

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

Interview with
Inas Williams

March 26, 2004
Las Vegas, Nevada

Not Available
Online

Interview Conducted By
Yonna Polehn

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Produced by:

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

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

Yonna Polehn: *OK, we're going to go ahead and get started. Can I have your full name?*

Inas Williams: Inas Eleanor Williams.

OK, and your date of birth?

January 25, 1936.

OK, and your place of birth.

It's a small town. They don't even have it—there's no sign for it, anymore. It was a little mining town west and north of Gallup, New Mexico. The name of the town was Allison, but they don't even have a sign or anything up about it anymore. They've built all the way around it now, so—

OK, and what year did you meet Mr. Williams?

My sister introduced us. My sister was Ernie's [Ernest Williams] boss's secretary. Do I need to tell this whole story, what I did, how I got—?

Oh, you can go ahead and just kind of, you know, if you want, just kind of tell me kind of like how you met and, you know, things like that so—now, this was Ernie's boss at the Nevada Test Site?

No, at AEC [Atomic Energy Commission] in Albuquerque, New Mexico. And she had him up at her house for supper, and so she said, I want you to come up later to see him for dessert, so I did. That's how I met him. And first of all she said, There's two guys that are single in the office and, she says, if this Bud Moore calls you first, she says, hold it off and I want you to talk to Ernie Williams. So that's how it started.

OK, great. Now were you working at this time or did you live at home when you met Ernie?

I was working at the telephone company, AT&T [American Telephone and Telegraph] telephone company.

OK. Now what year did you and Ernie get married?

December 27, 1959.

OK. Now were you living at Las Vegas at the time when you first met Mr. Williams?

No, we lived in Albuquerque.

OK. All right now, how soon after you met Mr. Williams did he tell you he worked in that field like, research and, you know, associated with like nuclear testing?

Oh gosh, let's see. He had come back to Albuquerque in 1958, I think he said—no, not 1958, excuse me. I'm sorry. I forgot when it was.

Oh, that's OK. That's OK.

But after we got married, then he told what he was doing, and that was December, and in February our daughter was born—on Valentine's Day—and so then it was after that he went over to Christmas Island in 1962. February of '62.

OK, so that's in 1962 he had to leave for the first time while you were married?

Yes.

OK. Now once he left and stuff like that, were you curious as to where he was going? Were you aware of where he was going?

Yes, he told me where it would be, and he said he didn't know how long he would be there, so just before he left—let's see, he left in February 1962—and before he left we had gotten a trailer, and so he moved it in my mother's back yard so that I could be there with her, and Teresa, our oldest daughter, and I could be there together. So later on, after he'd been over there from February, in May he called me on a ham line and told me what he was doing. And I said, oh,

OK, but he didn't really say very much about it. I didn't know anything about it until, oh gosh, [00:05:00] it's been at least five, six years after we were married that I knew what he was doing. If I'd've known that, I'd have really been scared, what he was doing, you know. But other than that, he came back in, yes, 1962 he left and he came back in June the thirtieth, I think it was, and we moved the trailer to Vegas.

OK, so during the period that he was gone, you had to take on certain responsibilities. Would you like to kind of describe the things you had to do since Ernie was so far away?

Yes. Well, we had the trailer parked in the back and so when he called me in May and he said he might be able to come home in June, end of June, and then he says, They're going to ship me back to Las Vegas. So I said well, the swamper that we had on top of the motor home wasn't working, so I had to go get another one, and they came out, and after he got home he put it on top. I mean put it all together. And then we moved here and then, let's see, Teresa was, she was a year old in February. He didn't get to see her first birthday anyway; he had to leave then. So then after that, like you say, I had to learn to do all this other stuff. We lived in the house, and so my mother was there still. And so she helped me with showing me how to do all this other stuff, you know. But it was a real lot of learning, you know.

So what were kind of like your emotions, you know, when you first realized you had to take on certain responsibilities that typical young brides might not have to do? How did you feel?

Well, I was a little scared, a little unfamiliar, and then my mother said, Well, you've got to learn. You know this. You took all that stuff in school. So I did, and his check, when it would come in, then that's when I could go get things that we needed for the trailer, to bring it ready to come to Vegas. So, getting a swamper and the license plates for the car and the trailer, and let's see—

So what it was, was that when Ernie came back you moved to Las Vegas, so you were taking on, you know, those type of responsibilities. Now how did you kind of feel about having to do stuff that traditionally your husband would have done? You know, what type of stuff did you have to do besides, you know, getting licensing ready and things like that?

Yes, well, I think I just kind of remembered what he did, how he did it or something, and then I would try to get it that way. And the neighbors across the street from us had been very good, special friends across the street, and the son and I grew up together. Mr. Horner was his name, Charles Horner, and he helped come—and I had to get another car—so helped me a lot picking out one. And then after that why, I was working out at the—no, I had quit the telephone [00:10:00] company in 1960 before our daughter was born. So it was hard. I take it back. He had had a trailer and we got another, bigger one before we came out here, so I'm going backwards on this. I'm sorry.

Oh, that's OK.

