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

Interview with Lawrence Lermusiaux

July 14, 2005
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Suzanne Becker

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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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Suzanne Becker: *If you just want to start by stating your name and where you're from, when you were born?*

Lawrence Lermusiaux: I'm Lawrence E. Lermusiaux, known as Larry Lermusiaux. I reside at 6240 Duneville Street, Las Vegas, Nevada. I've been a resident here for approximately fifty-three-and-a-half years. I was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico November 11, 1951.

My father, Albert R. Lermusiaux, known as Al, professionally known also as A.R. Lermusiaux, graduated from the University of New Mexico with a degree in civil engineering. While he was attending the University of New Mexico, he had gone to work for a construction company in Albuquerque named Lembke Construction. Lembke Construction had an office in Albuquerque and in Colorado and I believe in Idaho at the time. In early 1952 my father, upon graduation from UNM and then while full-time employed by Lembke in Albuquerque, was reassigned to southern Nevada. Lembke had been awarded a contract to build the first permanent facilities at the Nevada Test Site which were, I believe, dormitories. They teamed up with another contractor, a company known as Clough & King. For a short time, they were known as Lembke-Clough & King. Throughout the years, my father, through Lembke Construction, was involved with a number of different projects out at the test site, some of which I could enumerate.

As far as my personal background is concerned, my dad was employed with Lembke until, I believe, 1963 or 1964 when he went into business for himself. [He] was involved in a lot of projects that were substantial in the community while he was with Lembke. They built the Las

Vegas Convention Center, they built McCarran International Airport, they built the Dunes Hotel high rise, they built the Guardian Angel Catholic Church on the Las Vegas Strip, the first high rise downtown was the Fremont Hotel, Las Vegas High School auditorium, the first wastewater treatment plant for the City of Las Vegas, and on and on.

So growing up here, you've certainly seen this place change.

Absolutely.

And grow. And it sounds like your dad had a lot to do with that, building some of the more significant landmarks of Las Vegas. Were you aware of that at all, that as Las Vegas was growing, that your dad was part of this?

Of course, young boys don't know much beyond their neighborhood. And the town, there were only about forty, fifty thousand people that lived here. You didn't have much of an awareness of things. In those days, everybody bought their clothes down on Fremont Street. We used to walk downtown. I suppose one of the most notable differences between then and now is that when I was a young boy only ten or eleven years old, on any given Saturday my friends and I would walk from what was then North Las Vegas all the way to downtown on Fremont Street, spend the day going through the stores, go to a movie, and come home. We'd be gone the entire day. My parents weren't at all concerned because nothing happened to your kids. Now you can't even walk to school anymore.

But one of the things in my youth that I always found especially fascinating is that when Lembke Construction had taken on a number of these Atomic Energy Commission [AEC] contracts, one of the expectations on the part of the AEC was that they be able to keep documents in a secured site in their office. As a consequence, remembering of course a Las Vegas back in those days when bank vaults were kind of a joke, even, Lembke had a special safe

[00:05:00] built into their building. It was large enough, it was an actual walk-in safe, and within that safe there was another safe. But within the larger one, there was a desk and shelving and all sorts of things. Well, every now again when I would go with my father down to his office on a weekend, I would always insist that he open the great big safe door, and I always used to watch with fascination as he moved the tumblers back and forth and swinging open that great big huge door because that was real mystic stuff for a little boy. So I remember that well.

As far as any other aspects of how it affected me in my youth, it really didn't. I had friends, of course, whose fathers worked at the test site perhaps as electricians or painters or plumbers; outside of being in their homes and hearing their fathers gripe constantly about the long haul out there and back, it really didn't mean anything. I suppose my father never discussed some of the more interesting aspects of those projects simply because I was a kid and it would be lost on me. It's a rare occasion when a son has an opportunity to speak of some of the things that his father did, so I welcome this. It's interesting to talk about unto itself.

Something you just said, a question popped into my head. You talk to many people that have worked at the test site and one of the things that you hear about is this camaraderie that forms amongst many of the workers out there. Whether they're at different areas, whether it's the test site managers, the miners, the engineers, the electricians, we always hear about a sense of camaraderie, and it sounds like here in town on the family end, because the test site at one time was such a large employer for Las Vegas, that you probably had many friends whose parents worked out there. I'm just wondering if as a kid you had any sense of camaraderie with other families, or what it was like here in town, if you had an awareness of that.

When I had reached a stage in my life where I paid attention to such things, and I suppose it was noteworthy that test site jobs were considered amongst the better-paying construction jobs. The

travel to and fro from the test site, was handled by the same bus line here in this town, LTR, for literally decades was a family-owned business. The only other comments that I ever used to hear about it, and again as I say as I grew older and they became the stuff that would be important to me to pay attention to, was that like so many other government jobs, with time these types of jobs were considered to be a little bit of fluff, and of course this is just conjecture on my part but—.

"These types of jobs" meaning?

Construction jobs. That since the labor pool in some respects was somewhat limited and very tightly controlled by the area unions, that the government and its contractors didn't do too much to ruffle feathers, and as a consequence, people who worked there were sometimes thought of as, you know, having a soft job.

Really.

Yes. In fact, my dad used to speak disparagingly of that. As a contractor, he used to refer to the speed at which they performed their relative jobs out there as "the Reynolds gait." Reynolds Electrical [and Engineering Company, REECo] was a major contractor out there and they employed a *lot* of people. And when my dad referred to workers functioning with a "Reynolds gait," he wasn't referring to the gate, G-A-T-E; he was referring to gait, G-A-*I*-T, meaning the **[00:10:00]** speed or lack thereof with which the employees moved about, taking care of their respective jobs. "The Reynolds gait."

A little bit slow.

Yes. The jobs, like I say, were considered to be good jobs to have. Most of the people that I know who worked there worked there for a long time. I had an uncle who was a painter for a

local paint contractor who, I don't know, he probably worked out at the test site for fifteen, twenty years.

Now, was he in construction out there also?

He was a painter.

So he painted.

I think he worked for an outfit called M.J. DeBase [sp] but I'm not sure. Anyway, they were considered good jobs. My dad's capacity out there was as an engineer, as a site control person. He, during his time with Lembke, advanced rapidly and ended up actually being part owner and vice-president. And he loved his work. He loved his work.

Important thing. Now, he was out there for fifty years, is that correct?

No.

No. OK, I was going to say that's—

No. Lembke had a series of jobs out there beginning in 1952, and I think their last job out there was probably around 1960, 1961, somewhere around in there. I don't think they did anything past then. My dad did used to remark on occasion, though, that no one could ever find a greater example of wasted government money than with some of the facilities to be found out there. He used to allude to underground warehouses that were lined completely in titanium, and after the projects that they were used for, were completely left empty and never to be opened or used for anything. He said people have no idea how much money lies underneath the ground out at the test site, and what always will be there. He said that it's probably true that when you're involved in certain aspects of experimentation, that's just the by-product of it but, he said, it breaks your heart to see stuff like that lying unused and there's functionally absolutely nothing wrong with it.

