

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

**Interview with**  
**Melva O'Neill**

**July 2, 2004**  
**Las Vegas, Nevada**

Interview Conducted By  
Yonna Polehn

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Produced by:

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## Interview with Melva O'Neill

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

**Yonna Polehn:** *All right, if you can go ahead and start by telling me your name.*

**Melva O'Neill:** My name is Melva O'Neill.

*And your date of birth.*

Is October 21, 1951.

*And your place of birth?*

Carlsbad, New Mexico.

*And where did you grow up?*

I grew up in Carlsbad, New Mexico.

*Can you tell me a little about your family history?*

Of course, my mother and father met in central New Mexico, and married there. They were farmers, and actually my father was farming in the field when they tested Trinity, and he said that it lit up the sky there.

But anyway, they married and moved to Carlsbad. They had a drought. And my father didn't complete high school, so had mediocre jobs. And I grew up in a small home, small house, with five children. I was the next to the oldest.

*Did you want to go ahead and tell me a little bit about your work history?*

My work history? Let's see. I graduated high school, and I worked as a waitress for many years.

And then I took a job as a desk clerk in a motel in 1978 and '79, and it was there that I met

Layton O'Neill. And we married, and I quit that job, and I haven't worked since—well, I've worked at home since then. I have a daughter from a previous marriage.

*And what's her name and age?*

Her name is Amy Karttunen [00:01:50] and at this time she's twenty-eight years old.

*Would you go ahead and tell me a little bit of how you and Mr. O'Neill met.*

I was a desk clerk at a motel in Carlsbad, New Mexico. He was down there on the DOE Gnome Project, to clean up after that test. They were burying everything and cleaning it up. And he was staying at the motel where I was working.

*And it was a cleanup for the project?*

The Project Gnome, yes.

*And what year did you guys get married?*

I met him in July of '79 and we got married in December of '79, because he went back home and we had a long distance telephone relationship. You know, that gets expensive after a while [laughter] so I quit my job and left Carlsbad and moved to Las Vegas.

*You said that you met him while he was working on the Gnome Project. Could you tell me a little bit how you found out, specifically, how you guys—?*

Well, the people from Department of Energy [DOE] were staying at the motel that I was working at, and they would come in shifts, work for about three or four weeks, and then leave. So you knew who the person was coming in, and you knew that they were with DOE, and you also knew already that that's what they were working with the Gnome Project. And so whenever he checked in, I already knew who he was and where he was from.

*So you're already aware of his career?*

Yes.

*Did you guys, when you first met, did you discuss what he did?*

Well, Layton was one of these, he was single and he would just come and sit down at the desk and chat for a while—for a long time—and talk about what he was doing, and about life.

*And how did you feel when you were having all these scientists come in and also knowing what he did? What were your feelings towards the project?*

I had no worries about the project. I really knew nothing about it at that time. I was just beginning to learn.

*Now, after you guys got married, what was he continuing to do with the AEC [Atomic Energy Commission]?*

Well, he had finished the Gnome Project and he was still involved with the cleanup at Johnston Atoll. They were taking turns going out there, so for a month at a time, he would be gone. He'd go to Johnston Atoll and do his job there and then come home.

*So during your marriage, there would be period that he would leave?*

Yes, for a month or so.

*And what exactly were you doing during this time period?*

Well, I would maintain the house and the yard and pay the bills and you know. Just keep up with the life crises that would happen or whatever. But he would call weekly and we [00:05:00] would just talk about what was happening at home, and he'd tell me about what was happening where he was working.

*So how did you feel with him being away? What would it take to manage the household?*

Well, whenever I first moved to Las Vegas from Carlsbad, I had to get over my fear—at that time, I thought it was a big city. It's much bigger now than it was then, but at that time I thought Las Vegas was a big city. So I had to get over my fear of getting out on the streets and learning

the city. I was aware before we ever got married that he would be gone for increments of time, so I was open to that and I made plans accordingly.

*So how soon after you were married did you have to move to Las Vegas?*

Well, I moved to Las Vegas and then we got married; so I had left Carlsbad and came up here and got married.

*And what was the reason why you left Carlsbad?*

Well, because I decided I was going to—Layton and I were going to get married, and the long distance relationship wasn't working. So I made the commitment and left my family and everyone in Carlsbad and moved to Las Vegas.

*And then what were your feelings the first time having to—I mean with it being a big city, leaving your family behind?*

Well, you know, to me, my life has always been an adventure, so to me, I was going on an adventure. I looked forward to that.

*So how soon after you moved to Las Vegas did the two of you get married?*

It was probably about three weeks between our moving here and getting married.

*And how soon after the two of you were married was the first time that he had to leave for a long period?*

I'm trying to think of how long that was. It was probably about year after we got married before his turn came around again for him to be gone.

*And how old was your daughter at the time?*

She was four.

*So was that a little bit harder, having a daughter, a new city, when he left?*

Well, since we were there for about a year, I had become adjusted to the city and to our part of town. And Layton made sure I got acquainted with his friends and people, so I knew people, so I wasn't just alone.

*Now, his friends, did they work for the DOE also?*

Some did, and some were involved with the church that we attend Westminster Presbyterian Church.

*So when he was gone how did you feel when he would leave and you would only have limited contact with him?*

Well, I've always been satisfied. I mean I'm not a clingy kind of person. I've always felt as long as I know where he is and how to get a hold of him if I need to, then I'm satisfied with him being gone.

*Now, would he tell you exactly where he was going when he would leave?*

Yes, I would know where he was going, because at that time he was doing cleanup. He wasn't involved in the testing side, so it wasn't a real big secret what he was doing.