But it was a big deal to learn how much you could spend and save for your bills, and it taught me a lot of stuff. I mean, you know, how to do it. It didn't seem to bother me until I found out where he was at and what he was doing. I didn't know that till way after he'd come home. And after he moved us out here, he went back over there and he didn't get back till after Labor Day in September. So that was a lot of things to know what to do. And he no sooner got here—we had moved here and the only place we could park the trailer was in Henderson at the Ballerina Trailer Park. And so things went *kaput*, the water lines and everything had froze up, so I helped him with that, get that stuff together so he could do it when he got home in July, because he got to stay until the eleventh, I think, tenth or the eleventh of July. So he had to work fast and get all that stuff together and fix that up. And then eventually, after he came back, why we moved out to

Lone Mountain Road. The people that owned that motor home park out there put it in. After we'd moved there, they put a new—so then we learned more stuff to do and we did it.

So when you guys had to move to Las Vegas did you feel a bit more comfortable having to deal with these certain responsibilities, especially once you knew he had to leave again?

Yes, because the park that we were in—in fact, my mother came to help me with our daughter. She'd come from Fresno, California and then she come to here and she said, I think you've went to Hell. This is the hottest place I've ever been in. And the day she came in, it was 117 degrees outside. So she had come and lived and stayed with us till he came back. But I guess I just learned a lot of stuff as to how to take care of everything, you know. And then after he got home in September, we took a two weeks' vacation to go back to his home and see his folks, so—

So does that mean you had a lot of family support?

Yes.

And how did you feel, you know, being able to have family with you?

It was great because she [Teresa] was so little. The summertime was very hot so we always stayed in the house where we had the swampers on, you know, then and it helped. But I appreciated my mother coming to see—she came when she [Teresa] was born in Albuquerque and then when she came back to be with us after we'd moved to Vegas. So I was glad to have her there with us. And I guess we just stayed in the house as much as we could because it was so hot. And then after he got home, then I think Mother—that was August and then she went back home in September after we—I think she left before Ernie got home from Christmas Island so—

[00:15:00] *OK, and how old was your daughter and how long had you and Ernie been married by the time he got back that first time?*

Let's see, we were married in 1959 and so she was born in February of '61, so that's only a couple of years. And then [we] moved out here. So we've been out here since 1962.

And why did the two of you have to move to Las Vegas?

They transferred him back to Las Vegas, and we lived at Ballerina in Henderson. And he had to be down to the old—on Highland there was a big DOE building there, or was it—let's see, DOE was third—yes—no, DOE. And then it was ERDA [Energy Research and Development Administration]—I forgot what the initials mean, but he had to drive down to—he drove the car to Highland and then he would catch the bus from there. He had to be down there by six o'clock. And then he would go out to the test site. And it was a long—over twelve hours by the time he got there and got back, worked out there.

And what did you do in a typical day while Ernie was away at work?

Oh, do things with our daughter and keep the trailer cleaned and pay bills and that stuff. I still do that. I always take them to the post office, you know, all my bills anymore. And so just about anything, you know. We didn't know very many people, only one couple that he introduced us to. And that was—I lost his name—Bill and Peggy Kinder. And he worked with the DOE too. And Ernie had known him earlier in working there. So—

So you only met another wife that was associated with another test site worker.

Yes.

Kind of describe your friendship. Was there any connection considering that your husbands did the same jobs?

Yes. They've been very good friends all these years too. And then after we'd come back from vacation, then the McGuires, was their name, she had worked out at the test site for years. And so then she asked us if we wanted to move out to their place, because Bill and Peggy had lived

out there in a trailer, then they got a house, and then we moved out there. And then that's when they started to build the RV park because it was just acres out there. And so they let us move out there, and then eventually they moved us off to the side because they were going to start all the equipment work of making the trailer park. And so, the McGuires then, we stayed there and lived there, and in August of 1963 we'd bought a house. And while it was building we put our trailer up for sale. And we sold it sooner than we expected, and so the people that bought it said that they would trade where they were, in an apartment, and they would take the trailer. So that's what we did. We moved in there, the apartment. They had one more month of payment, and so that's what we exchanged. They paid for the rest of the month of September while we were waiting for [00:20:00] the house to be built. And so after that, then, it made it easier for Babe [Ernie] to get on the bus to go out to the test site.

So you guys didn't have a car at this time?

Yes, we had a Belvedere, Plymouth. And let's see, I think we got another car, a station wagon, after that.

So then when it came time for Babe, he went, let's see, Ernestine was born in September, so we finished living in the trailer till October the fifth, is when we got to be moved in our house. So then if I needed a car that day, then generally he would ride with a neighbor next door that worked out there, so he would take to ride with him to catch the bus, or he would take him all the way out there and then he would catch the bus back at home time.

So with the car you needed to do like, you know, daily tasks.

Yes.

And what type of stuff would you do on average?

At the time they had a—it was called First National Bank then. I had to go clear down on Gass—if you know where that is, downtown—go way down there with the kids. And they went with me, and they were very good kids, girls, it was all three girls. By 1965 our third daughter was born.