Now, did he go out there daily, drive out daily?

Yes. He used to go out in his own car.

And so he must have been gone quite a bit, long days, it sounds like.

Long days. Actually, it's interesting you bring that up. I have two brothers and two sisters. I'm the oldest sibling. My second-youngest brother, Tom, when he first learned how to speak, called my dad "Hi."The reason he called him Hi is [that] when he was in his baby formative years—of course would be asleep early, the only times that he ever saw my dad was when he'd come home. He would hear everyone say "Hi" when they saw him, so he thought my dad's name was Hi. It comes from being in the business world sometimes. But he finally broke himself of that habit.

So was that hard that he was gone so much, long days, particularly for you as the oldest?

Kids, I think, always feel slighted somehow or another time-wise, and that's particularly challenging for any family where one or both of the parents is running their own business or formatively involved in a business. And as a consequence, that did have its effect on our household. My dad also was socially involved. He was a past president of the Las Vegas Jaycees in either 1963 or 1964. I believe it was '64. And back in those days, the Jaycees and the **[00:15:00]** Elks were probably the two major community organizations in Las Vegas. In fact, I just recently gave a reproduction of a photo which shows my dad in 1965 giving the award for the outstanding young man for the community to Mike O'Callaghan, who is deceased, died last year in 2004. He's a former governor, generally considered the most popular governor in the history of Nevada. At the time, O'Callaghan was just a school teacher out at Basic High, so it's interesting that as time passes I can say these things and move along. But of course, there are things, when you're in your youth, that you would've liked to have had your dad at an awards ceremony or this, that, or the other, but those are just the things that come with life, and their

compensation is that you know that your parents love you and that they take care of you, and so it goes.

So it impacted the family, it sounds like, but—

Yes. It's the give-and-take of it all.

Now, did you ever make it out to the test site with him?

No.

Actually I don't know if they did it early on, but they used to have family days or visiting days.

Back in the day when my dad was involved, you have to remember that it was a much less sophisticated world than it is today and these things were considered much more hush-hush. Now, since so much of this is after the fact and a lot it's become very homogenized with the tours that they take out there, well, that wasn't the case back in those days, so that was never even something to wish for. It was never spoken of.

Just what it was. So your dad was out there for ten, eleven years, then?

Those weren't the only projects that Lembke had.

So what specifically were his years that he was involved with the test site?

Well, it would be safe to say that any project that Lembke was involved in with the AEC between 1952 and 1962, my father would've been involved in on some level.

So for at least that decade.

Right.

And do you know specifically some of the other types of work that he did out there?

Well, as I say, they built the first dormitories. They built the camera pits and pads where such things as the much-vaunted Rapatronic camera was housed. They built a lot of the structures that

were erected to be photographed by the Rapatronic for time detonation. Gosh, I couldn't even begin to tell you how many. They did a lot of projects out there.

The most interesting one, for which I brought along this photograph for your file, involves the towers that they used. There were several different ways that they used to explode devices out there, and the earliest one, for example, the first one, [Operation] Ranger, most people don't know it but it actually was an air detonation. The bomb, I believe, was dropped by a parachute and detonated while it was free-falling. While they were still doing above-ground testing, most of them were done on towers, steel-fabricated towers that ranged anywhere from a hundred to three or four hundred feet high, attached with guide wires. Typically the tower was rectangular in nature. It had a blockhouse at the top. It had an elevator that passed through the center of the tower from the ground floor up to the blockhouse, and that was how they would deliver the bomb to the top.

My dad's involvement with that—I don't know whether they erected any of the towers or not—but his involvement was in creating a methodology for the Rapatronic camera to determine the degradation of the building materials that comprised the blockhouse that the bomb was **[00:20:00]** placed in at the top of the structure. The Rapatronic, I have to apologize because I can't remember what its shutter speed is but it's beyond human imagination. It was used to detect the disintegration of different types of building materials to determine the effect that it had on [and] how quickly something broke down, the manner in which it broke down. Well, they had yet to be able to detect the disintegration of the blockhouse. Well, my dad, in conjunction with I think somebody from Reynolds Electric, his name was Ed Moore, created a formula that could be used in the Portland cement mix that was used to construct the blockhouses at the top of the structures so that the Rapatronic, upon the detonation of the device, would be able to recognize

that isotope, if you will, in the structure as it was being blown up, or at least that is what the idea was. The downside to my father's involvement with that was that it required that he take readings on the cement batch as it was curing and as it was being used on the blockhouse, which meant that he had to go to the top of the structure. He said in one of the rare examples of the federal government using its head, to his disadvantage. Originally, as I said, the elevators used to be within the confines of the tower, and so as you were traveling up to the top, you felt relatively secure because you could see the brightly-painted, nice, shiny-looking metal all around you and this elevator was nice and firm-feeling underfoot. Well, somebody somewhere finally had their light bulb go off when they reflected that why are we spending all this money to erect and paint these structures and pay for these fancy elevators when all we're doing is blowing them up? So they changed their strategy, and from that point on they didn't bother to paint them, and the fancy elevator got the heave-ho, and instead they put one of those saddlebacks that was hooked up to the exterior of the structure that it's kind of like a ca-clunk, ca-clunk, ca-clunk, type mechanism. So, he said, consequently from that point on, as he had to travel up, all he could see was the panorama of the desert all the way around him, and he said that could be a little bit spooky. But he had to do a number of those, so that was a very interesting project that he was involved in.

So that was always interesting to hear about, and actually I did know Ed Moore, who was the guy that he teamed up with on creating that. But the reason that the collaboration was called for was because it had to be done in a way that didn't compromise what would ordinarily be considered the mix for the cement and concrete that was used, bearing in mind that they wanted to use real life situations as much as they could.

So, at any rate, he was involved in a lot of that.

And this is a picture of a tower as you were just describing.

Right. One of the towers.

Well, it sounds like he was able to come home and tell you guys some good stories.

Actually, I didn't hear these stories until I was an adult. A combination, I suppose, of my father being so much in the business world and so much in the *construction* business world that he led a very adult life. And it was only when *I* was an adult that we *really* were able to communicate on that sort of level, which was something that we both enjoyed when that time came.

Now, with a lot of folks and a lot of the various jobs that have been out at the test site, people haven't necessarily been able to talk about some of the work they've done. And again, I don't know if he needed any type of clearance to be out there or if secrecy was, you know, whether he was permitted to actually talk about this work or not? Do you have any sense of that?

I don't think that he actually was ever at the site when they had a detonation. I don't think he was there. Because I should think that he would have made mention of that, and I don't recall he ever **[00:25:00]** has. So I don't think that he was ever there. It's interesting because some of the companies that first came to this town because of those projects went on to *really* substantial success in the community. A contemporary of my dad's was a guy by the name of Bobby Ruppert. His father was the originator of Ruppert Plumbing. At one time, he was the largest mechanical contractor in the Southwest. And Bobby was his son. Ruppert Senior was known as Smiley, and he was known as Smiley because he had a volcanic temper. And Bobby, my father's age, was very involved in his father's business here in town. They did a *lot* of work out at the test site.