*And what type of cleanup was it, specifically?*

Like at the Johnston Atoll, they did some rocket tests that went awry and they blew up the rockets on the pad, which scattered plutonium and/or uranium all over the ground. So they were cleaning up the ground and buildings.

*Well, were you ever worried about the task that he was doing?*

No.

*Really?*

No. Because see, whenever I met him and married him, he'd already been involved in this career for a good ten, almost fifteen years. And he tells stories of when he was up in Idaho, when he



was married to his first wife, and they had a reactor up there and there was a reactor accident, and he had to enter in at that. He told about the high radioactivity and then coming back out, you know. So he's had exposure before I ever met him. And he was comfortable with his field and he was comfortable with what he was doing. So I sort of take [00:10:00] my lead from that. If he's comfortable with it and not worried, why should I be worried? So I wasn't worried.

*OK. Now when he would leave for those long periods, were you going back to your family? Were you staying in Las Vegas?*

No, I stayed in Las Vegas and just carried on our life as if he were still there. You know, we have our daily routine and we had church on Sunday.

*What was an average while he was away?*

While he was away? Of course, I had the young daughter, so it was getting up, making breakfast, or having breakfast, and taking care of my daughter. Sometimes I would go visit friends, and that was about it. If I had to do shopping, if I needed to do shopping. Paying bills, if it's that time of the month. We were getting paid twice a month, so whenever the paycheck would come in—because our check was on automatic deposit, so you'd know whenever it would come in, so you pay your bills. And the car breaks down, then you have to take it to the shop.

*So when he was leaving, were you finding yourself doing a lot of the tasks that he would do otherwise?*

Right. Right. But since our marriage, my main responsibility was to keep the house going and keep the car going and keep everything going because he was a workaholic. Even whenever he was in town, he would leave for work 7:30, eight o'clock in the morning, and he would not get home till 7:30, eight o'clock at night. So my days were pretty well busy with supporting him,

because he didn't have to come home and take care of business. So I just kept everything going while he was working.

*And what were your feelings about him being a workaholic? Leaving and coming back so late?*

Well, I've always felt like, you know, it's what made him happy. And since I was a stay-at-home wife and mother, I felt like he was supporting us, so I've always done my best to support whatever he did.

*And how many cleanups did he do?*

Well, that was probably the last. Johnston Atoll was the last one that he was involved in. He was involved in others before I met him. Enewetak and then, of course, Gnome, and then also up in Colorado. He was there for cleanup at a couple of shots there. But those were before I met him.

*And then how many times during your marriage was he having to leave you and your daughter?*

For several years, they were still doing underground tests out at the Nevada Test Site, and they'd take turns, in his office, going out and covering the shots, and sometimes it would be his turn. Most of those were like overnight outings. So after he was finished with the Johnston Atoll project, mostly, it was just overnight. And sometimes they went to Washington, D.C. for meetings for a week or two.

*What were you doing during that time period when he would leave for more than—?*

I would just maintain the house. I would clean the house, buy the groceries, you know. Mow the lawn. I just was a stay-home housewife.

*There's nothing wrong with that.*

That's right. You know, it's like any other kind of job. You have tasks that you do every day, but you don't really think about.

*Now, did the two of you have children?*

No. He had had five children in previous marriages and I had one, and I figured six was enough between us, so we did not have any children between us.

*When he would come back, were you curious as to what he did? Did you ask a lot of questions?*

Well, Layton, he's always taken the time to educate me about radiation, and he's always taken the time to educate me about what his job was. So I always had a pretty good idea of what he was doing, even if I didn't know exactly what he was doing.

*So did you guys, especially after a certain test, did you just sit down and ask a lot of questions?*

Really, I did not. I would know that there was a test, like when he was out at the test site for a shot. Most times they were announced shots, and he would call me that morning [00:15:00] right after the shot and he would say, OK, you should feel the shock wave anytime now, and I would feel the shock wave. And the rest of them probably didn't feel it because they didn't know it was there. But if you had notice that it was coming, then you would be able to feel it.

*How did you feel? Did you feel a certain connection, just kind of like when he would call you and tell you about—?*

Well, it makes you feel more involved. It makes you feel a part of what he does.

*And how did that make you feel? I mean did you feel like you were just really a major part of this test?*

Yeah. Right. Well, you feel like that you're involved or that you're included.

*Did you do any volunteering or anything during these periods?*

At that time, let's see, he was also very involved in Boy Scouts, and so that was another thing I spent a lot of time with, was doing whatever he needed to have done so he could go on the outing or whatever they were going to be doing. So I would support that. And then I was very involved in our church. Sunday school teacher. I was an elder on the session, and over these years I've

served as a delegate for presbytery meetings, and I served as chair of committee for presbytery. So I've been really involved in our church life.

*Really? And how long have you been doing these activities?*

For about twenty-two years. A couple of years after we got married, I started getting involved in these things.

*So while he was away, you still kind of continued that routine of church every Sunday?*

Right. We had church every Sunday, and meetings once or twice a week.

*Oh, what type of meetings?*

Oh, committee meetings. Once a month, we had women's circle meetings. And so you had other things going on.

*Women's circle? Now, what was that?*

That's where a couple of women of the church have a Bible study. And then we do fundraisers and things like that, you know. You bake cookies. At that time, you could still easily park in front of Smith's or whatever and sell cookies. You can't do that very well anymore, but at that time, you could have fundraisers.

*Now, the church committee, were they aware of what your husband was doing?*

Well, they were aware that he worked—actually in our church, we had about one, two, three, four, at least five or six people who were employees out at the Nevada Test Site, or employees of the government. So our church was very—we were very well aware, where these people worked.