And so then he went to—let's see, I think he had to go somewhere for—I've forgotten what it was he had to do. I guess it says on there what he did after [sound of pages turning]. No. *OK, well, you know what? Why don't we talk about, you know, your children and what it was like, you know, having to, for a certain amount of time, kind of raise your daughters on your own. Did you want to, you know, explain your experiences and perhaps even your daughters and how they felt?*

Yes. Well, I don't think they really understood—well, the oldest one probably did, but she didn't really know what it was all about either. And all I know is, he was at a desk out there and, you know, I never knew he had went out to see all these tests. And later on he's told me that he was in seventy-two implosions; he had seen seventy-two of them. And so it was the usual thing: take them to the doctor. At that time we still had a doctor, a real super doctor, out in Henderson that we would always go, so that was from Hobart clear out there to Henderson clinic and that would take them—and he was a very good doctor. If one of them was really badly sick with something, then he gave us enough medicine for the other two, if they would by chance had gotten sick or something with the flu and stuff. And—

So was that hard for you if the children got sick and it was just you without Ernie at certain times?

Yes. And eventually when he got back I'd tell him and so then he would help, show me what I had to do on paperwork—how much it cost to pay for, then, doctors and that stuff. And then,

let's see, Teresa had gotten real bad and I had her in the hospital. And I just hated it because they didn't let me go back in the back with her, but she had a clog in her bowels; it was stopped, and so they had to really work with her to get her to have some movements and stuff. And then it was [00:25:00] a kidney; she had a kidney infection. So it was scary to me.

And where was Ernie at this time? Was he—?

He was still working, but some days he couldn't get off. It depended on how many days he could take off, because for every, let's see, every week or two weeks, or once a month, if you saved up some of your days for something that you had to go to, then otherwise you had to build up the days for anything else that you would have to go on, you know.

OK, well, this time when your daughter was sick, did you have any family or was it just you and your children for support?

Well, my mother happened to be there with us. She came in again to see us and be with us. And yes, she was there. She took care of our second daughter and our third daughter at that time while I was at the hospital watching her [Teresa] and taking care of her. So other than that, then he would go with me when after supper we would go back and check on her.

Oh yes, I can imagine. Now how did this affect your marriage, I mean with Ernie being away and you having to raise your daughters on your own?

I don't know because, you know, he was always there when something would go wrong, and it was the same way, it still is the same way. If something goes wrong, I have to be the "bad news bearer" of it, you know, I have to tell him what's going wrong. And he was always there and he always comes in at the right time. So it's hard when you expect that maybe sometimes, you know. And then he doesn't get there so I have to wait then until he can get home if he's had to stay out there longer. And sometimes he's had to go to Washington with some stuff. And then he

was on a grand jury, and that was—I think he was on there over a month, off and on there. So that was nerve-wracking because it was about one of the—I'm trying to think, I forgot who it was, that it was a grand jury—but he got to call up there to get a special paper written about they were thinking these people—it these people were talking about getting too much radiation.

Yes, and what year was this?

In, let's see, 1972? Or '76. I've forgotten, that that happened, and he was on there, it was a long time, and the majority of the jurors would be testifying and the racketeers, or I mean the—what are they called when they used to be here? They would watch and if you told something that wasn't supposed to have been said or was said that was right, then they would—it was scary because, you know, at that time they could come in and shoot people.

Did you know what was going on at the time, you know, as it was happening or—?

Yes, a little bit, but he couldn't talk to me too much about it, so—

Now were you curious?

Yes, especially when he comes in and says, you know, I have to be very careful. I can't talk to you and tell you that much what's going on. And so I said, OK, you will when you can. And he said yes, he would, so—

Was there any part of you that wanted to keep on asking more questions?

[00:30:00] No, you know, sweetie, I just took it for granted that with all the stuff he was doing, which I didn't know all of what it was that he was really doing until after he retired in 1986. And I was working at the Stardust at that time, and so then we both quit. When he retired, I did too. And so I just took for granted that if it was going to be something bad that he would be getting into, radiation or anything, I didn't even realize, you know, what it would do. Nor did they, when

they were having all the tests way out there in the islands, Marshall Islands and Enewetak and Christmas Island and it was scary.

So let's kind of go back a little bit, you know, as a young bride and a young mother and stuff.

How often when Ernie was away did you actually talk to him?

Oh, he was very good at writing letters all the time, and then he would get to talk on the ham radio, and that would go from—one time it was from the Marshall Islands to San Francisco.

Somebody picked him up there and then they called me and it was really good to hear his voice for once, you know.

Was it a surprise when you would hear from him? Would it be expected or—?

Yes, in some of his letters he would say he would try to call me on a certain day and that I would be there then.

Were there ever times that you missed a call, you know, when he was supposed to call?

Well, yes, and by that time a letter would've come as to why he couldn't get through, that some of the ham operators around the world didn't get to pick him up or, you know, had that problem with getting a call through. And then after that, well then I just couldn't believe how far away he was. I was watching the map, you know, as to where he was at, put little stick points in it, you know, where he was at again, you know. And the girls, they liked to do that; they thought that was neat to find where Daddy was, so far away. But other than that, I just took [it] for granted. I guess it was a bad thing to do because he was a worrywart about always worrying about stupid things, you know, about him, where he's at and all that. But he always had a good letter and he would tell what they would do on weekends or their day off and that helped, to see what he was doing there on that. But they would work twelve hours a day out there with the paperwork he

was doing. And I don't know what else because he was in charge of building and constructing, getting the stuff ready for the shots is my understanding and—

At that time did you kind of have the details as to what they were doing on the island, or—

No.