In fact, I can't remember the whole story, but Bobby Ruppert was quite a hellion in his day and in fact in his later years he was a stock car driver—he and his father were both big car

fans – and Bobby was even racing in his fifties, and he was known as Red Feather Ruppert. In fact, there's a building complex out on the northwest part of Las Vegas that is known as Red Feather Plaza, and it's named after Bobby Rupert. His family developed the property. Anyway, Bobby Ruppert was coming back from the test site one day, and before he had left the test site, there had been an accident that had taken place on the Tonopah highway heading to Las Vegas. An ambulance had been sent out. While the ambulance was on its way out to get to the scene of the accident, a Highway Patrol car showed up at the scene, lost control of his car and ran into the cars that were involved in the accident. When the ambulance showed up, there was some debris on the road that got under one of its tires. It suffered a blowout and ran into the cop car that had run into the vehicles in the accident. Bobby Ruppert was coming back now from the test site and he was probably driving his usual 120 miles an hour. He said he came over the rise—I'll always remember—he came over the rise and came upon this accident scene so quickly that he couldn't react, so all he could do was, quote, "hit the switch and head for the cellar," and that's just what he did. He just dove down onto the floorboard of his vehicle, which then smashed into the ambulance. And out of all the people that were seriously injured, Bobby Ruppert had a scratch or two and that was about it. That's the way he always was.

The town was a rough-and-tumble town back then, and I knew a number of these guys that had worked with my dad out at the site and, like so many other people in that era, they were a combination of smart and tough, and self-sacrificing.

And that's a really apt description for, I think, an entire era that was at the test site for probably like twenty years, it seems like. I don't know if you get a sense of this now, but I think some of those jobs that were out at the test site, you couldn't even do today. I think it was the being-

tough-and-being-smart combination, especially from some of the descriptions that you talk about, that kind of stuff doesn't happen much anymore.

It's a more litigious world that we live in today, and as a consequence, projects and their intended purpose too often become secondary towards all the other subsidiary things with OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] and long-term effects and so on and so forth. People kind of lose sight of what—back in those days, if there was something **[00:30:00]** that needed to be done, they just exerted best efforts to accomplish it. And is that to say that it always ended up with the conclusion they anticipated? No, nor does it mean that perhaps certain things could've been done a little bit better, but hindsight's always 20-20. You work with what you have, and as long as the intent is good, which I think it always was with regards to the test site and the personnel that were involved out there, gainfully employed out there, I think the intentions were always positive on the part of the United States government, which was national security, and on the part of the contractors who worked out there, which was to do the job that they had been contracted to do. And for the worker bees, if you will, who were out there who, all kidding aside, are where the rubber meets the road, and if indeed they hadn't done their jobs correctly, it would've affected the overall success or insuccess of the projects so, you know.

Now, you were a kid growing up here, and you mentioned that the purpose of the test site was generally was for a pretty good cause, national security, as a kid you said that you didn't really think much about the test site being there, but were you aware of what we look back on now as the Cold War era, and did they talk about this in school? Did they ever mention the test site, or did you guys have the duck-and-cover drills like some other places had?

Oh, yeah, we had that. In fact, the elementary school that I went to had the area air raid siren that used to go off every Saturday morning at noon.

Where'd you go to elementary school?

Tom Williams Elementary. I believe it's on Tonopah and Belmont in North Las Vegas. Yeah, we had those get-under-the-desk drills. Oh, let's see, what else? You had just mentioned something.

Did they talk about it at all?

They didn't talk about it a great deal. A young boy's mind is occupied with all kinds of things, and the realities of war beyond playing war is, I don't know, an abstract concept at best. The potentiality for destruction, again, was something that was kind of abstract. You know, it's interesting. Back in those days, the gathering of information and the dissemination of information wasn't *nearly* at the level that it is today. People knew less, there was functionally less to report, and the vehicles for reporting it were substantially more limited than they are nowadays. I mean, now news has become a joke. I think people, unfortunately, are zoning out on news because it's become too much of a business. It's like an advertisement. But back in those days, of course, you didn't have very much of that. And you didn't even have a lot of photography. People didn't take as many pictures as they take now and all those sorts of things, so the type of exposure that you had to what was going on out there was pretty limited. And also I think that it's certainly true that if anyone such as my father or people who were involved with Reynolds Electric or EG&G [Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier] or people who were in the upper echelon with the AEC, I mean their basic operating instructions were that you weren't supposed to be talking about this stuff, so they didn't talk about it. So it was just as simple as that, really. We did have one neighbor, lived about a block-and-a-half away, who had built an underground bomb shelter. It was the only one I'd *ever* seen. And the only way you could tell is they had built like a patio slab and they had some decorative furniture on it, but off in the corner

you could see this ventilation pipe coming up out of the ground, and you almost **[00:35:00]** had to look for it to find it. And oh, that was very mystic stuff when I was a kid.

Did you get to go down in it?

No, no, because we didn't know the people who lived there. They didn't have kids, so I didn't know anybody from school, couldn't wangle it that way. But yeah, that was pretty interesting stuff. And I don't think that those types of things ever really popped into my head, actually, until the Cuban missile crisis, not because so much of what was being reported on TV or the radio, but because I could sense a very, very somber seriousness on the part of all the adults that were around me. Obviously, *this* was something pretty serious. And *that* affected me. That scared me. I remember that. So, once again it's that thing that if adults don't think that kids pick up on things, they certainly do. And that was the case for me. But as far as did I used to, to my recollection anyway, did I used to think about the bomb, what it could mean to me, or—you know, back in those days, they didn't even talk about contamination. I mean they used to have soldiers standing 500 yards away or whatever. It wasn't even an issue. And it wasn't because they disregarded it, as some lawyers like to make a living out of nowadays, but they were functioning with the information that they had.

Yeah. I mean throughout the process, I'm sure we learned so much about—you learn as you go.

And could it be that that issue should have been addressed in later years as information was becoming available and was relevant? That's a different conversation. At that point then, unfortunately, then you do need a lawyer, I guess, but back in those days, I didn't even give it the time of day.

It's interesting because you were young but you were still, I think, old enough to be cognizant of it. Now, you said that your dad wasn't out there for any of the tests, that you didn't think but—

I don't think so, but then again, my father was a very traditional person. It could very well be that if [he] had ever at some point or another been instructed by someone that there are certain things that you're simply not supposed to talk about, he may've gone to his grave with that. And if that's the case, I can only respect him for having done what he thought he was supposed to do and regret that I didn't catch an extra-good story or two, but could very, very well be.

