion? Was there ostracism? Was there anything like that at all, or was it just, we don't really know what this is all about so it must be somewhat harmless?

There were, oh—

Because Communists were on our side with World War II, you know, they were our allies, so there wouldn't have been a reason to—

Yes. Yes. The United Mine Workers have a long, bad [laughter] history. They were one of the first organizations to come into the mining communities and organize people.

Well, why do you think it appealed to the mining unions?

Well, because they were so lowly paid and these people were going to get them more money from the mine owners. And see, I was unfortunately on the other side because my father was a mine owner, you know.

Oh, I see. So he was more of an entrepreneur

Yes. Yes.

And so you wouldn't be too sympathetic with someone who would want more wages.

No. In some little communities, they were really—they were a force, you know, the United Mine Workers.

Were they aggressive or violent or—?

Yes. They could be, yes.

Well, what kind of—strikes—is that what you're talking about?

Strikes. Got in fights with the police. Not only here, but their other branches were back in the Appalachian district, in coal mines there. And some of the miners that we had here had come from the coal mining to escape that. They had come out here. They were going to make their fortunes out here.

Was there a lot of pressure to join?

I don't know if it was that they had any pressure to join. I had a friend here in town, a beauty [shop] operator, who told me about her mother joining this group when they came over from the old country. She didn't find out until much later that it was really the Communist Party, and [she] was afraid the rest of her life that someone was going to come after her because she was a Communist.

[00:30:00] *So it sounds like associating with Communists became more of a shameful thing as public opinion began to come—*

Yes, after the war, during the McCarthy period—you know, Joseph McCarthy—Communism became a bad name.

OK. Now wasn't that in the 1950s?

Yes.

OK, McCarthyism was in the 1950s. But before that time, during the war, it was well, we don't know if these guys are bad or not.

Yes.

Now what about once the Soviets did the hydrogen bomb? Did that turn public opinion more decidedly against the Communists?

I don't know that I ever thought of it. Working in the nuclear industry, we all thought we were being just terribly patriotic, you know, and that anybody that didn't like us was unpatriotic.

Yes. Are you talking about citizens, American citizens, as well as—?

Yes, or countries. I think for the most part, people that stayed out there [at the test site] like me were convinced we were in the right and anybody else was wrong.

Yes. Well, it is kind of an extension of a civilian-type work force. I mean in a military, as warriors, in order to—you almost have to be enemy-oriented, you know, that we are the good guys and they are the bad guys, and in many ways the test site had elements of a military way of thinking.

Well, you know, we had our clearances and they were updated every five years, so that kept us thinking that we were exposed to things that were highly secretive whether or not. I never heard a secret all the time I was out there, but you get into that feeling because every five years they come around and review your clearance.

Well, what was the kind of security pressure that was on you? Did they warn you about talking with anybody? I mean it doesn't sound like you had secrets to reveal.

Well, we were given warnings not to talk. And with the advent of Area 51 and with the advent of the hydrogen testing done out in Area 400, for example, they just cautioned you not to say anything to anybody. And we didn't. We all sort of stayed together.

Now you formed quite a little community out there, didn't you?

Yes, they formed a community which came into town. For example, the El Cortez Hotel there, a lot of the people, men and women, would stay there on Saturday or Sunday night. They would work out at the test site and live in the dorms out there, which at that time were barely habitable. Then they would come in and go to the El Cortez and have a room, and eat there, and play there, and drink there, and then go back out to the test site.

So you lived in Indian Springs in your little trailer then. As a Mormon, did you find the culture compatible or was it—?

I don't know that anybody cared whether you were a Mormon or what. There was no church out there. You didn't go to church, whether you were Catholic, Mormon.

Oh, because they had a church out there.

Well, they had a church at the test site.

Yes, that's what I meant, yes.

Yes. But there was nothing at Indian Springs, so you never went to church. So it didn't really make much difference what you were. The church at the test site came on much later. There was no church out there for a long time.

Yes. OK. Well, that answers that question. Let's see. Oh, you had said that as a female, you began working out there—what year was it you began working out there?

Nineteen fifty-four.

OK, 1954. You briefly described the dress code, that there was a dress code out there. Will you , for the record, tell about that?

[00:35:00] OK. I was an employee of REECo. And Mr. [L.J.] Reynolds was from the old country. He had certain ideas about dress and women and so forth. He lived in Albuquerque, but he had the contract from 1952 on out at the test site, and he thought that women should wear dresses—not pants; dresses. And women should not have bare shoulders. And women should not smoke. And so these became a dress code for us. We wore dresses. We wore heels, for the most part, and silk hose. I've seen women sent home because they came to work with a sundress on, with spaghetti straps. Told to go home and put a sweater on or a jacket or whatever. A lot of the women *did* smoke, *but* when Mr. Reynolds was coming out from town, his secretary downtown called out and told the test site, Mr. Reynolds is on his way.

Put out the cigarettes.

I'll tell you, not only were the cigarettes put out, but the custodians came around and cleaned off the switch plates, and ashtrays—that the men were using—went into drawers. We got a heads-up on Mr. Reynolds and we cleaned up our act.

Well, it sounds like you worked together on that one, didn't you?

I don't think anybody ever thought of being contrary to that code. Now, when so many agency people came out there, the[ir] women *did* wear pants. We used to sit there and say, How can she dare to wear pants out here? We have to wear dresses.

Who are you talking about when you say agency people?

People who were directly employed by Livermore labs or Sandia.

OK, the labs.

Yes.