What did he say that he was doing?

Paperwork. I think that's what he always did say, he was doing a lot of paperwork. So that's why I didn't think he was even that—radiation or—but he always had done that job from, let's see, what did he say, 1958? He was out there in '58, I think it was, and then he came back and then he was shipped to Kirtland Air Force—or Sandia; it was both Kirtland and Sandia down there at Albuquerque.

Now there were times that you said earlier that there were things that he says, Oh no, I can't tell you. How did you feel? Did you want to ask him more questions?

Yes.

I said, Well, are you going to be all right? you know, or Is it going to be very dangerous?

Well, I just can't tell you now. [He said]

And I said, That means you are.

And he said, Never mind, he said, I'll be all right. I'm OK.

[00:35:00] *Besides being, you know, wife in the sense, you know, you having your feelings, how did you in turn kind of explain as to, you know, why Ernie was away or, you know, what, you know, Daddy does, and things like that? Did you explain to them?*

Yes, only what I could say, you know, that I really didn't know all of what he was doing, and so they would say, well—they'd get to read—he'd write to them but, well really it was only Teresa that was the oldest as where—she didn't—she was so little. But since he went in 1991—he went

for a whole week of schooling for when the Russians come in, so he had to go learn about the treaty between the Russians and the United States, he had to learn all of that.

Didn't he tell you at the time what he was doing or where he was going?

Yes.

Were you curious or fascinated?

Yes, I thought wow, that's a big deal. He says, Yes, honey, he said, I had to learn a lot of stuff and a lot of paperwork. And so he wouldn't call only every other day while he was gone, and it would be later in the evening because he had to take this book home and read a lot of stuff.

And this was in 1991?

Yes.

OK. Kind of going a little bit, you know, back to your early years, and as, you know, a young wife and mother, was there any time that you kind of wished you were more a part of that aspect of his life?

Yes. Yes. Because he did so much traveling to all the islands and I wanted to go out there and meet him at Hawaii but he said No, I don't get in to Hawaii. Only if we go back home, then we stop there and then get on another plane to come home that way. So I just said, Well, I'll see you when you get here then, I guess. I'd have to wait.

Yes. So what was kind of, for example, one of the longest periods that he was away?

Was right after we were married. Let's see, he left in February of 1962 and Teresa turned one year old on February 14.

So he was away when she had her birthday.

Yes. And I hated it because he left early that morning—her birthday was on a Wednesday and I think he left on a Tuesday. So we didn't get to see him or only hear from him once in a while on the ham phones, you know. So that was on Mother's Day and again in June as to what time he thought he would be home. And then we would move the trailer out here to Las Vegas then, in late June.

Yes. And during this period didn't he miss birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, I mean, and how did you kind of feel?

Oh no, he just missed her first birthday, and then after that, let's see, after we moved out here, then I got pregnant with our second daughter and she was born in September. So other than that, sweetie—now I wished I really would've bugged him more about it, you know, but—

Yes. Yes. But during that time—?

Yes.

Now given the time period, was there any part of you that kind of felt that was your, kind of like your duty or responsibility as both a wife and mother?

Yes, it was. It was a load because, well, I didn't go back to work. I quit with the telephone company after we got married, in June of 1960, so I didn't go back to work until '78 then. And **[00:40:00]** other than that—that was the longest he'd been away.

Was in the early years of your marriage?

Yes. And I had to learn a lot.

Well, did you kind of want to, you know, just maybe give me a little more detail of some more of the responsibilities, like daily, you know, what different aspects of the household and financial responsibilities you took care of? During this period when was gone, that long period.

Yes. Well, just the usual stuff. If something went wrong I would either call a friend, if he could fix whatever went wrong, or something like that. But it was just making sure that you had the money in the bank for whatever else that would come up that would happen, you know, and that was hard to do because the girls needed something, clothes or something when they started school.

So did you have to take on financial responsibilities?

Yes. With the girls on—let's see, when we got the house that was one of the things we checked, was to how close the elementary and junior high and high school was, and that was one thing about it; we were two miles from high school. So by the time I would take them to school, or walk them to school for first grade or elementary, and then the little ones would come back with me. I mean just walk Teresa, and then all three of them, and then Warren wasn't born until 1971, so it was after that then, in 1978, that I started back to work again, so—

But during this time you were, you know, a housewife, financial manager, and handyman, is that kind of what you were?

Yes.

But was there ever any time that you might've had a, you know, an incident like, you know, something was broken and you didn't have anyone to call? What did you have to do and stuff?

I just usually called help for somebody. And we had met—in 1963, we started a church, Westminster Presbyterian Church, and so the people that we all happened—down the street was another family that their names were Jerry and Phyllis Donelson, and they were from New Mexico. And so we wanted to find out, you know, who they were because we were both from Albuquerque at the time, and that's who I'd call, one or the other of them, if we needed help or if

they needed help. And it comes to find out right now, there were six or seven couples of us from the church that have stuck together ever since.

Oh really? Did you want to maybe explain like, you know, during this time period, kind of like what, since you and these women had things in common, what type of things you did? Did you kind of share experiences and, you know, emotions with your husbands being away?