Do you as a kid remember when they used to do the tests? Because I think the tests were '51 through '62 when they were doing the atmospheric tests, and living here in Las Vegas, some folks have recollection of like their swimming pool sloshing back and forth or cups in the cupboards sometimes shaking, or downtown occasionally I think there was a light or something that they would—

I don't have any of that.

You don't recall?

No, I don't remember seeing the cloud. To begin with, I think the number of occasions when you could actually see anything when they had a detonation, from here in Las Vegas, were probably *very* few in number.

I think you'd have to be up pretty early, too. They did it in the early morning.

Well, you're talking about quite a ways away, and you're talking about differences in elevation. Did those clouds hold their form for a while? Yes, they did, but I mean they would have to hold that form while they were *way* up in the air for somebody to be able to see them from this far away. So no. Do I know from the press that they used to have parties and—? Well, of course—Miss Atomic [Bomb] and all that nonsense but that was Las Vegas. If you could pitch something and make a buck, that was the deal. And that hasn't changed very much.

No, that's still Las Vegas.

But no, I don't remember rattling or anything. I don't remember stuff like that.

[00:40:00] *Interesting, I thought. Just going back to the exposure thing or the contamination thing for a minute, did your dad ever mention—I mean was that something that he was ever concerned about or thought about, whether that was during the era or perhaps years later in hindsight?*

He never reflected upon it at all. He had bladder cancer, but that was only when he was in his mid-to-late-seventies so; whether or not there was any subsidiary value there, who in the world ever knows? Do I think he ever thought about it for more than two seconds? No, probably not. It's interesting. It almost seems like the people who experienced or ostensibly experienced problems with that were people that weren't at the test site. They were people that were living in Utah that caught the—

Right, downwind of the—

Right, the Downwinders. I don't know if it's because all the radioactive residue was drawn up with the plume so that really minimal—there wasn't a great deal of it at the test site. I really don't know.

That's an interesting point.

I do know that I had a friend of mine who—when you worked out at the test site—used to have to carry this badge that registered therms, I think is what they call their radiation. It would register by changing colors, and if your badge changed into a different color range, they would expect for you to excuse yourself and you couldn't go out there to work for a while. What the regimen may have been for doctors' exams or anything, I'm not too sure. But I do recall a friend or two of mine whose fathers were excused from work because their therm range had changed. But they were, as I recall, the badges were *extremely* sensitive so that it wasn't like you would be

considered normal and the badge would change only when you had reached a point of really being serious—it would register far, far before then, so that it wasn't, if you will, a health threat situation.

So they were fairly sensitive.

It would seem that they were quite sensitive to it, yes. And I don't recall my dad having a badge. I would think that I would've remembered that. So whether it was because he was in and out or because at that point in time they weren't using them—because these people that I'm talking about, the friends of mine that had fathers that were employed out there, *now* you're talking about people in the mid-to-late-sixties, and my dad by that time was no longer involved with any projects out at the test site.

But he remained in the business in the Las Vegas area, helping to build up the city as we know it.

Oh, yeah. He was a private contractor. He did a *lot* of work for the Clark County School District. In fact, the relocatable classrooms that are relied upon so heavily now, when they did that pilot project, my dad was the contractor. In fact, I think he built the first 126 or 128 of the relocatable classroom buildings, and many of them are still out on school sites. And you got to remember that those were built in the early 1980s, and they're all wood structures, so they've held up pretty well, actually. Yes, he did a lot of work for the school district. Did some work out at Nellis Air Force Base. Was always well respected.

You mentioned on the phone when we spoke last week something about information about **[00:45:00]** *estimated the barracks after they were completed. And was there an issue with that having to do with money or—?*

I'm not following you.

I may have misunderstood you but one of the things you started to tell me was something about not just being awarded the contract to built the barracks but—or maybe that was it, that they were awarded certain projects out there.

Yes, that would've had to have been what it was. My knowledge of the contract doesn't go beyond really much farther beyond that press release that I made available to you.

Which is interesting.

Back in those days, Las Vegas [Nevada] was an extremely sparsely-populated city. Las Vegas in 1950, like I said, I don't know, might've had thirty-six, forty thousand people here. And it's reflected in some interesting ways. For example, back at that time, the number of engineering tools like levels and transit levels and things like that, weren't very many of them. A level that my dad had obtained while working out at the test site was a mining level that they used out there. It's called a Dunphey level. The Clark County Historical Society has it now. The level, it's almost a hundred years old. What made it interesting was its transportability. You were able to use it for sight lines in much rougher terrain than you normally could with a transit level. So it has a special significance for that. And it may well be that they had to use things like that initially out at the test site because, you know, it's out in the middle of nowhere now but back then it was *really*, *really* desolate, uncharted territory.

Middle of the desert.

Nobody really had much reason to ever have been at—although at the time there was a scratch-out road that ran through the area to a mining area, to an old mining camp that was no longer used, and it was called Mercury; that was known as the Mercury Road, and that's why Mercury got its name. They didn't know what else to name it, so they named it after this scratch-out mining road.

Interesting. I never knew why it was called Mercury.

That's why. Yeah. So it may well be that that Dunphey level was of some real value to them initially when they were out there in the wilds.

Boy, it's come a long way, if you really think about it.

Oh, yeah, the level of sophistication and the amount of money that has been spent out there is just stupendous. My dad, probably after he left Lembke in the early 1960s, I don't know that my dad ever went out there again. I don't think he ever even went out there as a tour person or to go out with some of his old cronies or anything like that. To him, it was business.

It was a job and it was what he did.

Right, and when he didn't have a contract there, it was time to spend your time and attention on something else.

But from your perceptions as a kid, did he seem to like it? I mean it seemed to be—

My dad had a real *joie de vivre*. He had a real joy for life. And he had a particular talent. He was an exceptionally bright man. He had a photographic memory. He was very gifted mathematically. But at the same time, he absolutely loved to be out there in the regular element. He could be involved in the most intensive business negotiations and then later on the same day you could find him out at a job site sitting around b.s.ing with the workers and just absolutely loving both of those facets of the job. And he missed a lot of that because **[00:50:00]** the world has changed. And like so many other, if you will, old-timers, misses the days when—when a man gave you his word, that's all you needed, and if a guy was doing a lousy job he knew it, and if he got let go, he knew why, and there was no crying or complaining or fistfights or calling a lawyer. It was a world where everybody understood what their responsibilities were. And of course I think the test site was a lot like that. People felt that they had a responsibility for safety,

that they had a responsibility to be one step ahead of the adversary. And when you involve yourself in that type of thinking, you also understand that there are risks attendant thereto. Nowadays, people sometimes pay more attention to the risks than they do the project, and you can't, I suppose, necessarily blame people for that either, but it does impede progress.

The world we live in. I mean business is business, is what it sounds like your dad's attitude was about the business.

Right.

Have you been through the [Atomic] Testing Museum?