OK. OK, so it sounds like there was a little bit looser dress code for women—

I don't think they had any. I mean they weren't bound by Mr. Reynolds.

Well, was Reynolds the only one who had a dress code like that or did some of the other ones—?

Oh yes. Yes. He was the biggest employer out there. His company was based down in New Mexico, and he and Robert E. McKee had a friend who went to Washington and got this contract for them.

So Reynolds was the founder of it, then?

Well, there were various companies that came in there and worked until 1952. Reynolds got a maintenance and operations contract out there. Before that, there was the Nevada Company and the Olympic Commissary and Haddock Engineers. It doesn't come to mind. But they had various things like the fire department. They had a doctor out there. They had a barber. They had the feeding. That was the Olympic Commissary, which was a railroad feeding outfit. And in 1952, some of those were combined under REECo. In 1955, the rest of them came under REECo: the fire department, the feeding, all of that came under REECo.

OK, so REECo did much more than just drilling and construction?

Oh yes, they were the maintenance and operations, and in 1955 they got all of these people. They took people that were truck drivers and trained them to be RADSAFE [radiological safety] monitors. Most of our RADSAFE monitors were former truck drivers.

What is that, monitors, what did you—?

RADSAFE monitors.

RADSAFE. Radiation safe. OK. They were truck drivers.

Yes, they were mostly truck drivers and they were trained out there.

So they got some training. But because they were so desperate for people, that anybody who was willing to drive out there, they promoted and trained into other positions, then.

Yes, for the first few years, that's right. Yes.

Oh my goodness. Well, how many people were on the payroll?

Well, at one time we had as many as seven thousand on our REECo payroll. Now DOE had people, Holmes and Narver had people, other contractors had people, but we had seven thousand people.

[00:40:00] *Well, I think the largest number of people they had out there was somewhere between twelve and fifteen thousand, and you're saying that REECo was almost half of it alone.*

REECo had seven thousand. Yes. Oh yes.

Well, that must've been quite a big job, then, as paymaster there. Seven thousand paychecks.

Well, I wasn't paymaster then. I was working in the payroll office. But we started off doing our payroll on what they called the NCR [National Cash Register], National Business Machines, and you typed in the whole thing. Then we went to keypunching in things and then we went fully to an IBM [International Business Machines] system.

Well, how many were in your office doing payroll?

Well, when I left I had twenty-six employees.

Oh wow! Kept them busy, then.

I remember when I first went to work out there, the payroll office consisted of Jack Moe. There was an older man who was quite handicapped—who had worked downtown as a gambler—who worked in payroll out there. There was a young man that was quite effeminate that just sort of fluttered around. [He] worked in payroll. There was another man—his wife Norma worked for one of the agencies and Jim worked in payroll. I remember him because he smoked so much. And there were just a couple of girls. Most of the people in payroll were men. Now personnel was mostly women.

Personnel, doing what?

The personnel office that was doing—

The ones who do the hiring.

Yes. They were sort of together with payroll. For a while there, the man over them was the accounting department manager. He had both payroll and personnel. And then as they got bigger and he got more paperwork and things, you know, they became separate.

OK, so you saw then gender-wise, out at the test site, females went to personnel, some went into payroll. Was there any other—almost a division of genders—

Secretaries. Secretaries.

Universally female.

Universally female, yes. The men did—I can remember two times [laughter] will be forever in my memory. One was when the head of the RADSAFE operation—which became a rather big thing, you know, radiation safety—made one of his secretaries [an] administrative assistant. And the gasps all over were, you know, *Unthinkable* for a woman to be put in that position. And—

Didn't happen very often, then, I gather.

No. And the other time was when the first woman wanted to work in the tunnels. Oh!

Did she get to?

Well, it was a long time. They first got some clerks, some secretaries—didn't work in the tunnel. Worked outside. But they did go up there and work in the offices.

Well, it seems like a lot of it was very, very hard work. I mean the drillers worked very, very long hours. Miners worked very, very—you know, it'd be interesting, you know, what would make a woman want to do that?

Well, maybe like me, always pushing the boundary, you know.

Did you ever have a desire to do that?

I always considered that I could do anything a man could do, if they give me the chance.

Did you think, given a different set of circumstances, you would've wanted to have been a miner like your father and grandfather?

I don't know. I was down in the mine a lot, but in those days mining [was] just really hard work.

It was before you got all the hydraulics and stuff,. There was one woman miner that I knew in Battle Mountain. She came from England. She worked in a mine over in England and then came to Nevada so I knew that women could do mining.

They did hire them if they, I guess, had a desire or inclination.

Well, out there, you know, when Bill Flangas came to work for us in 1958, women don't belong in a mine. We'd never have a woman in a mine. You wouldn't be caught dead in a mine.

And I sat back there thinking, My dad would've had a field day with that little man, because he had an utter contempt for people like that. But Bill and I got to be really, you know, good friends.

[00:45:00] *Did he ever change his mind, or did he always still feel that way?*

Bill has changed somewhat. One thing is, when his wife went to work, you know, and then he got in politics and he became a little more open-minded. But [in] the beginning, he had the same attitude that a lot of the guys from Kennecott Copper had, you know: This is our business. Nobody else knows our business.

Did you feel any of that gender suppression personally as far as—?

Oh yes, yes, guys would come in there and they'd think that because they were male, they could tell you this is wrong, I want this made right, right now, or else.

And how would you handle that?