Yes. Phyllis was and still is a super lady, and I feel more closer to her as a sister than I would my own sisters, because they all lived in California. And the “Dirty Dozen” we call ourselves. We’re close and that’s who we would all call on, is our people from the church and that stuff. And other than that, why, if I couldn’t fix it then I had to wait till he come back. But some of it wasn’t real bad, that I can think of anyway right now. I know I remember the time when Teresa was in the hospital, had to go to the hospital, that I was scared, that stuff. And you could [00:45:00] hear her screaming, what they had to do to help her, and it scared me a lot. My mother was sitting out there with the other two girls and then the next time, that night, well then whenever Ernie got home, well then we would go back down there and see and check on her. But that was the only worst, bad thing so far that I had had to deal with. But other than that, whenever things would go wrong, why, let’s see, I can’t think of any—we would just tell our scrapes and bumps and grinds that we had to go through, you know.

Well, you mentioned that, you know, when Ernie was away, that your oldest daughter was very young. Now as time went on, when they got older, was Ernie still traveling and, you know, leaving at that time?

No, he didn’t have as much to do up until 1991, because he had retired in 1986, so they asked him to come back in and help with this grand jury problem. Other than that, we’ve all been doing all right.

So Ernie was only there when, you know, your daughters were born and—

Yes. The second daughter, we still lived out at the trailer park when I got pregnant with Ernestine, the second daughter, why, that's when we decided we had to find a house. Because the trailer was the bedroom and then they had a first bedroom, and the two of them would be small, would be not enough room for both of them for later on in years when they get older to play, you know. And other than that, why she was born in September and then we moved in our house October the fifth. But they were very good. They'd never be too curious, only when, well, when's Daddy coming home? you know. Other than that, that's all I can think of, the most things that was trying on you sometimes.

Oh, "trying." Did you want to kind of elaborate on, you know, what you kind of mean or how you felt when they would ask you, you know, where he is?

Yes, they would, and I said, well, as far as I know he's either on his way to another island or something like that, or he's having to work late for something. And then when he'd come in, why, then they would have their tussle with one another, you know, he would play with them. But I always had supper ready for him when he'd come home. And so then they would have their talks together, and it was mainly he had to do all the big school—when they got up in junior high and all that—he was always the one that had to do a lot of the math and English stuff. But I was glad that he didn't have to go back out there for a long time. But they still had him out there at the test site some.

OK, well, and I wanted to ask you a question on, were there times when, I noticed in the video he mentioned that he on occasion got stuck at the test site. Was he able to call you or was there any time?

Yes, he would say that if the wind didn't get too high winds, then they would have the test at 4:30 in the morning but, he said, otherwise I should be home later in the morning, or I'll be there till the next night. So then they would put him up in the barracks, or not barracks, but they're rooms, they had room out there for people for overnights.

Was there ever a time when he wasn't able to call you and he had to stay a day or two without being able to contact you?

[00:50:00] Yes. Well, you know what, if one of the other guys got to call their wives, then they would call me and let me know that they was going to have a big test.

You mean kind of like a network?

Yes. Yes, the wife would—like Peggy Kinder—although Bill wasn't out there, but some other friends that he worked with, their wives would call and let me know that they're going to have a test and he would be out there late, till probably the next night to come home. If it didn't go off, then they would come home. But usually if the test didn't go off, then they would wait till the next night or next morning.

Kind of like in the idea of, you know, having like a support or a network. Did you do the same for the other wives?

Yes. Yes, we all did. And they were like the rest of us, I guess. Some of them knew what they were doing and some didn't know. Most of us new people didn't know, when he first went out to the islands and that stuff. But we had some super friends, and his bosses were all very great and really nice to us to letting us know too.

So was it helpful having this type of network of other wives who understood?

Yes.

Would you kind of want to, you know, kind of elaborate a little bit?

Yes, they would say, *Now don't worry, it's not going to be really anything too tragic or too serious, that it's just their usual tests that they would be doing.* And they said they'd be there; if I needed her or anything like that, to let them know. If I had trouble with something, why, let them know and they would come and do it. Because they'd usually be way out there where they didn't have a phone till they got back to the office.

Now given the fact that you knew you lived in Las Vegas and you were able to see when the bombs went off, what was going through your mind, knowing that Ernie was there at the time?

Oh, they had program before we got there—well, after we got there, I guess it was, and I didn't know that till later on. But down on Main Street where one of the offices—the offices they first started at, before they moved over on Highland, it was on Main Street—and they would have a special light that would be red or green, I think it was. And if they were going to have a test that day, and if you saw one or the other of those lights on, then you knew they was going to have a test. And then sometimes you would be able to see this—if you were outside and you had a clear enough vision to where you could see it—you could see some of the implosion of the cloud that it made. You could see it sometimes, but I never got to. But when we'd been in the house, you could see it as it was—they told on the early news, radio, that they were going to have a test that day and so that they would clear out some of the people up in the higher hotels and buildings. And so other than that, you could feel the rumble in your house and see the plants hanging up and swinging, and the lights.

Oh yes. Well how did you feel knowing that Ernie was there at that time? What were you feeling, knowing that at the exact same time the test was going on and then Ernie was in the area?