Yes, I did, recently. The movie was excellent. The exhibits, by and large, were extremely interesting. I'm very pleased that they put that in there. I overheard some of the employees in the foyer talking about a school bus tour being there sometime later that day. It's a *great* opportunity for kids. I know when I was a kid, of course, they didn't have things like that available. I think it's interesting because it's history, because it's history that involves the southern Nevada area. These kids here have such a serious lack of sense of community that unfortunately, even though it involves bombs, it's still something that happened in their area and bad things lend towards cohesiveness just like good things do, and for them to have the opportunity to view that, I think, is substantive. There are a couple of things that I had provided the Clark County Museum with that I think would've had a much better place at the museum. They, for example, had an example of a transit level that was used out there. That Dunphey level would've made a much better exhibit. Such things as these letters and press reports. They had a picture of Camp Desert Rock. I think it would've been interesting if they'd had a release showing the actual awarding of the contract. The information that I provided the museum, with regards to the towers and the Rapatronic camera and all of that, they have a major display of the Rapatronic camera. I think a

description of how the blockhouse was used would've been a very interesting one. They chose not to use it. But at one time, I had made this stuff available to UNLV [University of Nevada, Las Vegas] and they were quite excited about it. But I think what spelled the demise of it all was when they discovered that we were interested in providing this stuff to the school but that there wasn't a huge monetary contribution that was going to be forthcoming with it, and when they discovered that there was no money involved, I never heard from anybody ever again.

Was this just to the school or a specific department or—?

Who was it that I had contacted? I think it was the School of Engineering. So that was the end of that. And knowing that this stuff, functionally was of some value—I certainly felt it was, anyway—I gave it to the Clark County Museum, and to my knowledge, I think that stuff has never been put on display, that it's still tucked away in a box somewhere. So for anybody who's listening to this dissertation, if you can get it into something where somebody can make use of it, please do so.

Good point.

[00:55:00] *I just want to go back a little bit. You mentioned that you had siblings?*

Yes.

Four others?

Two brothers, two sisters.

And you're the oldest.

Right.

And what are their names?

The next oldest is Candy, who lives in Reno, Nevada. She graduated from Rancho High School. My brother Jerry, who graduated from Rancho High School, now lives in Florida. My brother

Tom, who graduated from Rancho High School, who lives in Florida. And last but not least, Cecily, who graduated from Bonanza High School and she lives in California.

So with the exception of Florida, you're sort of regionally located.

Somewhat. It's kind of interesting. I'm the last one of my family here in Las Vegas. And it's kind of sad in a way because we have a history of having been involved in a lot of things here in the community. But as times shift, we all find our own direction, I suppose. I am contemplating actually leaving in about a year, and there is a bit of conflict for me. My wife has reflected upon how I'm going to handle that because this community has had such a dynamic transition, and I say "dynamic" because it's happened in such a short period of time. When I graduated from high school here in 1969, there were only approximately 150,000 people that lived in Clark County. So you're talking about a *huge* expansion. The numbers really started taking off in the late 1970s. But whether it's viewing it as when I was a kid or viewing it as an adult, the fact remains constant that there are a *lot* of touchstones, if you will, involving my father's involvement that have been memorialized in the form of buildings. No matter where you go around town, there are things that he built or so on and so forth. And it does have a subconscious effect, I think, on people. And how I'm going to deal with that as I get older or once I leave, who knows?

Well, this has been your home for your entire life.

Right. But it's time. I'm moving to a smaller community. I'm moving to Prescott, Arizona.

Oh, Prescott is beautiful.

It's beautiful and it's small and it's quiet and they don't have 7-Elevens and slot machines on every corner and there are a lot of very nice people that live there and I look forward to it. There's no community here anymore.

Interesting.

And of course, Las Vegas, to some extent, it's always been that way. This has never been a community that's pretty, and it's never going to be. There's nothing about the weather. Half of the year the weather is horrible here, and the other half it's extremely nice, but 50-50 is no bargain. And the traffic issues are never going to go away because it suffers from mid-twentieth-century urban sprawl and there's no way you can get around it. And the crime here has reached near-epidemic proportions. There's only one reason to live here, and there's only been one reason to live here, and that's to make money. If you're not here to earn a living, or you're not here because you *have* to be here to earn a living, there's no reason to live here. So even with all the memories and all of that, I think it's time for me to try something else. And I really appreciate the opportunity that the school has provided by allowing people in this community who were involved with the AEC contracts to share that because that, I think, is a better tribute to the project than perhaps the project was itself.

Interesting. Well, it's something that certainly seems to be a foundational part of Las Vegas history.

Oh, sure. Well, back in those days, construction was a very important part of the economy. It is now. The dirty little secret in this community is that the reason **[01:00:00]** they're not stopping urban sprawl is because county government's deathly afraid of what's going to happen if you pinch the economy that comes out of the construction industry. It would be catastrophic. They've really got themselves in the crosshairs now.

Sure. It's got to keep going.

Yeah. Have you ever had an opportunity to interview Al O'Donnell?

No.

He was a project manager out at the test site.

I mean it's possible that we have and I'm just not familiar with the name.

He's big stuff. He lives in Henderson. And I believe—

[brief discussion of Al O'Donnell, spelling of name, etc.]

He's a senior, so you'd better get a hold of him quick.

[01:01:23] End Track 2, Disc 1.

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

An hour and twenty-eight seconds now.

Geez, I had no idea we'd been talking that long.

Yeah, time flies. Well, I guess I just have one more question, and sort of more of a broader question. Since you've been here for so long and you've been here really through some significant changes in Las Vegas, what has been or what do you think is the most significant change that has happened here in your time?

I think the expansion of the university has been a very good thing. I was in the gaming industry for a couple of decades, and I know that the School of Hotel Administration is highly respected. I think the introduction of I-15 when it was first built was *gigantic* for this community. Although I remember when I was in my early teens, we used to go out there and drag race. There were so few cars on it. You could do pretty much whatever you wanted to and—

That is no longer the case.

Oh, yeah. It's no longer the case. What do I think are good things? I think the maturity of the community has brought it to a place where a lot of folks who have been here for a number of years are in a position to financially give something back, and that's always a very nice thing to see. You know, this is still a young town, and there are actually only one or two generations of

southern Nevadans that actually qualify for that, who have been in business long enough to where they're in a position to be able to give back that way.

On the downside, I think that there has been very, very poor stewardship on the part of local government, particularly the county, and that as a consequence, I think it's not going to be too much longer, I would imagine within the next ten years, that you're going to see some very explosive situations in this community with regards to taxation. They have relied on the excuse of an expanding tax base for a lot of this union hand-holding and things like that. And as we have seen in the private sector, the attempts at trying to make things really comfortable or perhaps too comfortable for people in the future has its limitations. I think that they have really kept that out of the public limelight, but I think that it's a train wreck that's going to happen, no question about it.