Tell them to sit down and we'd look at it, you know. In fact, a couple of times, my boss sent me out there to give the checks to certain men who had been fired who were pretty violent. He figured a woman, I guess, would handle them, and I never had any trouble with them.

Oh. Well, you are talking about payroll and that's a very sensitive issue with people. You saw a lot of people come and go through the years, didn't you?

Oh, an awful lot.

Lots and lots.

A lot of things.

Tell me what you—there were sports teams out there. Were you part of that?

That's right. No, I was never involved in that. My son was. He worked out there for a while, and then he worked in Tonopah, and he was on their baseball team. But I was never much of a sports—I'll tell you what we *did* do. When they decided to have some veterinary services out there, they had REECo hire a man who was a cowboy, who was going to ride around the hills and herd the cattle and take care of the cattle. They had a great dairy farm out there. It won prizes. And they had pigs out there and stuff. And so Ken [Case] was supposed to take care of these. Well, eventually they brought in an [EPA] veterinarian.

Oh, so to take care of the animals.

Yes. He wasn't there all the time but he came in. And he didn't have a horse here and he was not going down to buy a horse and REECo didn't own any horses, so they leased a horse from us.

Oh, you had horses.

Yes.

Was it part of your trailer or—?

No, just when we settled in Indian Springs, we got us a couple of horses. Floyd's an old cowboy so—

Oh, so did you have a home in Indian Springs then?

Just the trailer.

Oh, just the trailer, but it had horses on it.

We built some corrals up there. They let us use some land. We built some corrals. We had a rodeo one year out there, and Casey Tibbs rode in our rodeo.

Oh. Well, how many horses did you have?

I had as many as five. We've got two right now.

Oh wow!

Yes. But anyway, so DOE leased from me a horse and a trailer for three months for this veterinarian. So I thought that was different and unusual. See, REECo didn't own any equipment out there. They had the contract to provide the manpower, but all of the equipment was owned or leased by the government.

Oh, OK. OK. So that's the way they divided things up then?

Yes. When in times of need—and there were times—they hired some truckers who had their own trucks who came out there and worked and we paid them. But REECo itself did not own anything.

Well, that would simplify whose is what, and are you driving off the test site with government property or your property? It probably simplified things, at least as far as security was concerned.

Yes, anything that went off there—if it had the government tag on it—it was government-owned.

Well, did they have a swimming pool out on the test site?

Yes.

Did you ever use that?

No. No. In the latter years, they modified things. First, they had men-only barracks and some for [00:50:00] women. And first they had none for women, but they finally put some in for the women. And then they made a part of the complex out there where they could park these little trailers, and a man and a woman could live in one, so they had joint, cohabitation, or whatever you want to call it. At that point, they had a steakhouse out there and a bowling alley and a swimming pool and the movie. First the movie was a big Quonset hut and the fellow that showed the movies was one of the soldiers who showed the movies out there, and they were on the line of movies that go from one base to another. They stay at a base like two days, then they go on to the next base, and so they were on one of these, so they got the movie for two days.

Now your place of work was on the test site itself then?

Yes, for the first seventeen years, and then I moved downtown. They moved most of the offices downtown. And we would make the payroll here [Las Vegas] and then send it out there and somebody would pass it out.

Do you live in Las Vegas now or do you still—?

Oh yes.

Oh, OK, so you were in Las Vegas then for twenty-something years then.

Oh yes, we moved to Las Vegas in, oh, it was 1957, I guess it was. We moved our trailer in, bought a lot, put our trailer on it, and built it all. And we're on the north side of the valley there, so it wasn't much of a ride out to the test site.

Now did your husband—you said REECo hired him. Now what did he do in REECo?

He was a mechanic.

OK. And the mechanic, what did he repair?

He repaired, well, anything, but mostly generators. Worked on generators.

To provide the electricity out there?

Yes, they had a lot of portable generators and they had generators for electricity when we first went out there, but he didn't work on those big generators. Those were electricians. They had a steam plant and an electrical plant out there. And he worked on the portable generators. Then they went out to Area 51. They had generators out there. They had a lot of generators.

OK, so is that pretty much what he did until he retired, was working on the generators and various things as a mechanic then?

Those things, yes, and trucks and—yes.

OK. Now did you have any memorable testing events? Did you get to see any of these explosions, or did you just stay in the office?

One of the stupid things we used to do was we'd party at night. If they said well, there's going to be a shot Tuesday morning at five o'clock, we would party Monday night and then we would have breakfast, get on a bus, a school bus, and go out to CP, the control point, and put on our glasses and wait for the shot. After the shot was over, we'd go back in and go to work. Work all day.

Oh wow! So you'd put in a sleepless night. It was a very exciting event then, I guess, for all of the test site people.

Yes, we did it a lot of times. Silly, you know, really, but that's what we did.

Now are you describing the atmospheric one? Is that what you're—?

Yes. Yes.

What was your impression of that?

I thought it was tremendous, and I don't think anybody who hasn't seen one will ever realize what an atmospheric shot is. The force from bursting that atom is just almost beyond comprehension. It really is.

How many times did you see that?

Oh, I saw five or six shots out there.

Did it ever get old hat to you, or was it each time—?

No, each time they were different, they looked different, they were different shots. They had one dangling from a balloon. They had built great big things that they lowered the canister down and [00:55:00] shot, and they were just a tremendous force. I've got great admiration for people that are involved in that science.

Were you nervous about the radiation and contamination at that time or were they just awe-inspiring?