I just thought, oh God, I hope he calls me pretty soon to let me know that it's OK, you know. And he did. Sometimes he could and sometimes the other ones, they couldn't tell you till they

got home that night. And then they would usually get a report on the news that the test was good, it was a good one, it didn't have any radiation leak or anything, is what they were [00:55:00] always anxious about to hear on the radio. But I didn't realize it. I just, you know, I think sometimes I was so damned dumb I didn't stop and think about how serious it really was. Because he never seemed to be serious—I mean not serious, but he never—if it was going to be a good shot or not, he would tell me, you know. And then I said, Oh my God, you weren't in the area, were you, or anything? And he said, No, I wasn't that close to it this time. But other than that, I just didn't realize of all the stuff he was into.

Was it because he told you that he only did like paperwork that you didn't really want to ask the question?

Yes. Yes, that's it. He was always very good to let me know afterwards, because he says, I know how you are and you just got to stop worrying about all that stuff. But like you say, I think I just never expected it to be so dangerous. And later on in years he said that, you know, it was really tests and we never realized some people would get hurt, what it would do to you.

And what part of your marriage, or how long were you guys married when he told you what he was actually doing?

Oh, let's see. I think it was after he retired.

Did you ask questions? Were you kind of curious as to what he did?

Yes.

I said, Well, was all those things, you kept telling me you were doing paperwork, was that what you were doing?

And he says, Yes, all right, that's right.

I said, Now you tell me. I'm glad I didn't know it then, I guess.

He said, Well, I was down in the trenches for some of those.

And he's got some neat stories all about them, you know.

So when you describe the stories and stuff, did you ask him any questions or did you really want to kind of find out like for example in your early marriage and stuff like that, did you ask him about it?

No, because like I said, I just took for granted because he never seemed like he was shaken up by any of this stuff, you know. I guess that was probably a good thing because I would've went into orbit if I'd known he'd done all that.

Well, after he retired, did you ask questions over the time period when he was away for so long?

Yes. Only time he would really say a lot about is if we were visiting. If people'd come over and visit with us, or relatives come in from out of town, they would ask him a lot of questions and then he would tell. And I said, You never told me that, you know. So that's about the only time that he would tell and answer a lot of questions, which I never knew what to say as to some of it.

Oh yes, so kind of like, you know, staying, you know, after he retired and when he would talk about those stories, would you ask him any more questions?

Yes.

I said, Well, you never told me that before.

And he says, well, I couldn't tell you some of those before.

And I said, Well, you weren't hurt or in danger and nobody else was?

And he said, No.

He's just an encyclopedia. He just knows and remembers so much stuff, it's unreal. And I guess I just never got riled up about it until that. And now he can tell and I'll ask him about, well, what

about this? and he said, No, that wasn't, you know, this did it this way, or something, or they had to do it a certain other way than what they would do. But he says, other than that—

[01:00:00] *When you were asking, you know, after he retired, when you were asking questions about what he did in the early years of your marriage, did you ever feel that, you know, you wished you would've known at that time what he was doing?*

Yes, and I would say, Well, when did that happen again? And he would tell me, so then I would say, Well, how come you couldn't tell me that before? And he said, Because it was too big. And I said—well, I don't know, I guess I just wasn't really thinking a lot about it.

So now, do the two of you sit and talk about what happened? Do grow kind of a bit more curious now that you know what he did and you guys kind of take the time to talk?

Yes, and he can tell me all of which—we've got the videotape of some of the implosions and where they were all at, and that was what I would say: How close were you to that? you know. And he would tell me which one it was, which implosion it was, everything. And I said, Oh gosh, that gives me the chills when I see them. They're so beautiful to be so bad, you know, those beautiful implosions, and all the books and stuff that they show now. And I think, God, I'm glad. It just scares you to death. And other than that, we'll show one of them when people come and they'll ask him a lot of questions and I'll learn a little bit more. But I don't think it sinks in, right? So anyway, sometimes you hear it so much that—I'm probably not very good help, helping you get this story.

Oh no! Oh no! Actually this is wonderful. You've answered, oh, all of my questions. I'll be honest, this is really helpful, and because, you know, I'm here to know your experiences and

what you were doing at that time. No, I actually find this very, very fascinating because it's important, very important, to know what you were doing because you held the house together and stuff like that.

Yes. Yes, it was. It was really interesting, and I couldn't wait till he got home at night to see how his day was, you know, doing—but I guess I just never was scared till I've seen all the pictures and the videos and that stuff now.

Well, OK, see, the wife now has to make the decisions that Ernie normally would. How did you feel about having to make those specific decisions and stuff from the time you first got married to when he retired?

You know what, if I couldn't talk to him and ask him about what should I do on this, then he just—sometimes he would—when he did call he says, well honey, you just have to make your own judgment, and if it's wrong it's fine; if it's not, I mean—

Oh, how did you feel when Ernie told you that you did have to make your own decisions? What was your reaction and what did you do?

Well, I just said, This is what I did, and if it's wrong I'm sorry, I did another boo-boo, or something like that, you know. But I said at the time when it needed to have to be given an answer to, I said that's all I could do is think what I think was the right way to do it or the way to do it, so—otherwise—or I would call somebody, you know, that knew to see,

Would this be a good idea or should I do the other way?