I also think that, hand-in-hand with other parts of the United States but particularly in the Southwest, this immigration issue is going to have a larger and larger negative impact on the community. I don't say "negative" because I think that people from Mexico are negative inherently. I say it only because we're not getting people coming over the border who are successful people. We're getting people coming over the border who are bottom-tier employees, bottom-tier educational; and for all of the public relations that's coming down the line to refute it, the simple unavoidable matter of fact is that the cost is an imbalance to the benefit, and that's only going to get stronger and stronger in this community. How that is going to be handled, I don't know, but I do know that just as an example in the school district, monies that used to be budgeted for general use for kids are now being taken out of those areas and being specifically **[00:05:00]** targeted for use to address people who have English-as-a-second-language problems. Well, altruism aside, practicality just—there's just so many dollars that can go so many

directions. I'm on the Rancho High School Alumni Association and we were formed several years ago with the primary function of trying to help out the kids at Rancho, which is largely Hispanic, because it had been proven time and again that just throwing federal or state money at these things obviously is not the answer. The educational statistics for Las Vegas and for southern Nevada and for the State of Nevada are abysmal. So we decided that a community's responsibility is to step up whenever they can, and we have wherever we could. Of course, we've done the scholarship route, but more importantly we have done things like set up tutorial programs, help out kids who are *devastatingly* poor. At Rancho, actually, there are kids there that are homeless. And it's heartening, the silver lining in the cloud is that—nowadays with the kids, their cars, and mp[3] players and `I need this` and `I need that` and `I'm so unhappy because I can't own this`—here we have a collection of students who are living in transitional housing, and I mean even to something as simple as couch-to-couch, wherever they can find it, but these kids show up for school. If I could give a four-year college scholarship and a brand-new car to any kid, it would be to one of these kids, because they show up and go to school. So are my comments at all xenophobic or racist? No, not at all, because I participate on levels that involve *my* time and *my* money *for* those folks. But do I see that as a growing, very serious problem here? Absolutely.

Yeah, and something that's probably increased as you've lived here, I would imagine?

Oh, yes, unquestionably. I'm a real estate licensee and I've done business with people who are *legal* Mexican immigrants, and I know the difference between somebody who understands the rules and plays by them, even though they may be very difficult at the outset, and those who don't. You know, the people who typically don't follow the rules in one area have a proclivity to not follow rules in *other* areas. It's an *attitude*. But to give you a cute one, my gardener, who is a

legal immigrant, comes from a small town in Mexico, and he approached me about a half-a-year ago. He wanted me to find him a home. And I said fine, and we talked about it a little bit, and then he made it clear to me that it wasn't for he and his family, that they already *owned* a home. He wanted to buy *income* property. Now, this is a guy who's out there mowing my lawn, trimming my trees, he doesn't own a big fancy landscaping company, he does it with his kid. He's not afraid to work hard. He's humble but he has an entrepreneurial spirit. So I find him a house, and he's got some people renting it from him. And he told me what his plan is. He said that *his* house, for starters, that he and his family live in here, is paid for. That he plans on paying this other house off in ten years. And when he does that, he's going to move back to his little town in Mexico. Because with the rental income that he makes from his two houses—and he asked me, How much do you think I can rent these for?

And I told him, because they were in pretty marginal areas, quite frankly, I said, You could probably rent these houses for about $700 a month each.

[00:10:00] So he said, When I move back to my home town, if I can make rent of $1,400 a month, I'll be the richest man in my town.

And he said that with a big smile on his face, see. Now, that's where it's at.

That is the entrepreneurial spirit.

And he went through the steps, difficult though they may be. So those are the guys I bet my money on. Anyway, I digress.

Well, all part of the story. Was there anything that we didn't cover that you think is important to this story or your dad's story?

No. Las Vegas has always been a boom town. It was marginally so when the L.A. and San Pedro train [Salt Lake, Los Angeles, and San Pedro Railroad] came through. It was so when the [Hoover] dam was built. It was so when the titanium factory [Basic Magnesium, Inc.] was built

out in Henderson, which actually employed a lot more people than a lot of folks think. Their dining hall, I think, had the capacity to feed 10,000 meals a day. Yeah, it was quite a facility. The test site was a boom for them. Howard Hughes was a boom. And the dawning of corporate America was a boom. And the global economy was a boom. What the next level will be, I don't know. This town has been typified as the truest form of capitalist spirit that you can find in the world because it has shown the capacity to reinvent itself to accomplish whatever it needs for its survival. From creating the buffet, which had its derivations at the El Rancho Vegas, to making it kid-and-family friendly, to expanding on the amenities offered in the hotels, even though for the very first time it was no longer a bargain. The town has always reacted to the pulse of the country and responded, and responded by putting its money where its mouth is. And you can't find a community that does that more than this one does.

That's interesting because—yeah, you're right.

That takes a lot of guts. Of course, it takes a lot of b.s., too. Take guys like Sheldon Adelson, he's the owner of the Venetian, he's the owner of this, he's—he's the owner of *none* of it. What he was *great* at was getting other guys to pump their money into it. That's what these guys are *good* at.

Well, that's a skill.

Yeah, that's a definite skill. But, there are some people that have told me that when I move to a small town, that it's going to rub itself bland with me probably within a year.

You think you're going to miss this?

It's kind of like what we always used to say about people who left town: that it might be that you're gone two years, it might be that you're gone twenty-two years, but you'll always come back. And it's not because you want to go to Safeway at three o'clock in the morning, or you

have need to go to Safeway at three o'clock in the morning. It's because you know subliminally that if you *want* to go to Safeway at three o'clock in the morning, you can. And perhaps that will bother me somewhat.

But, you know, there are some very interesting similarities between Prescott and Las Vegas, because Prescott is like Las Vegas was in the 1950s when I was a boy, and perhaps that's **[00:15:00]** what the lure is for me. I was up there recently working on one of my investment properties—I have a small college dormitory up there—and I had taken a break and I went to a store. I bought a bottle of water and an apple and I drove downtown; in Prescott they actually have a city hall square with a big columned limestone courthouse surrounded with black oak trees, beautiful lawn, and I just sat down on a bench and drank my water and ate my apple and watched the world pass by, and I absolutely enjoyed it.

When I was a young boy living here, the Helldorado parade, which was three days, used to pass by City Hall. Used to pass right by City Hall. Yes, Fridays was the old-timers' parade, Saturday was the kiddie parade, Sunday was the boots-and-beauty parade. And they were the real thing. In fact, in its heyday, the Helldorado parade was I think the third-or-the-fourth-largest parade in the United States.

Oh, really? I did not know that.

Oh, they were *fabulous*. You know, the hotels used to build these big beautiful floats and have their showgirls on them, and they used to bring bands in. The highlight of every year, *every year*, they used to bring this one band into town. It was called the Long Beach Junior Concert Marching Band. If you find somebody who remembers that band, you're talking to somebody who's been around. They used to bring them in every year, and they used to play in *all* three parades, and they used to wear a different *costume* for each of the parades. They were a *huge*

band, *gigantic* marching band. You know, they had one of those banners in the front announcing, it was so big that it was on *three wheels*. And then they had like *forty* flag-twirling girls. And then they had like *thirty* baton-twirling girls. And then they had this *huge* band. I mean the tubas, they must've had three rows of tubas.