I don't think any of us were. We didn't realize what it could do to you. We didn't think about it. In 1955, I think it was, they had civil effects tests out there. They brought in soldiers and they had them in foxholes out there. They had equipment out there. They also brought in some wardens from various places. One of them was my brother-in-law from Fallon, Nevada. He was a warden up in Fallon. He came down there all dressed up as if he was going on a deer hunt. Had a canteen, had the whole thing- the whole nine yards. They went out there and they were assigned their foxholes. They were there when these shots—they had several of them, civil effects test group shots. And some of those people died of cancer—had pretty bad deaths—probably because of the shots.

So you knew some of them personally then.

Yes. Yes, I worked with one man that was a soldier out there, and then when he got out of the service he went to work for REECo. He died of cancer, and it was a long, lingering—you know, he had chemotherapy and radiation. I think probably it was because of the tests out there. There were several people that died like that.

So you saw a lot of people that suffered some really bad effects from it. Has that changed your view now versus at that time? How does that make you feel about the nuclear testing that the government did?

Well, at the time I told myself, as many of the people there do, that that wasn't the cause of it, that it had to be something else. Now I think that the government *and* the people *and* the scientists *and* the doctors were all a little naïve about the effects of radiation. To see people who take radiation for cancer therapy and it's pretty hard. But we didn't know. Nobody did it deliberately. It was something that people just didn't know.

Do you think the price that those people had to pay is worth what the nuclear program did?

I don't think they're any worse off than people who worked in coal mines and didn't realize what coal dust did, or people who worked in factories and didn't realize that the dust from those fabrics was insidious and gave you all kinds of emphysema and stuff. My own brother-in-law lived to be eight-nine or ninety, but he had emphysema from welding during World War II. He worked in the shipyards, where you went inside the ship and you welded. Nobody had any idea that that welding did that, you know, gave you emphysema.

But now we seem to live in a day where people, you know, kind of blame someone and get compensation for it. Do you think they deserve that compensation?

No.

Why?

I think they took the same risk that all of us took and that giving one compensation is unfair to the many people who worked there and lived through it and if they suffered, suffered in silence.

What about people who, like for example St. George or Downwinders, who weren't really expecting it, you know, were totally surprised by things that happened years later?

[01:00:00] I think a lot of that is overblown, because my own relatives from southern Utah had cancer *long* before there were tests out there. I think there is more to causing cancer than just radiation, because there's a *lot* of cancer and has been for many, many years in the St. George area down through there. My sister-in-law, her mother died a nasty death from cancer long before there was a test site. No doubt there are some people there that have suffered, but I think it's drastically overblown. People nowadays want to blame somebody for their illness, you know.

Why do you think they want to blame the government?

Why, that's just somebody to blame. I don't think they have anything against the government *per se*.

Do you think the test site gets blamed unnecessarily for things?

Yes. Yes, I do. I do. I think a lot of people say, you know, A woman's got breast cancer, it was caused by the test site. We were in, not St. George, where were we? Springdale, over there, with our horses one day, and this old man was just coughing and coughing up a storm. He says, Oh, it's the test site. I got it at the test site.

And one of the men there said, well, if you'd give up smoking, you wouldn't cough so much. And I found out his name and I went back and looked at his record. He'd only worked out there two months. He sure didn't get emphysema from working in the mines two months.

Well, did you see the attitude towards you working at the test site change through the years?

You mean *my* attitude?

No, no, no, the attitude towards people, knowing that you worked out there?

The attitude towards people? I have friends even now who think it's terrible that I worked at the test site, that that's the cause of their sister-in-law's cancer or their brother-in-law's cancer or whatever, that they blame it totally on the test site. Yes, oh, several people.

So is that a reason to just continue an association with people who only worked out there, because there's a common understanding of what you were trying to do?

I think the people, the men—not myself. I think the men that worked out there were great patriots. I think they worked out there without thinking of themselves. And though some of them now have doubts and blame it on the test site out there, I think they did a great service to this country, without which we might have been the victims of greater radiation from a Communist country.

OK, so you're expressing the Soviet nuclear program, had it succeeded, and the part that the test site played in deterring nuclear holocaust.

Yes. It was great. You look at Chernobyl, you know. That is a *terrible* mess out there. We've never had anything approaching that. Never. Have we?

Have you talked with people who actually saw some of these contaminated sites in the Soviet Union?

No, I haven't. All I've seen has been on TV. I haven't seen any of that, although I did know most of the men who went over and worked in Russia, the drillers.

Give me some of their names, just, you know, because—well, and if that's, you know—

I can't think back and think of their names now, but there were a group of them that went over there.

I know, there are about two hundred. Yes, there's about two hundred who went over there, who had that experience of seeing firsthand the difference between the way the Americans did things and the way the Soviet Union did things. That's one of the questions I'm very, very interested in asking anybody who has gone over there. So you kind of have said that there's people you've known, and so I use those leads, you know, to try to find people who are still around who can still tell—

Well, Frank Solaegui is one.

Solaegui? OK.

[01:05:00] I'm trying to think of who went over there and my mind's a total blank. But I don't think John Campbell went over there.

I haven't been able to find a list in the archives. I was looking for JVE [Joint Verification Experiment] people and there is no list of the two hundred and I don't know quite where to find it either.

DOE should have something somewhere because they had to get visas for them and everything to go over there.

Yes. Yes. Yes, I think Nick Aquilina is the one that I think, and it was quoted in one of the newsletters. I can't remember if it was the DOE one or the REECo one—I can't remember which one—but he had said that there was two hundred Americans who had been over to Semipalatinsk and they all worked at the test site. This was an experience very, very unique to test site people.