*So did you feel that—was there ever a time when you just needed to kind of stop and maybe talk to someone, while your husband was away or—?*

Well, no, probably not. I never really had any major crises. I forgot to say that Layton had a daughter who was living here for about the first ten years of our marriage, and she suffered from

mental illness. Well, at first she was diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, and then another time she was diagnosed as manic-depressive. Finally, after years, they diagnosed her as schizo affective, which is like in the middle. They had medications for these two other guys, but they don't really have medication for her condition. And she could keep you quite occupied with crises. Whenever she'd get off her medicine, she did a lot of things. At one time, she worked for the state out at the Spring Mountain State Park, and she was coming back from there, and she's not doing well, and she parks her car on the side of the road and leaves the door wide open and the music going, and she just wanders off into the desert. And so we had to go find her. She'd go off and she'd decide that her dad was Satan and she'd run away from him. And she would break things. One time, she was in our home, and my husband has a few guns, and she was getting his guns out, so I went and took them away from her. But she was more my worry than Layton's job ever was.

*Really? So were there times, for example, when he was away or you knew he was going to be away, that things happened?*

[00:20:00] Right, and what you had to learn to do was to call the police if you couldn't get her to go in to see the psychiatrist or the doctor or counselor. So you just had to call the police whenever she was not doing well.

*Now, was there more than one time while he was away—?*

While he was away. It was such an ongoing thing because I can't recall for sure whether he was away or not. Most of the times, I think he was in town. Sometimes he wasn't. But you just had to take it on as a responsibility, to take care, to see that she got help.

*Were there ever times when he was away that you're saying, OK, you kind of were prepared for what might happen?*

Right, you had to keep yourself prepared because whenever you're around someone who suffers from mental illness very much, if you know them very well, by just being around them you can tell when they're not doing well. You know, they don't tune in. They don't pay you much attention. They get involved in their conversation with whoever is in their head and they just drift away. And that's usually a telltale sign. If you're not paying close attention to them, then, you know—but if you're paying close attention, you can tell if they're fixing to need help. And the way the government or the society is set up nowadays, used to, you know, they would put people like her in a hospital and that's where they stayed. But they passed a law, and I forget what kind of law it was, but anyway, they don't keep them in the hospital anymore whenever they've been stable for any short amount of time. And so you have to, whenever—commitment for her was like every six months. There was a legal thing, that you had to wait for her to get so ill that she couldn't control herself around any authorities, which is a terrible thing for people who are sitting to watch to have to wait until they're so ill. And then she would go through court and then she would get committed for six months. And for *those* six months, then, you could just call and they would put her back in the hospital or get her back in the hospital easily. But once the six-month commitment was expired, then you had to wait again until she was so bad, you know, to get her re-committed for another six months. Because even though they're quote, unquote, committed for six months, they don't keep you in the hospital for those six months. If they think you're stable enough, they'll release you back out onto the street.

*And then what were your feelings about your stepdaughter? Were there ever times you had to deal with the court? And then having a little girl, also, to deal with?*

Yes, that was pretty hard because Amy, which is my daughter, had to learn and deal with this crazy person who is sometimes staying in our house. And so I had a hard time with that

sometimes. But I've always been one who just kind of rolls with the punches as best as possible. I just pick up and do what I have to do when I have to do it.

*Was there ever a time when your husband was away that your stepdaughter stayed with you?*

Let's see. I'm trying to think. I can't recall exactly if he was out of town when she was living with us, but I think he was for short times, but not for any real length of time. And then she was living in her own apartment after a while. I learned that your sanity is much better off whenever they're living not in the same house with you, because it's just really hard on you.

*Well, could you kind of describe when you say it was hard? I mean what exactly were you feeling?*

Well, when you have to deal with someone who suffers from mental illness, it quite pulls in your own kind of sanity, you know, your own thinking, because mental illness is like transient. You can't feel it; it's not like looking at a broken arm. And people who have mental illness play mind games. They use words and they—it's really hard. It's really hard on your own emotional stability, whenever you're dealing with someone who is chronically mentally ill.

**[00:25:00]** *What do you mean, emotional stability? I mean for you personally.*

Well, like when she's in the hospital. When she's in the hospital, when she would be behind locked doors, my biggest fear when I'd go to visit her is that they don't mix me up with her and the rest of those guys. And they never had a problem with that. But you know, it's just—I don't know how to describe it. It's just very hard on you whenever you are around someone who's like that on a regular basis.

*Did you find it maybe just a little bit harder when your husband was gone rather than him being there with you?*

Well, since he worked all day, there were a few times that I had to call him home, needed to call him home. But most times, I had the responsibility of taking care of whatever the problem was.

*And when you say responsibility, could you give me examples?*

Well, to go and visit her on a daily or weekly basis and see how she's doing. Take her to pay bills, if she needed to pay bills. If she's not doing very well, to take her to the counselor. You know, to do those things. To take care of her.

*Did you ever feel that it was especially difficult because it was your stepdaughter and then you had your daughter having to come with you?*

Well, she was probably about five; she'd started school, so a lot of times she was in school when we had to take care of those things. But my daughter was aware of Marilyn's condition, so she was able to deal with it also. And we would talk about it. If she had a problem, we would talk about her problem, you know, what was going on. It wasn't a secret.

*Was there ever a time while he was gone that you would wish he was there or just kind of want[ed] him home to take care of the situation?*

I probably fleetingly would think that, but you know it's impossible. Like when he was at Johnston Atoll, when he was that far away, you can't have him there. So you may fleetingly think that, but you have to continue. You just have to take control. And I've learned to be a controlling kind of person. I like to be in control.