You don't have this anymore.

Oh, it was *fabulous*! And they always used to keep them for the end of the parade, to keep people there. So you'd be sitting there and sitting there and sitting there, and waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting, and then all of a sudden it was almost like your feet came up off the ground. It was like rolling thunder. And *off* in the distance was these two or three dozen snare drums playing, and here came that band. It was fantastic. That's my number-one memory of Helldorado.

That's a great story.

Yeah. It was a great band.

But anyway, Prescott is a lot like that. They have a tremendous community spirit. It's a small-town feeling. It's *very* western. The Californians are trying to "californicate" it. But the little community fights them tooth and nail. There's no billboards. There's no slot machines. There's no bars all over the place. There's no street lights all over the place. You walk outside my house and you look up at the night sky and there's no refraction from anything. It's the night sky. And it's a wonderful thing. And that's the way this town used to be. You know, until my dad's dying day, when he'd pull up into his driveway, take his keys out of the ignition, drop them on the floorboard.

Yeah. Can't do that anymore.

Not here. You can if you want to in Prescott. And maybe that's just the consequence of being in a big city now, but maybe I'm still looking for that. Maybe that's my pursuit. You know, it's just like with women. They say guys spend nine months trying to get out and seventy-eight years trying to get back in. And maybe it's the same thing with having grown up in a small town, is that I'm trying as I've gotten a little bit older now to find that peace. Maybe when I get there, I'll determine that the price is too steep. I don't know.

Luckily, you can come visit Vegas.

Right. I can always come back.

You can come get a little flavor of that.

Absolutely.

But no, it's interesting to hear that we've got Las Vegas what it is now and it's just blown up into this huge—the image of it precedes it, you know, and to hear people talk about it as being a little town, community, it sounds like—

Used to be a great place to live.

Very cohesive, tight-knit community with nice central gathering locations at various places and **[00:20:00]** *kind of small-town feel to it, so that's interesting. And I think that's really representative of some of the values that coincided with the test site, with the rise of the test site, just hearing your story and hearing various people talk about it.*

I'm sure you've heard some very fascinating things, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if you found some common threads involving what the test site represented to people in that era, both from a political standpoint as well as an economic one, to find out you've probably heard many stories about how this was Main Street America. Even though there was gambling, that was like a thing that was off to the side. It wasn't this overwhelming thing.

A side note. Well, I'm sure the Strip has grown exponentially since you've been here.

Well, it's funny because the few in number that were out there when I was a kid—the Flamingo, the Tropicana, I remember the El Rancho Vegas before it burned down. One of my very favorite all-time quotes about gaming involved the El Rancho Vegas. A reporter from the *Las Vegas Sun* showed up the evening of the conflagration, and while the building was on fire, he spotted a guy that he knew. He was a pit boss at the El Rancho Vegas who was standing there smoking a cigarette and watching the fire. And the reporter walked up to him and said, `Well, how do you think this fire could have occurred?` And the pit boss never looked over at the guy, just kept watching the fire, and he said, `Because Mr. Katleman don't know how to make a tornado.` [Beldon] Katleman was the owner. But even back in those days, there were a few—you know, the Frontier was out there. Where the Silver Slipper used to be—hopefully you remember the Silver Slipper—

I don't know what that's—

Oh, geez. There was a place that was across the street from where the Desert Inn—where the Desert Inn parking lot is, you know that brick one, that multi-story one? Across the street from there, which is a vacant parking lot now, it's right next to the [Desert Inn] Arterial, there was a casino there for a long, long time called the Silver Slipper. In fact, they've got the marquee of a revolving silver slipper with lots of light bulbs on it downtown at the Fremont Street Experience. It was there for decades. And that was the first place where they had boxing matches here in Las Vegas, upstairs. That's where Kenny Kerr's Boylesque got its start. But right next door to it, it had a place that was called Frontier Village. And that was a tourist attraction but it was also a place where Las Vegans used to go because they had western clothing stores there. But it was called Frontier Village or Frontier Town. Because they used to have all these displays with

Indians and all that sort of stuff. But that place had been there for a *long*, long time, and it was evocative of *all* of the western themes that were so important here in southern Nevada in those days. So we used to go out into the areas then, but as far as the casinos and all that, that was strictly for tourists and it had no practical application to anybody outside of some derision. A lot of people used to think that if you worked in a job where you were a dealer or a cocktail waitress back in those days, it was like you're a little on the shifty side of things, of course in large part because back in those days, most dealers were "mechanics." That's the popular terminology for card thieves.

I didn't know.

Oh, yeah, most of the dealers back in those days, the Sands with—it wasn't Milton Cohen. It was one of the Cohens. He used to tell his dealers, he'd come up and he'd say, with his finger (you never wrote down anything), he'd write, let's say, an 18. He'd write that on the table with his finger and he'd tell the clerk, who's what you'd call a dealer, `That's the percentage I expect this game to hold.` That's all he'd say. Now, how you got there was **[00:25:00]** up to you. Now, the reason that was important is because the dealer *then* could do anything he wanted in terms of cheating, in terms of taking money and chips off the table for himself.

Wow.

Oh, yeah, tubed trousers, they had more mechanisms, things up the sleeves; you wouldn't believe what these guys could do. But as *long* as that drop box showed that they won that number, that's all the house cared about. And all those joints ran that way. They were all crooked.

But that was another world. In fact, when I was a kid, there was only one person I knew whose father was in the business, in the gambling business, and his dad—it always used to be so strange because his dad must've worked swing because when I used to go over to his house after

school—no, he was probably working graveyard. When I'd go over to his house after school, [voice drops almost to a whisper] you had to be very quiet while you were in the house because his dad was sleeping. And I used to think, who has a job where you got to be asleep at four o'clock in the afternoon? I mean what's up with *that*, you know? So it was kind of like this *weird* kind of thing.

So it wasn't a common job for a family job.

No. It wasn't common at all. Very strange. And I knew one family, the mother was a cocktail waitress. She was a cocktail waitress at the Fremont Hotel. And she had a son and a daughter. And they were spoiled rotten. We used to just be amazed at what they used to get at Christmas time. Well, it's because she made a lot of cash money. But the thing that was always strange was that you weren't used to seeing somebody who looked that pretty all the time; who always, whenever you saw her, her hair was like she just came out of the beauty shop, her makeup was always—well, first off, she had a lot of makeup on, and secondly, that it looked really nice all the time. Moms did look like that, you know. What's with this lady? What's this all about? So it made her look a little odd. Times do change.

Oh, they do. They certainly do.

Listen, am I taking up too much—?

No, you're fine. Yeah, it's interesting. I just think it's really—the Las Vegas history, I think, doubly fascinates me as a parallel to the test site because it has, in such a short amount of time, developed and changed so quickly, and it's very interesting to hear from people that have been here and their families have been here. Because it's really not a very long time.