Yes.

Now did you get to see the Soviet scientists at all when they came over for the JVE?

No. No.

Do you know people who did?

My best friend did but she's dead now. She's not going to help you.

Well, even in the office, how did you feel about them being on the test site?

I thought it was great. I think it proved that the Americans had the ability to get things done that some other nationalities, for want of a better word, don't do. Maybe it's our, you know, dates back to when they crossed the plains. People went into the unknown and made something out of it. We do things that other countries don't do. We attempt things that other countries don't do. Not saying that some of our scientists and some of the people that come here have come from other countries here—you know, Teller and people like that have come over here and been very instrumental in what has happened.

Well, Troy Wade had said that there had been a lot of people at the test site—cooks and different people—who were not at all happy that the Soviet scientists who they had all their lives, you know, for many, many years been protecting the test site against were now all of a sudden coming and were seeing things.

Yes, that may be true, but I think that's the attitude of people who aren't very well educated.

That's good.

[01:07:53] End Track 2, Disk 1.

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

A lot of people worked out there.

There are. There's been a lot of building, a lot of contributing, and I think probably one of the greatest stories of Nevada history is actually the test site. It's kind of interesting because, you think, OK, where does the story of the test site fit? Does it fit in Nevada history? Does it fit in United States history? My thinking, it also fits into world history. The Cold War. You know, the

Cold War takes us out of our isolation and in this little desert spot over here was a very real battleground with very real Cold War years.

If the story of Groom Lake, Area 51, was ever to become known together with the test site, there were pretty dramatic things that happened here.

Are you able to talk about the Groom Lake story, or is that something that's classified. I don't want to do anything that's classified. I just don't know what's—

I didn't work there. My husband worked out there for eight years. But you know, there've been so many stories about it and people still go out there on the mesa and look down into Area 51 and then broadcast what they think is going on there.

Yes, and then there's been television series that have fantasized it, and then we've got movies that make a big deal out of it, so there is a big mystery over what the real facts are. I think that is part of the problem of the test site. A democratic country thrives on being able to ask questions. There has been a tension between defending our country and being able to answer those questions. So often test site people have been able to just stay silent and the answers, you know, not be given.

I think the problem with Area 51, and this is just my personal opinion, is that some things transpired there that implicate—that's the right word—some other countries. For example, certain countries gave us things that occurred in their country or in an adjoining country that was dissected and looked at Area 51. And if you tell that, you're implicating the country that gave it to us, which they're not ready to do and probably won't be in my lifetime. But I think there was some pretty remarkable things that went on out there, and I base this on the fact that occasionally an officer would bring my husband something and say, Hey, Floyd, you ever seen

anything like this before? And Floyd would look at it and comment on whether he had or not, and in some cases he had seen something similar to that.

Did Floyd ever say what he saw, or describe it to you at all?

No, he doesn't talk about what went on out there, but just from the few things that he has let drop, I think that's probably what happened. I'm sure it wasn't aliens because I don't think for a minute you could have an alien on the test site and not have some culinary worker telling somebody about it.

Well, did you have to suppress a lot of that curiosity or did you just put up the wall and say these are barriers that we just won't pass?

Yes. To this day I don't talk about the test site with my own son who works out there because there's no point in getting information you can't reveal. I'm sure he wouldn't tell me and we just don't talk about it.

Well, it sounds like it's difficult for the story of the test site to get known as long as those barriers are up. And you know it's also difficult to know if the government regulations or the way the government handled thing with a standard of fairness or rightness as long as that secrecy is held in such close quarters. Do you have any feelings of why—I mean were they afraid that secrets would be given to other countries, is that—

[00:05:00] Well, I think it's all in this idea that you take information from here and you take it from here and you take it from here, then you put it together and you might come up with something that is detrimental to the welfare of the United States.

Have you seen in your lifetime where secrets had gotten into the hands of the Soviet Union?

I'm sure that it has, yes. Yes.

Because as I've read some de-classified information, the Soviets say that just about everything they got was stolen.

Oh yes. Yes.

You know, their technology was stolen and I—

By the same token, I think some of the stuff we've got nefariously was stuff from the Soviet Union—just to see what they were doing—because it wasn't an open society, so we had to get stuff in a certain way. And then we had to look at it and determine what in the world it was. I think that's probably what's going on at Area 51.

Well, Troy Wade had said that they knew more about us than we knew about them, because we had an open society and they didn't. They were so completely closed down, so—

Oh yes, you know, you look at the exploits of Kim Philby and some of those Soviet agents that were [in] Great Britain or even our own people. They were just stealing stuff left and right and sending it over to the Soviets.

Now was that happening more in the 1950s, or did that happen pretty much throughout the Cold War?

I think that was mostly throughout the Cold War.

Did you see any difference at the test site once the Soviet Union fell?

If I did, I didn't note it. OK? It just went over my head.

Oh, OK. Well, maybe you can just kind of share some of your bosses at REECo, the different ways of management, maybe that you've been able to observe through the years. This could be really valuable as part of the history of REECo itself.

Well, we had some fairly intelligent people out there. I think the accounting department manager, Bob Van Compennolle was one of the most intelligent people I've ever known. He had

no charisma or anything. He wasn't one of these people you'd look at and think, *Boy, he's part of the intelligentsia*. He just didn't look like that. He was a little thin man that just dripped perspiration, but he was *brilliant*. He was brilliant.

Oh, was he? What made you say that he was brilliant?

That he just had a grasp of everything, you know.