*What do you mean?*

I like to be in charge. I like to say, OK, today is the schedule and this is what we're going to do.

*Who do you feel that's directed at, your experiences with your stepdaughter and your husband being away?*



Yeah. Yeah. I think so. Because I probably could've easily been the other and let him be in control. And then as my husband has gotten older, his memory's gotten worse. And so I'm sort of the one that's picked up the reins and knows what's going on, and have to keep track of him and what's going on with him.

*What do you mean?*

Well, like his weekly schedule, to remind him of what has to be done, and just to keep him on his own schedule as to what he wants to do. Because he doesn't remember sometimes that he has things scheduled.

*Was there ever a time that you felt maybe it was a strain on your relationship, not just with him leaving and his work schedule, but also the situation with your stepdaughter?*

I don't think so. I don't think so, because those are all things that I knew was going to be a part of our relationship before we ever got married. I knew he had the mentally ill daughter. I knew he had to go out of town. So I accepted those as part of the deal in our relationship.

*Like a package?*

Yeah, that's part of the package. And if you know what you're buying when you bought it, then you accept them as the—

*From the time you met, how long was your stepdaughter in Las Vegas?*

Well, when we first married, she was back East visiting. Probably about six months into our marriage she came back to Las Vegas. And she lived here for about ten years.

**[00:30:00]** *And during that time, was your husband still working for the DOE?*

Yes. Yes.

*OK, so it became a part of what was going on?*

That's right.

*Now, does your husband still work for the DOE?*

No, he's retired. He retired in 1994.

*Has he ever sat down with you and just told you stories, you know, of his experience, what he saw?*

Yeah, he's told a lot of stories. Right. I've heard probably most of them, most of his stories about—and he's told me stories, you know, throughout our marriage, of the things that he's done and been involved in.

*And how did you feel? I mean did you just kind of enjoy sitting down and listening?*

Yeah, I've always found them quite interesting. Yes. And sometimes fun, you know, because a lot of times the stories have a little side story to them.

*Oh, for example?*

Oh, for example. Let me try to think about it. Whenever he was going to Colorado, he said he would take the graveyard shift because they were cleaning up there but he loved to go skiing, so he would work graveyard and get off and then he would go take his skis and he would go. There was a mountain, Powderhorn, close by, but he would go skiing during the days and then when his tour of duty was over he would come back home.

And then also he met a man at Amchitka who was like a gold miner, you know, panning for gold, and he tells the story of this person who he met and this guy showed him a lot of pictures that had all kinds of gold. He said that if ever in his life he was going to get gold fever, it was when he was up there. But he didn't. But he came home with a couple flakes of gold that he got from this character, plus a colored picture of a shining gold nugget on a blue rug. And things like that.

*And how did you feel, I mean when he would tell you these stories and then you knew during that time period you were dealing with the stepdaughter and the crises that would pop up on occasion?*

OK, like the Enewetak one was before I met him, was a story, but I don't associate those things together. They're separate.

*What do you mean?*

Well, I mean a story of something in the past is a story, whereas a crisis which is happening now is not the same.

*Oh, what I also meant was like when he was off and he was in other cities and out of the country during a crisis that would come up with your stepdaughter, when he would come back, did you ever feel like the responsibility—?*

No, I've always just accepted the responsibility. I've never been jealous of his travels. I don't know if that's what you were looking for, but I've never been jealous of his travels and seeing things. Because like when he would go to Washington, D.C. to meetings, his first wife was from Maryland, and so when she left him she took the children back East. So whenever he would go back East, he still had other children back there and he would take an extra week off or something and see his children. And I've never been jealous of those things. I think those are important, for him and for his family.

*Could you tell me about after he retired? You know, you volunteer here at the Atomic Testing Museum—*

OK, this wasn't going on yet at that time.

*Oh, OK, when did that start?*

That started in '98, I believe. So when he first retired, because he was a workaholic and because he spent a lot of time away from the house, we had *major* adjustments.

*What do you mean?*

He was used to making suggestions, because in his job, in his work, and people taking action on [00:35:00] it. So when he retired and he was home every day, he was making suggestions about how I ran the house. And we had a lot of conflict over that. But he soon realized, and I guess we realized also, that that wasn't going to work. So he got himself involved heavier in scouting at that time, and also church work. And friends would know he was free and call him up. So he started spending more time away from the house, doing volunteer things himself. So it was a major adjustment for both of us when he retired, because he was gone most of the day for all those years. We were married in '79 and he retired in '94, so all those years I was used to having my own domain at home. And then he [became] a part of that domain.

*This is interesting. So after '94, you are the household manager, dealing with a lot of crises.*

Right. I was in charge at home.

*So then after he retired—maybe you could kind of give me a couple of examples, particularly like the conflicts and the adjustment. How did you react then?*

Well, we had a lot of arguments. I think that was probably our crisis in our marriage, was when he retired. Because it was really hard at that time to deal with him at home and under foot all the time, and I'm afraid I don't do things his way. We had to make adjustments, and as part of the adjustments, he found a course going on here at UNLV [University of Nevada, Las Vegas] that he wanted to get involved in. So he got hired on part-time with Tony [Anthony] Hechenova, and he found himself another little job. So he started finding himself things to do. Because he still doesn't do much, you know, he does some to help around the house that he didn't ever used to

do, but he still doesn't do a lot. He goes out and does volunteer things, helps friends with whatever. And of course, then he got involved with the NTSHF [Nevada Test Site Historical Foundation]. And whatever he gets involved in, he gets me involved in, too.