And they said, Well, whatever you think Ernie would do it.

And I said, OK.

So then I'd make a decision that way. So other than that, I don't know. Sometimes I did.

Now was—because you said that you were living in New Mexico when you first got married and shortly after you moved to Las Vegas. Was there a big difference, you know, in the responsibilities you did when you were in New Mexico to when you were in Las Vegas?

[01:05:00] Yes, because, let's see, I was twenty-two or twenty-three, so I didn't know nothing other than when I was working and know what I could do with my *own* money. And now for sure, when we get married and have all these other things that's come up, well, you just learn and ask if he thinks this is a good idea to do it this way or that way. And—

Was there a big difference in responsibilities from the time you were in New Mexico to when you were in Las Vegas?

I'm sorry, honey, it isn't what I said, what I answered your question right. Yes, it was, because it was after we moved here, then he had to go back out to the islands again, so that was. There were a lot of decisions you had to make on your own if he wasn't there.

Now when you first met Ernie and you were living in New Mexico, do you kind of think that, you know, if you would've known what he actually did, would that have affected anything?

No, I don't think so, because at the time he was doing the book work so, you know, that's all I remember until he gave me the notice that they called him and gave him the notice. Of course he was at work that day when they called him and said they needed him back out at the islands. And then he comes home and tells me. I said, wait a minute, this is not enough time to get together what we're supposed to do. So other than that, you just took over.

How quickly did you have to go from New Mexico to Las Vegas, and what was the time frame?

Well, after he left in '62, February 1962. Then in the letters he would send he said that we may have to be moving back, wanting me back to go back to Albuquerque. Because he got out of the service out at Nellis [Air Force Base] in 1955 out here [Las Vegas, Nevada], and so then he was

here and he retired from the service on January 11 and he started working the seventeenth out at Mercury then, of 1955. And he was budget and what is the other called? Budget and books anyway, did all that stuff. So he just let me know in February and then later, like I said, he was telling me that when we get back from vacation, then he said, I'll be back in Vegas.

And how did you kind of feel when you were reading this letter?

Oh, I thought wow, this'll be great! I thought, because we lived in Farmington, New Mexico as far as raised more out there, but when it was cold weather, when it was wintertime, it was real hard winters. And so when he come out here I thought, this is great, I can keep warm now!

[laughter] And then after we met a lot more people with who he works with, then it was great. It really made you feel at home again. So we've been here since '62, so that's a lot of years. Forty-two years.

Well, you mentioned earlier in the interview that you had the trailer and, you know, there wasn't a lot of people around and things like that. How did you feel, you know, kind of living in—at that time?

Well, I think it was just making friends with a lot of people, and there was only two that I know of at the time—no, three, three people on the street that worked out there at Mercury that we got—was friends with them. So I think just once we got established in our home and meeting [01:10:00] people on the street and everything, why, it was great.

Well, what were you thinking when you, like the first couple of days that you did come to Las Vegas, how did you feel? What were you kind of thinking and things like that with coming to a new area and—?

Oh, let's see, well, I think the climate made a difference in that we didn't have to worry about snow like we were in Albuquerque, and how close some of the stuff was to you, where you had

to go do your shopping or your banking, and to me that was a lot of help. And I think not having to work, that I got to stay home with the children as long as I did get to stay, because the majority, a lot of people were still having to work two jobs, or the husband and wife had to work both jobs. So I think it was just meeting people that what their husband were doing out at the test site and stuff like that too.

So you were the only one of the friends that was a stay-home mom and didn't work?

Yes.

OK. Oh, we have about looks like five minutes on the tape and then I'll just kind of go ahead and change the disk. I just wanted to let you know.

Oh, OK, sweetie. And that's fine. I don't know if I've been any help or not to you but—

Oh no! I've enjoyed it. This has been great!

Well, you'll probably get better stories from other wives and—

Oh no! Well, each woman has a unique experience and, you know, yours is unique. Just like you said, you were the only one that didn't have to work, so your experience is unique in that sense out of the group of, you know, people you knew. So yes, each experience is great because it's yours and stuff. No, I've enjoyed it! I have.

OK. Good. I'm glad, honey. I kind of went backwards on some of that information stuff that probably—

That's OK. But no, like I was saying, your experience is really important to the project because we want to know how wives felt, you know, during this time period because your experience is unique. And a lot of people when they write about women, it's normally during World War II.

Well, even though we are doing the Nevada Test Site and we're talking to a lot of workers and

lot of men who worked there, and women, the wives are very important because they're the ones who stayed home and they kept the family intact.

That's right. Yes. It was great. I've enjoyed everyone that we've met—and we still have a lot of friends that went through all of it too—so I really liked Vegas a lot. Not so much now, it's gotten so big, but at the time it was really neat. And we've had some super doctors that was great.

Well, going back to the fact that you were the only one that didn't work, why was that then, everyone else worked but you didn't?