He had a broad knowledge?

Well, and he dealt with DOE on all the plans and projects and the money and where it's coming from, where it's going to. He just had a total grasp of that.

Who would you say was the best leader? Had the best leadership ability? Ability to pull teams together?

Oh, of the men I know, Harold Cunningham.

You liked him the best.

I liked him the best.

Why?

For one thing, he was not prejudiced against women—and I find that *many* men are. They think, *My wife is brilliant but the rest of the women are secretaries and what have you*. It's seldom that you meet a person, man or a woman for that matter that is completely unbiased when it comes to gender.

So you kind of felt like you could be judged on your abilities with him?

Yes, I think he judged everybody on their abilities, not just me.

How long was he head of REECo?

Gee, I don't know how many years he was—

He has high regard for you too. Mary Palevsky has interviewed him and he was glad you were being interviewed.

Oh, he's really a nice, nice man. And I've known, I think, all of the test site leaders. [00:10:00]

Joe Lopez was the first one. And Frank Rogers, and I knew Frank because he was a sort of a, what do I want to say? He had been a construction man at one time in his life and he borrowed our tractor to clear his house and stuff. I knew Frank fairly well. And Colonel Tyler, I never knew at all. He spent his time downtown, or if he came out to the test site, he never—

Oh, he was not a hands-on man. So would you say he was one of the worst ones?

Well, I don't know. He may have been a brilliant manager, but he never came out and shook my hand.

Yes. And things just continued to go on as normally even if he wasn't in the office then.

Yes.

Well, did you prefer ones who were more hands-on or did you like the ones who just let you guys alone?

Well, there's something about getting performance from your employees by acknowledging them, you know. Joseph Lopez, the first man, had a *tremendous* memory and you could tell him something about yourself. The PBX operator was sick one day and they came around and said, Who can operate the PBX board? That was before they had telephones everywhere. You had one board that came into the offices there where the project manager and the engineers and payroll and personnel and accounting were.

And I said, well, I'll give it a try. My mother was a PBX operator. And for the rest of the day I played with it. Not that I did a great job, you know, but Mr. Lopez forever after when he saw me he'd say, Oh, you're the young lady that knows how to run the PBX board.

Now is that a forerunner of the computer?

That's a telephone system.

Oh, a telephone system. OK.

And I thought, you know, Of all the people he meets and all the things he must know, to remember that means he's got a prodigious memory. So I liked Mr. Lopez. Yes, and then there was Frank Rogers and then Colonel Tyler and then Harold, then Dale [Fraser]. I guess that was it.

Now you went to computerization of payroll?

Yes.

So did you start out with large computers or—?

We had a computer section. They started out first by keypunching the information that had normally been input into an NCR machine.

Now was that in the 1960s, or when was that?

Oh gee, I don't remember. I think it was in the 1950s that we hired our first keypunch operator and started keypunching.

Because I believe computers had a lot of their origination as part of the defense work, and that's one of the technologies that has come out of it.

Yes, we started first out there with—they did payroll and accounting because it just got so massive, you had to have a lot of people to do that. And they started keypunching that stuff, and then one thing led to another and we got our whole info systems.

So how'd you get your training on that? Did they train you? Send you to school or—?

By osmosis, I guess.

Really? You just had to figure it out.

Yes. The keypunch operator was somebody they trained. Williams was her name. Her and her husband both worked out—there were a lot of families that worked out there. It's amazing when you start thinking it out. My brother-in-law worked out there as a machinist. My other brother-in-law worked out there off and on with Dodge Construction. My nephew was a photographer for EG&G [Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier]. My other nephew was a custodian employee. My son worked there. My daughter worked for Nye County Assessor out there. Just a lot of whole families like that.

Now were some of them doing commuting or just working and living out there?

[00:15:00] My son worked out there one summer as a clerk out in Area 12 in the tunnels, and he went back and—oh, I think he stayed out there. I think he stayed out there, and when he worked at Tonopah, he stayed up in Tonopah. My daughter went back and forth with me every day. She carpooled. As I say, she worked for the Nye County Assessor who had a trailer just outside payroll. You could get your driver's license, get your registration, all those things, out at the test site.

Wow! A miniature little town then, wasn't it?

Yes. Yes. Well, most of those people were working up to seven days a week and they had no way of getting those things, so they [the Nye County Assessor] sold license plates and everything out there.

Sounds like they had all of the different services that you would find in like, for example, a military base, you know, that it was self-contained in a way, to be able to not have to commute if you—

Oh yes. Let me tell you about the first cafeteria they had. They had a big building up there and they had tables in there of course and, cooking stuff, and they had a turnstile and you dropped

your dollar in there. Well, some of the more thinking people, particularly the guard force out there, thought that, Hey, this is great! If I work this right, I can eat all day on a dollar. So they would go in there in the morning, they would have the cook cook up eggs and bacon and ham—you could order anything for your dollar—then over on the side they had the coffee and they had bread and a toaster and butter and stuff. So they would go in and they'd have their eggs and their ham and whatever cooked up, and then they'd go over to where the bread was and they would—

Make a sandwich.

Sandwiches. And they'd take them home and that was their lunch. They'd do the same—maybe there were two people sharing a room in a dorm. One of them would go through the turnstile and get enough for two people and come back out.

A little too clever for their own good, huh?

It was amazing what they could do on a dollar out there, really. Yes, it was almost a shame when they went to pricing each item. That sort of cut down on that stuff.

Did you enjoy the steakhouse too?