*When you mentioned that because of his traveling and you having to deal with a lot of things that would come up, you had a bit of a controlling personality. Now, when you say conflicts, could you kind of give me some examples of the two personalities?*

Well, he's a controlling person, too. I mean he was a boss and he was doing his job, so let's see, I'm trying to think. What's a good one I want to share? Well, just with the cleaning of the kitchen or the cooking of the dinner, you know, he would get in and he would want to do it *his* way and I wanted to do it *my* way. We would just end up in an argument and one of us would have to leave the room because we just wouldn't communicate well enough to get it done. You know, we just couldn't do it together, that's all. So nowadays, he gets in the kitchen and he cooks whatever he's going to cook. I stay out of the kitchen. And he stays out of the kitchen whenever I'm cooking. So we've worked through that, you know. He doesn't get in there and try to help me cook, and I don't get in there when he's trying to cook, because he doesn't do things my way at all. [laughter] And so I end up making adjustments and he gets upset because I'm changing his thing.

*Do you think it was, like you said previously, that it was harder after he retired rather than when he was working at the DOE?*

I think it was. For me, it was because, you know, I didn't have to deal with someone else's—it's like they say, you can't have two women in the same kitchen, and you can't have two people running the house. I think it's true. You have one person running and then another person just

coming in, maybe being a part of it, but it's always nicer when you have one person in charge, than when you have two people trying to be the king or queen.

**[00:40:00]** *So did the both of you feel that way when he retired?*

I think we did. It was a lot of conflict between the two of us. Conflict? Yes, it was. I mean it was just adjusting. Because we got a computer and Layton thought, we could learn to do the computer together. And so I picked up the computer pretty quickly—where you go to—how you get to wherever, and so I would just click through real fast, and he's sitting there and he was going, *You're going too fast.* And I'd try to slow down, then, you know, we would just get in arguments. That's the way it was with a lot of the things. But we've always had the same interests, like we both loved camping, we both loved skiing, we both loved the out-of-doors, and so we have a lot of interests together. But just the little controlling things, you know, with—life is a lot easier when you let someone else run the show and know that you're not in that position than whenever you—it's hard.

*You mentioned vacations. With him being gone so much, what was the outside time like, when he was not working?*

You mean like vacations?

*Yes, vacations, when he was home, when he was not traveling, days off.*

Well, a lot of times we would go camping, like at Utah. Most of our vacations are family trips where we go visit family, my family in New Mexico or his family in Montana. Like he loves Yellowstone Park, so at least once every two years or sometimes every year, whenever, especially when his mother was alive in the beginning, we would go to Montana once a year and we would go to New Mexico once a year. And then we'd do small trips, like camping kind of things.

*Now, when your husband was away, did you and your daughter ever go on vacation, take trips, since he was working so much?*

Only probably once did my daughter and I take a long trip, and that was a trip to New Mexico. I took her and we went. But most times, it was family outings, family trips.

*Now, when did you guys get involved with the volunteering here?*

With the NTSHF? Well, Layton knew Bruce Church and Troy Wade and some of these people who were first thinking about starting it. So whenever they first started having meetings about organizing the historical foundation, Layton became involved at that time. And he was going to partner with Ernie Williams and be in charge of procurement for the gift shop thing and, you know, setting up a gift shop. That was his first little job. And then after about the first year, when they first started the history center on Losee Road, we were the first volunteers to open up. We worked the first shift. And of course, like I said, a lot of times, no matter what Layton gets involved in, he usually gets me involved too. So we were the first volunteers to work at the gift shop. And the guy who was going to be the volunteer coordinator got upset and resigned. So they asked Layton and I, mostly Layton, if we would be willing to be volunteer coordinators. So it was like in June, was when they first opened up the gift shop for the history center, and in October we took over the job as the volunteer coordinators for getting people to work in the shop. And then we had little what you call traveling gift shop opportunities, little meetings or whatever where people would want us to bring our wares, so we were in charge of [00:45:00] also finding volunteers to help with that. We did that for '99 and 2000. Probably we were doing that until 2003, I guess, whenever they first hired Maggie [Smith]. She sort of took over both our positions, the volunteer coordinator, so we've just gone back to being volunteers again. And now we volunteer once a week. We volunteer every Friday afternoon.

*So you feel that it was like a second life for you guys to do things after he retired.*

Yeah. We've always—like in church, we do things together, and then here we do things together, and it's different whenever we're here, because Layton goes in one area and he does his thing, and I go into the gift shop. We do a lot of stuff together, too. I mean—but we never—we do his kind of volunteering, or if I'm helping him with his volunteering, he's the one in charge. So the only place we had conflict was at home, and then we both wanted to be in charge.

*So it just kind of seems that—do you feel that you really did actually spend more time together after his retirement, more opportunities for vacations?*

Yeah. Before he retired, you know, we talked to people and they said, the first thing you really want to do when you retire is plan a long trip to just make your change. So right after he retired, we took a three-month trip. We went to New Mexico and Texas and Missouri. Visited family and relatives, and saw things. And went down to Texas for Christmas. And we just took three months and we came back home. And then a couple of years later, we took another three-month trip to the [Northwest]. We packed all our camping gear. We'd never been rich enough to have an RV so we packed our tent and we brought our tent in our station wagon, and we went up the California coast and up into Oregon and Washington and then through Idaho and Montana, and we spent three months visiting state parks and things like that.