Well, I think Ernie wanted me to stay home with them for a while, and so I did. Like I said, I didn't get to go back to work, or I had to go back—I went back to work in 1979. And I got a job—Phyllis Donelson was the second in position of working at Woolworth's downtown, and I worked there for a year. And then our third daughter when she started to get married, why, her mother-in-law and father-in-law asked if I would like to go to a different job, and that was at the Stardust. So I did. I got to work there three years to the day, and then I retired when Babe did, or Ernie did.

You know, I've got to stop for a minute because I just wanted to go ahead and change CDs, OK? OK, honey.

[01:14:47] End Track 3, Disk 1.

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

All right, do you have more questions?

Oh no, well, what you were talking about before about working and stuff like that, but I wanted to kind of find out a bit more about the time period when you weren't working. How did you feel? Was it, you know, easier or harder? What was kind of your reaction to staying home rather than going out to work?

Oh, I enjoyed it, being home, because I was with the girls. And then after I got pregnant with our son, why, Ernie took a week off and he built an addition above the garage and we made the garage into a dining room. And then he put two bedrooms and a bath upstairs there, so each one of the four had their own bedroom. And he made sure of that so that they would have their own room, because he said he got tired of hearing, well, it was her fault, not mine. She didn't clean her side of the room, you know, all that stuff. But I really enjoyed being home with the kids, and I would take them to school and go get them and that stuff, too, so I enjoyed that much a lot, being at home. And they were always very good when they were little. If I took them with me to go pay bills, they would sleep from one place to the next, you know. And they were very good. They'd get out and take them in and then come back out and—

So this was the time when Ernie was away and you were kind of being a single mom, right?

Yes. I was.

You didn't have a babysitter or someone to watch the children?

No. Well, our neighbors across the street, we would take turns babysitting for one another. I forgot about that, yes. They would be a lot of help, or their daughters or children. Mostly girlfriends, they would come over and stay with them. But we've had some super neighbors in our area.

Well, was there ever a time that you wanted to be kind of alone and, you know, just like some alone time?

No. I haven't been that way very—you know. Not till later in years so far, you know, but right now we—of three—no, the two oldest ones live within—the oldest daughter lives six miles away and our second daughter lives three miles away, so they're real close. And our son, he lives within a mile-and-a-half from us, so—

Well, during the time period, you know, in 1961 when Ernie was in the Pacific, was there ever any time that you were lonely, you know, with him being gone?

Yes.

How did you kind of feel and—?

Oh, I did a lot of crying probably a lot at night, wishing he was there to help me make some decisions or help with something. Because he was all the time before we were married, I mean he was always there. And I just wished I—I bug him more now, calling him over stupid little things, than I could the other way, I mean when he was far away. But he was always good to let me know either by phone or the letters. But I think he only got to call me twice on the ham phones, and that was always really good. We could only talk maybe about three to five minutes, and you had to wait—you'd say what you say and then you'd say, "Over," and you know how that goes, having to talk, but—

So how many times in that period he was gone, from February until June, you only—?

Yes, and then he went back in September and—yes, it was come back in September and it was over the week after Labor Day weekend, so—

[00:05:00] *Yes. So how many months was he gone?*

Let's see, February, March, April, May, June, five months. And then he left in July, August, and September, another three months.

So there were two separate occasions that he had to leave.

Yes.

So what was the hardest, you know, part during these two periods of him being away?

Oh gosh, I think with our daughter, she was really good but just keeping track of her and thinking, I wish you were here so I could give you my problems, or the things that was going on

that needed to be fixed, you know. So he would just tell me in his letters, whoever you can get a hold of to help you, see if they can do it, you know. And like he said, Do whatever you think is right and see if it'll work. I mean if it does, if it doesn't, that's no problem, he says, I don't have a problem with it.

Now you mentioned previously that there were times when you would cry at night. Was it, you know, mostly when he first left or was it through the whole entire time period he was gone?

Yes, I think the first five months was real hard, and then when he went back, why, by that time we were moved out to Lone Mountain and the people, the McGuires out there, they were very good to help, to be with. They helped me when I was pregnant with Ernestine.

So was Ernie away during the time that you were pregnant?

No. Let's see. Let's see, I got nineteen sixty-two. Yes, 1962, I'd gotten pregnant, got pregnant, and then she was born September 1963.

Oh, OK, so he was during the time, he was gone for a period during your pregnancy.

Yes.

OK. Well—

Yes. Yes, that's when—yes, I'd forgot it was in there.

How did you feel about him being gone while you were pregnant?

I thought, What have I got myself into? No! I just thought, Oh my gosh, I wonder how long this is going to last? How many times is he going to have to do that? But he says, well, however long it takes, or whatever they need me for, he said, that's going to be it. And I said, OK. I'll accept that now then. So it just—

Did it make things a bit more difficult with him being gone, you being pregnant, and raising your daughter?

Yes. Some days it was.

What do you mean? Like on "some days," kind of like, were some days worse than others?

Yes, I think it's the way you felt, you know, when you're pregnant, how you have those days that's not good. Yes, I think that was it. It was just wishing he was there. And other than that, why—

Yes. So yes, because then we moved, like I said, in January, out to Lone Mountain. So we've had a good life together. Very interesting.

OK. Well, thank you very much.

You're welcome, sweetie.

I've enjoyed talking to you and everything.

Me too.

[00:13:17] End Track 2, Disk 2.

[End of interview]