I didn't eat much at the steakhouse out there. They had a place just beyond Indian Springs—just about a mile is a little place called Cactus Springs, and there was a woman there named Ilon [sp] who owned it or leased it. She had a bar and she started serving dinners, and she would fix you a steak. That's all she served were steaks, baked potato, and a salad with dressing that she made. She grew chives in cans on the windowsill. You'd come in and order your steak and she would cut the chives off to go in your salad and come up with the dressing and give you a baked potato and a steak. So many people ate there, just to get away from the test site. And then the rest of

them, like I said, would come into town, go to the El Cortez, and eat there for two days and then go back out to the test site and sweat it out on the meals.

Did you feel like the test site was rugged?

Well, having lived in a trailer and out on camp jobs and at mines and stuff, it wasn't too different from that, really.

Well, with your husband being kind of an old cowboy, maybe he didn't mind it either, did he?

No. No. Floyd was used to that kind of living because before he married me, working as he did on the road, you know, he'd live in these places where you ate in a boarding house, a cafeteria.

Did you go horseback riding a lot with him or was he mainly the horseback rider?

Oh yes. No, we used to ride all the time.

[00:20:00] *Was it just for riding or was it for just going up in the hills and camping overnight or—*

We'd just ride around Indian Springs. When we moved in town, there was maybe two houses between us and what is Twin Lakes now. If Floyd went to town and got waylaid in a bar or something, I could track him just by looking out my back window, because that road went down there and very few cars went down that road. So we really—I think we enjoyed it. It's been good to us.

Well, good. What was a high point of your life, you know, as maybe you think about ups and downs in your life?

I don't know. The fact that I raised two kids—in this economy or this gambling, drinking, working mother, all that—that have turned out great, and my grandkids are all great. There's no drugs. There's no problems.

That's wonderful. You mentioned about your son, that's he's worked out—I haven't heard too much about your daughter.

My daughter is married to a man that just retired as the executive vice president of Southwest Gas. She has one son who's thirty-six now who is the nicest boy in the world. He's just a lovely man. Great father. Great—he's just a good guy. And my son is divorced but he has two daughters that are both doing great. One daughter is a school teacher. She took me out to breakfast this morning. So my family is, you know, I—

Your family is a high point. You're really proud of them.

Yes. Yes. Too many people say, you know, their kid got in trouble because of the gambling down there or the drinking down there or whatever. My kids have been great. They're a great source of comfort to me.

Did you make a point of trying to be close as a family?

I don't think I was ever conscious of doing anything right. I just did it by guess. I've got so many friends whose kids are bad news that I'm really fortunate in my—

Now what were some of your maybe low points? Or a difficult time.

Well, you know, once or twice things at the job got iffy because you'd get a supervisor who you didn't get along with, something like that. For the thirty-eight years I worked out there [at the test site] I never felt sure of my job. And it's something that I always wanted—when I was a kid, the children that I was around, you know, their father would be a school principal or worked at Sears, Roebuck, but they always had, what's the word I'm looking for?

Are you talking about an identity?

No, it's just they never had to worry about what they were going to be doing next week or next month or next year. I really envied those kids because my dad was in a high-risk business,

mining. And then when I got married, Floyd was stable but it depended on the jobs, road jobs, you know. We were never *out* of work. And when I went to the test site I always thought, Well, maybe next week this'll end. Never envisioned—

You never envisioned thirty-eight years there?

No.

That there was always the possibility of cutbacks and things?

Oh yes.

And you survived a lot of cutbacks too, didn't you?

Yes. We went from 375 to 7,000 people, you know, and I was just sure that next week it's my turn to hit the road.

So you were always prepared for that to happen and it didn't happen. Well, have you seen more uncertainty in different presidential administrations?

Yes. It's not only in—well, I guess it is the presidential administration. You know, a lot of the people that have been put in charge of the Department of Energy, before that, you know, [00:25:00] the Atomic Energy Commission [AEC], some of them have been real political hacks, and you always worried about whether the next month or the month after they were going to shut the place down. You just never knew.

Or were there some presidents that made things more uncertain than others?

Oh yes.

Which ones?

Ah, I'm not sure that it was the presidents themselves, but the people in the administration. For example, REECo got their contract renewed every year or two years or five years or whatever length of time it was. But then when Mr. Reynolds died, EG&G bought Reynolds [REECo] and

the guy [Peter] Zavattaro from EG&G had a disagreement with a woman in Washington, D.C. and she said that was the last contract that EG&G would ever get. And REECo lost its contract. It went to Bechtel.

Was this under Clinton?

I don't remember who it was. In 1991 or 1992 that REECo lost its contract, who was president then? I think it was under Clinton. But it wasn't his fault. It was this woman there that was in charge of the Department of Energy. She just wouldn't have anything to do with Zavattaro, so as a result of that REECo lost its contract and Bechtel came in.

And what happened to you then?

Well, I had already retired by then. It didn't upset me, but I sat and looked at it and, you know, REECo *really* did a good job. I can be *proud* of my company. They did a good job. There were some things they did that *I* would've done differently if I'd been in charge, but on the whole they did a great job.

Well, they seemed to have tried to recognize their employees. I was reading the [REECo] Reecorders that come out that keeps everybody abreast of what's going on, and you know that's really kind of quite nice.

Yes, I thought they were a great company. I really did. And to lose them to Bechtel which can't hold a *candle* to REECo. The first three insurance things I got from Bechtel were wrong. One, two, three. You know, one comes out and says you're entitled to visual care and dental insurance, and go down to use them, you don't have them. Didn't apply to any retirees. Well, that's not what they said. Then they came out with another one [that] said something different, and they finally came out with a third one. It doesn't take *three* times—

To get it right.