*Now, since you've been able to spend all this time together, in a way do you feel closer to Mr. O'Neill after retirement, rather than while he was working for the DOE?*

It's hard to say. I mean yeah, I would think I feel closer. You know, after so many years, you have a life history together. It's hard to imagine it any other way, so you just assume it's going to be that way.



*So in a way, did you feel like a second chance to really get to know each other? Because it appears that you had to adjust and get to know each other?*

Right. Right. Well, we just had to adjust to our personalities, that's all. But yeah, we've done very well. And you know he had a heart attack a year-and-a-half ago last March.

*Really? He had a heart attack. Did you guys have to stop volunteering and—?*

Well, as it so happened, we were working at the history center and they had this beryllium scare.

I don't know if you heard about that or not.

*No, I have not.*

But they decided to close—it was very minute traces or whatever that they even found, but they closed down several of the buildings over there, and where we had our history center set up was one of the buildings they closed down. That was in the end of October, first of November, and this building was set to be open like in July—or actually, it was set to be open a little bit sooner, but I can't remember anyway. But it just so happened that we were out of business because in March he had the heart attack, so other than doing a traveling gift shop [00:50:00] once a month or so to the test site, we weren't doing any major volunteering for the historical foundation at that time because we were out of business for about six months before they opened back up here.

*And how long have you been working right here?*

Here? Since they opened. In July, I guess, was when the big opening was.

*And how do you guys deal [with] working together?*

We do pretty well.

*Do you guys, as you mentioned before, since you guys have the same type of interest, did that really help you guys a lot in the marriage?*

I think it helps a lot to have the same interests or have a lot of the same interests. Yes, it definitely helps. Because in your daily life schedule, it takes you totally different directions. If you have the same interests, it gives you a reason to stay together whenever you're put together. But whenever you don't have the same interests and you're living separate lives most of the day every day, then I think that's when marriages fall apart, when you really don't have the same interests.

*Did you kind of feel that, during the time period when he was working for the DOE, that you guys did have separate and totally different lives at one point?*

Pretty much. I mean whenever he was gone, you know, twelve hours a day, and you're at home twelve hours a day, and basically you come home and you eat and you go to bed, and the next day you get up and go your separate ways again, you know, other than whenever you're having a major crisis or whatever, you live separate lives. Like he was running his business, he was doing this thing at work, and I was doing my thing at home, and you do. You do live separate lives.

*How did you feel about being married to Mr. O'Neill and then you two really having separate hobbies, separate existence, especially with you taking care of your stepdaughter a bit more than he was able to?*

How did I feel? I don't know. I just accepted it as my lot in life, you know, as those are your responsibilities. To me, my life is like a job because you have your responsibilities in whatever job you're doing and you take care of those responsibilities. So I don't every really think I thought much about it either way.

*Did you find yourself, after he retired, taking on different types of responsibilities now that you guys were together a lot?*

Well, I found it hard—I don't think I took on *more* responsibilities but I found it hard to *share* my responsibilities. Whenever he first retired he wanted to be more involved in paying the bills and doing those things, and I've just always done it. So I have had a hard time sharing those responsibilities. And he's gone back to where he just lets me tell him whenever he can spend money or not, so I like that. So I really had a hard time sharing *my* responsibilities because that's my domain.

*Did you ever stop and tell him that, This is what I do. This is how I organize bills and the household chores.*

Yeah. Oh, it's hard to say.

*When you're talking about conflicts, did you kind of want to share a few more examples of after the retirement?*

Oh, let's see. I'm trying to think. Other than the kitchen and the computer and—I really can't think of any major thing right off.

*Do you find it easier since he's been retired for ten years, a lot of the conflicts and adjustments have withered away?*

Yes, I think so. We worked back into our own little niches, where I still do my thing, and he gets [00:55:00] up and he volunteers or helps people. So he gets up and he leaves the house and goes [and] does things for a few hours out of the day and then comes back home. And we're happy that way. He's happy that way, too, you know. He's not home sitting watching the TV. They talk about you retire and you either sit in front of the TV and vegetate and die young, or you find yourself things to do. And so that's what he's done.

*Do you kind of find it a little easier on you, kind of knowing that he is just off on his own and having his own hobbies?*

Right. Right. And like I say, I'm a controlling personality, and as long as I know where he's supposed to be and how to get a hold of him, I don't care where he goes. It's fine with me.

*OK, well, looks like we have a few minutes left. Now, during the time period that he was working for the DOE, did you ever travel up to the test site or take any tours or go up to visit him while he was up there?*

I never went to visit him while he was there, but they offered family tours every so often, and I took a tour of the test site probably twice. And that helped me to really know, whenever he would say he's in the control point, you know, of course that was one of the places they took you. And whenever he would talk about what area he was at, it helps you, whenever you take a tour of the test site, to know where they are, to visualize it better.

*Now, what do you mean, visualize better? Do you mean when he was there?*

Right. Because, you know, when you visit like the control point, that's where his main job was to be, in the control point, when they would do the underground tests. And so whenever you visited, you know that that's where they were.

*Did it make his job a little less scary or—?*

Like I say, I never had any fear with his job.

*Was it just kind of knowing and understanding where he worked and—?*

Right. Right.

*Is that kind of what you wanted, to have a better understanding of what his career was?*

Right. I guess the career, and then also, like he was a member of the Health Physics Society, and whenever you go to meetings with him, people would tell their stories, or whenever you hear about things at the test site, then when you hear people tell their stories, and if you've been *out*

there, then you have an idea of where they're talking about and what that area looks like. So it helps to make those stories become more alive in your memory or in your thinking.

*Well, what was the first time you went up to the test site?*

I can't remember. It was probably in '84, '85, somewhere in there.

*So he was very active in his job at that time.*

Oh, yeah.

*Did your daughter come up with you?*

No, she's never, ever toured the test site. For one thing, you have to be at least sixteen, I think.

They don't *allow* young children on the test site. And during her teenage years, being *anywhere* with Mother or [laughter] any of those kind of things was *not* in her interest. And she's since then, started having children, and the opportunity's never really come up for her to go out there.

*I was kind of wondering, with you having such a young daughter at that time period and your husband being away for so long, and having the situation with your stepdaughter, how did you explain why her father was away? Did you tell her what he was doing?*

Well, I can't remember now. She knew that he worked for the government, and she knew that his job took him away, and we would tell her like he was going to be gone to Johnston Atoll. She would know that that's where he was going. I don't remember her ever really asking many questions about what kind of job he does.

**[01:00:00]** *What was her adjustment, especially with her dad being gone so long during the day, being gone for long periods of time?*

Layton and Amy have always had their own conflicts because I mean he was gone a long time, so I was the main authority figure in her life. And so they had to work through their own

conflicts. And whenever Layton and Amy would have conflicts, I would just stay out of it and let them work it through as best as possible.

*Did you find it a little hard on occasion just being in a sense kind of like a single parent at that time when he was—?*

Yeah, you're pretty much a single parent. Even if you are married, you're the one that takes them to the doctors' appointments and you're the one that goes to the teachers' meetings, and when any major decisions have to be made, usually you make them because he's not there.

*Was there ever a time that you felt you wanted to call him or just ask his advice on a situation dealing with your daughter or—?*

Once or twice, a few times.

*When did you tell her or when did she start asking what exactly is it that he did? Was she ever curious wanting to ask you questions when she got older?*

Well, you know, she was always around when he would tell us stories. Also, I think that by osmosis, she probably knew a lot about what he did.

*So she kind of really knew what he did about the tests and the cleanup.*

Yeah, I think she did. She had an idea because, you know, Layton would talk about those things at the dinner table or whatever. Because we've always tried to have a family dinner.

*Oh, really?*

Yes. Dinner at six o'clock.

*How often a week would you, as a family, try and have a family dinner?*

Well, tried to at least do it five days a week. Didn't always happen that way.

*Did you guys try, for example, especially in the early years, try and make sure you guys always had time together as a family and things like that?*

Yes, we did.

*Did he ever try to take time off specifically just so you guys could be together as a family?*

Other than vacations, no, I don't think so. I don't think so.

*OK. Wow, looks like—*

We killed two hours already?

*Almost an hour and a half.*

OK, that's good.

*OK, well, did you have anything else you'd like to say or—?*

I can't think of anything.

*Anything you'd just kind of like to wrap up with your experience just being married to Mr.*

*O'Neill and just—?*

Well, it's been an adventure.

*What do you mean?*

Well, Layton's one of these people who has always got things going on, you know. He always volunteers for helping someone. Or all our trips that we've taken, you know, they're always an adventure.

*What do you mean when you say helping someone?*

Oh, let's see. Well, let's start back when we first got married. When he came down to Carlsbad to help me pack up my stuff to move, and he picked up a hitchhiker.

*Really?*

Yeah, my husband—at that time, I hadn't trained him. He doesn't pick up hitchhikers anymore. But at that time, he picked up this hitchhiker and he brought him to Carlsbad with him, and this guy helped us load up and helped us drive my car and our cars back to Las Vegas, and then he

stayed in our house and he did some painting or whatever, and Layton paid him—and this was our first adventure—paid him, and this guy—Layton took him down to the bus stop because he said he was a gambler and he couldn't keep his money. So Layton took him to the bus station downtown, with all his money that we paid him for the work that he did, and a couple hours later he called Layton and said, I lost all my money and I didn't get a bus ticket. I didn't go. So Layton then goes down and picks him up and takes him to [01:05:00] the edge of town, hands him five bucks or something, and he hitchhikes wherever he goes. I don't know where this guy went. That was one. We've also taken in and helped people over the years.

*Oh, really? Could you give me some examples of the situations?*

Well, my next-door neighbor. A woman and her husband moved in next door to us a few years back, and they went through a divorce, one of these very violent, bitter kind of divorces, and she was not working and she had a young child and an older boy and she was on the street. And we took her in and she got herself a job and she—did I tell you, I've found that people we've helped out over the years, it takes about three to six months, it depends on the kind of job they do and how serious they are. But she got a job and she got her money in order and her car; and she's gone on with her life now. So we've helped people over the years who are in need. And I've taken in my brothers. And of course we took in Layton's daughter, and then we've taken in young families once in a while, you know, for short times.

*Was there ever a time while he was away that you were in these situations, you know, helping people?*

No, I don't think he was ever away when we took in families. It was after his big travels were over with.



*That's actually really interesting, you guys doing all of that. Now, have you guys done that after he's retired?*

A few. We've helped a single—they don't always turn out really well, you know. Some do and some don't.

*What do you mean?*

Well, like one boy—he's not a boy now. Well, he's passed; he's dead now. But it was a young man from our church who was an alcoholic and, you know, he needed help and we would help him and he would go back down, you know, he would go off the wagon. Then he would come back in to try again, and he ended up taking his life a few months ago. So it was like, you know, Layton was really attached to him. And we've helped another single person out like that, and it didn't work out either. But we've had success stories, and then we've had not success stories. So like the woman I took in from next door, she was one of my success stories in helping someone out, because she's doing very well now.