To get it right. No, it really doesn't.

No, if you take too long, you can waste some very, very valuable time. What do you think has been your overall guide or formula for living? Is there any, you know, particular values that you have that guide you- that are deeply a part of you?

Well, my father gave me a pretty good structure to live by. He felt that you could do anything you applied yourself to, but you had to do a good job of it and not blame results on somebody else, and that's—

That sounds like a work ethic, giving your best.

Yes, that's what I've tried to do. I got myself in trouble a number of times because a lot of people don't take kindly to a woman being that uppity. But that's what he thought and he taught me not to be a bigot, and I've tried not to be. I hired the second black female worker out there, all on my own.

[00:30:00] *Did she do a good job?*

Did an excellent job. By the time she left the company, she was a senior auditor.

That's wonderful. What was her name, do you remember?

Gwen Page. Yes.

Was that a rare occurrence, to bring in minorities into the test site?

They didn't have any minority clerical workers. They had crafts[men] until I think it was a man named Bud Lawson, Clark G. Lawson, I called him Bud, who hired the first black woman, and I hired the second one, and after that things sort of fell in place.

Opened up a little bit more?

Yes. But there was—

Well, did you see minorities relegated to menial tasks? Did you see that? Did you see, you know, changes that took place in the test site?

Yes, when I first worked there, you know, the only women minorities were culinary workers. There was one that worked downtown that made the coffee and wiped off the things and stuff. She eventually worked in the supply office. She was competent. There's no reason why they couldn't have had more. They just didn't hire them. Of course, when they did they sort of went overboard, but we were a good minority—

Equal opportunity—

Yes, and we had people in personnel that saw that everybody got an equal break.

Now when did you see that really start to push ahead? Was that in the 1960s or 1970s? When did you see that?

Probably in the 1970s, yes.

The 1970s? They became more aware that that needed to be developed there.

Yes.

Well, good. Well, who has been some of your heroes in your life? Some people who have influenced you.

Well, my dad. You're right, there was a great man. I greatly admired Harold Cunningham. I thought he was a great fellow. I admired Bob Van Compernelle for different reasons, because I thought he was just really smart. Who else? I'm sure there are others but I don't think of them now.

Tell me about your mother.

Oh, my mother had been a PBX operator when she was a girl. Telephone operator. Worked during the war as a telephone operator. The great love of her life was my dad, who died fairly young. My mother lived to ninety-six.

Oh wow, ripe old age.

She is one of those cases where you look at somebody and say she had a horrible diet. [laughter] She never saw a vegetable that she liked except for sliced tomatoes and corn, you know, no green vegetables. I don't know how in the world she lived to ninety-six, but she never ate green vegetables, never exercised a day in her life, never. Worked up until the time she retired at sixty-five. But she lived to ninety-six, and was as sharp as could be at ninety-six. Her body was a little out of shape but she never lost her mind.

What level of education did she get?

She went to seminary in Salt Lake City, which I understand was like a college for women.

Floyd's mother lived to a hundred and one.

Oh wow! Longevity on both sides.

Come from Mormons that just live on and on and on and on and on.

Well, you know, they do have really good health if they take care of themselves at all.

Yes. I had one grandmother that was a hundred and eight when she died. Grandma Goff, yes.

Oh wow! Well that, you know, staying away from tobacco and liquor and coffee—

[00:35:00] Yes, that's part of it. My mother never drank. Never even drank coffee. Did drink Coke. She drank a lot of Coca-Cola but—and as I say, her diet was terrible.

OK. Well, is there anything else you would like—oh, if you had to do it over again, would you make any changes in your life?

Yes. With no disrespect to my husband, I probably would've married a professional man. But we've survived fifty-seven years so—

So what profession would you have liked him to have had?

Well, my husband's a fairly uneducated man and there isn't a great deal to talk about, now in our latter years.

You seem to be very well-read.

I read a lot. I've always read a lot.

Yes, I can kind of tell that.

And so I miss talking to somebody because you lose your English if you don't use it, and I've lost a lot of mine since I quit work.

Well, do you do other things with your spare time other than—you don't seem to be like a TV person or—

I do watch TV now. There's not much else to do. I used to do a lot of needlepoint, sewing, made my own clothes.

But with your eyes failing, that probably—

Yes, a couple of years ago I stopped driving. I couldn't drive anymore. I enjoy coming down and working in the museum [Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas, Nevada], but I think that's sort of a complimentary post because what can you do without your eyesight? But I come down one day a week which keeps me active.

Oh, I think the fact that you share the history, there's a lot you do just with talking.

My husband enjoys it. He likes to come down and be with people that are interested or who have worked out there [at the test site] and every now and again some older fellow who was in World War II will come in the museum and make known that fact. Floyd was in World War II, so—

Well, I've been very impressed with the kind of support that the museum is getting from former test site workers. There's a pride in coming together as volunteers It shows that there's good morale, really, really good morale.

Well, I wish more people would offer to help. Maybe because they don't realize that they can do it. But it's been good to us. It has. With all of its faults, it's been good to us.

Well, I really appreciate your sharing your time with me.

Well, I'm happy to do it.

I think you've gone through my list of questions and if there's anything else you would like to say—

No. That was my opportunity to 'fess up.

OK.

[00:38:07] End Track 2, Disk 2.

[End of interview]