*Actually, this is really interesting. Would you mind taking a few moments to kind of just explain how you guys—some more of your experiences [about] taking people in?*

OK. Well, the last person I took in was more than I could handle. I had a hard time getting her out of my house, that one, because—well, she came to our church, and she actually knew a couple of people in our church. So I thought she sounded like she was probably a pretty stable person, so I said, You and your son can come and stay with us while you look for—she said she was newly divorced and on the street and needed help. And so it turned out this woman was newly divorced, probably, but she and her son were hiding from her husband, and she wasn't job-hunting, and I couldn't get her out of my house.

*What do you mean, hiding?*

Well, she wouldn't go out and get a job, and she wasn't willing to do what it takes to get on your own.

*You know what? I'm sorry.*

You ran out of time?

*We have five minutes left, so I'm going to go ahead and put in disk two, if that's OK.*

**[01:08:52]** End Track 2, Disk 1

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

*OK, now, you were mentioning that woman that was hiding?*

Yeah. It turned out she stayed in our house. When we had people stay with us, after a while, once they start going to work or whatever, it was never always just a freebie. I would charge them a little bit, like thirty-five dollars a week to help cover food and, you know, they use water and soap. People live in your house, they use your stuff, so wear and tear. Thirty-five dollars a week, I think, is pretty reasonable. Anyway, this woman was not going out job—she was leaving every day, but I don't know where she would go. And she had this little boy who was about three or four years old. And that's what made it hard with getting her out of our house, is because she did have this young child. But she would leave, and then whenever I—I could tell she was not job-hunting, and I went out and I got her like a bus pass for a month. I said, *This'll help you find a job.* But she never did do any job-hunting. And I went to our pastor and talked to him about it, and he did some background. He knew more about computers, and so he looked up and he found that she had a warrant out because she was hiding from her ex. He was supposed to have visitation rights, you know, and so you know how parents—it turned out to be a woman kidnapping. Not really kidnapping, but she took her son and never let her ex know where she was living, not letting him have any kind of visitation with him. But it turned out that that's what

she was doing. And she moved from my house, after about five months, she moved into the home of another member of our church, and he actually has a daughter who works for the police department up in—because I didn't know at the time that that's what she was doing. But I was strongly suspecting, because she wasn't looking for work. Anyway, she was wanted, and so he found out, the person that she moved in with after us, and I have no idea what has happened to her since, but we know that she was in jail for a short time, and probably the son went to be with his father, I would assume. So that was another one of those, it wasn't a great experience.

*Did you want to tell us about some of the positive experiences that you've had in these situations?*

Well, let's see. When I took my brother, who married a woman with three children, into my home. And I got very bonded with them and very attached with them. And we don't have a really big house, so we were making great sacrifices to all of us live in our house. But it was a very good experience. And it took them about six months before they were able to get out on their own. And then my brother was an asthmatic, and he died after that. He died about that time. He was twenty-eight years old and he had an asthmatic attack. At that time they still didn't have a lot of the medications they have today, and he passed away from an asthma attack. But he left his family with us, his wife and three children, and I loved them to death. So it was good for us. It was good for *me* that they were there at that time.

*What do you mean, good for you? Was it during the time that your husband was away?*

No. I mean he was there sometimes, and he wasn't always there.

*Did it make the situation just a little bit harder, given the circumstances?*

I don't think so. And let's see, who else have we taken in? We took in a family—we actually had them—we put up a tent in our back yard and let them live in a tent in our back yard, a family with three young children, and they stayed for about two months there.

*OK. So over the years, how long have you guys been doing this, having people come into your home?*

Taking in families? Over the years, well, we've probably been doing it most of our married life, you know, taking in somebody when—we haven't done it for the last two years because you just [00:05:00] don't take in *anybody* hopefully. So it just depends on the situation and depends on the people. And it doesn't last, you know. You're only taking them in for a few months at a time.

*Now, did you do something like this before you married your husband, or was this sort of a marriage situation?*

No, this was something that—see, my husband is very giving, very—that's one of the things that probably attracted me to him when I first met him, was that he was a very giving, very generous, very open kind of person. That's part of who he is. He's willing to take in, and he did that before I—he rented his rooms out to kids that were just getting out on their own, like eighteen-year-old kids, so he's always been a person who takes in people. It was just part of the—whenever I married him, it was part of his thing, too. And that was OK with me.

*So you kind of attached and continued the tradition after you guys got married?*

Yes.

*And just in the last two years—?*

We haven't—after I took in this woman that was actually hiding, that was one little burn thing too many, so I've been a little bit more leery about taking in someone. But we probably will again, if someone comes along. And actually my spare room is now full with my grandchildren,

so it's kind of hard to—since my daughter has now started having children and she lives here, they spend a lot of time in my house, so the one room that I had for putting people in is now full of my grandchildren's stuff and beds for them.

*Oh, and how many grandchildren do you have?*

Well, I have a seven-year-old—well, between me and Layton? Layton has seven from his children, and then I have three and one on the way from my children. The ones that live here are my daughter's children, and the oldest is seven and the next one is six, and then there's one that's eight months old, and my daughter's expecting another one in September, before the eight-month-old is even a year old, so my hands are full now with grandchildren. And volunteering.

*Well, you know what? This has been really good. I really appreciate you agreeing to sit and talk with me, because I feel that women have unique experiences, and their husbands, you know, they go beyond. They have their own experiences. They have their own lives.*

That's right.

*The purpose is just to show that they're capable of having those lives beyond the marriage. And I just wanted to say thank you for sitting in and talking with us.*

Thank you.

**[00:08:05]** End Track 2, Disk 2.

[End of interview]