No, it's not. Actually, as things go, it's a very *short* period of time.

Right. I think it's interesting. Now, what part of town did you grow up in? What side of town?

Oh, let's see, the first home my parents owned was in Hyde Park, which is generally off of Charleston and Decatur. Then the second home they owned was in North Las Vegas. That was in, let's see, it was in 1955, and the reason I remember that is I was born in '51—no, it was 1956. The reason I remember that is when they moved there they put me in kindergarten, I was too young to be in kindergarten by a few months, but they made an exception and they let me go to kindergarten. I was only five years old. So that was in 1956. They then bought another house off of Charleston and Buffalo. Then in the early 1980s they built a home off of Patrick and Jones, and that's the home that my parents lived in until they passed away. So, I think it's kind of reflected the migration of the community. When they built the house—in fact, in North Las Vegas, when they bought that home, it was a Pardee Phillips home and it was the largest tract not only in the history of Las Vegas but it was the largest housing tract that had ever been built in the southwest United States. It was a big gamble on Pardee Phillips. **[00:30:00]** The house was like 1,200 square feet and I think it was $11,000 or some ridiculous garbage-can number like that. And then, as time went on, they moved along, and the home they ended up residing in until they passed away was a big house on a big piece of property.

Yeah. If you don't mind me asking, when did your folks pass away?

My dad in December of '98, my mom in September of '99.

That's very close together.

Well, my mom was in pretty poor health, so when my dad passed away—she just, you know, it was just one of those things where when one—you know. I was talking about Mike O'Callaghan, when he passed away last year, he had a heart attack while he was in church. He wouldn't have wanted to go any other place. He had a heart attack while he was in church. Well, his wife, she was OK, died within six months of his passing. She just died of a broken heart. And it's

interesting because there's a kind of a parallel there between my mom and dad and them. Mike O'Callaghan was a rough, tough, no-nonsense type of guy, very gregarious, very outgoing, extremely popular, loyal to a fault, all those sorts of things, but those are also the sorts of things that can make for a difficult husband. And my dad and my mom were exactly the same way. And one would think that in a way, a woman would be—even though of course love and all those sorts of things and having to raise kids together—but that they'd be somewhat relieved from getting out from underneath a yoke of being around somebody like that, to say nothing of always being in their shadow, but it doesn't work that way. It seems that when a wife loses somebody like that, an almost larger-than-life husband, that it just takes away too much of their world.

Well, when you've spent a good portion of your lives in this partnership, this relationship, it's—you know.

Yeah. So it's kind of interesting that way.

It is.

How long have you lived here?

I've only been here two years.

Whooooo! You haven't gotten the stardust out of your eyes yet.

Yeah, I don't know that it'll go away. Might stay there for a little bit.

Good. Hey, listen. There's nothing more important than enjoying where you're at, so whether you're here for a short time or a long one, I hope you enjoy it. There are a lot of people that have grown up here with me that have their gripes about this community, but are dumbfounded that I'm leaving. Larry, why do you want to leave? This is your town. This is your turf. You can't go someplace else and have what you have here. But what they don't understand is that my life has

changed as I've grown older, and the things that the community offers aren't the things that interest me anymore.

It changes, but the thing is, it's still here. It will still be here.

Right, and I would imagine that when we move, we'll keep a condo or a townhouse here because I'm still going to keep my real estate license here, so business will bring me back occasionally. By the way, do you need a house?

Someday.

You'd better buy one soon. Of course, you never know. The cycle may go in the toilet in the next few years and you can buy one for $12,000 like my parents did.

I'm waiting.

Waiting. Waiting to see that happen. I mean not—no harm to anyone, but it could happen.

Yeah, and of course it's funny. When I come out on this campus and you told me Wright Hall, but it's Building A. Well, that suggests that there's a B or a C or a D or an E. And this was it, when I was going to school here. This was it.

What years were you here?

Nineteen seventy through nineteen seventy-four. I had Frank Wright for a couple of political science—

Oh, you're kidding.

I had him for History of the Middle East. One of my favorite professors here was Vernon Mattson. Is he still around?

I have no idea.

History professor?

I do not know.

My favorite English professor, her name was Felicia Campbell. Do you know Felicia?

No.

She's been here for a long time. She was a *good* instructor. I had some good teachers here, I had some lousy teachers here, but you can say that about any institution.

As is the case with anything, yeah.

Sure. You know. But I'm glad you're here and I'm hoping you're enjoying it. Where'd you do your undergraduate work?

[00:35:00] *Colorado. University of Colorado.*

And since you can't teach where you graduated, you came here so that you could get your doctorate and go back there.

I'd be very happy going back there.

Colorado Springs?

I was in Colorado Springs for a bit, yeah. Absolutely. I lived in Manatee Springs.

This heat must kill you.

Yeah, it's a strange thing.

I mean it's so pretty up there.

Yeah, it's a transition.

You know, there are places in this valley you can go to and still get a taste of the small-town stuff. If you go into Overton and areas like that, there's a nice peacefulness to it. It's kind of quaint. You know, the Rupperts that I referred to earlier—I don't know if you've ever gone out to Warm Springs.

I haven't.

OK. That was a *mammothly* popular area in the sixties and seventies anyway, and beyond that I can't reflect. They have some natural warm springs out there. It's out in the Moapa Valley. It's about sixty-five miles out of town. I mean you have to drive a ways. But they had two pools out there. They had a private one that had a gravel bottom, and that cost X-number of dollars to go into, and in my youth we never went there. And the other one was $2.00 a carload or $1.00 apiece or something, and that's the one we went to, and it was a triple-Olympic-sized swimming pool, and we used to go out there *all* the time and just have a marvelous time. Well, the reason I tell the story is because as you're coming into the Warm Springs area and you've taken the turnoff, there used to be this compound. There was, oh gosh, I don't know, ten acres or fifteen acres that was surrounded with huge—out in the middle of the desert—*huge* palm trees, great big huge palm trees, and there was a big house out there and a private gate and all that. That was Smiley Ruppert's out-of-town hideout, and that's where they used to go on the weekends to get away from it all. And he built his own private landing strip out there. And he made and lost several fortunes. He was big stuff in this town. A lot of people knew him. A lot of people liked him. Robert Ruppert. He was known as Smiley. And Bobby Ruppert was his son. They were very colorful people. He had graduated from SC [University of Southern California]. His wife graduated from UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. And they were bitter rivals. No, the husband and wife. When it came to the schools. In fact, when the football teams would play each other and they'd go to southern California, one would sit on one side of the football field, the other would sit on the other side of the football field. They were incredible people. The last thing that Smiley ever worked on in this town is he had long ago given up his company. Bobby bought it from him or something. And when they built the MGM Grand, Smiley worked for the mechanical contractor on that job. I think he was the superintendent of the job. I think it was

Hansen had the job, I'm not sure. But that was the last project in this town, and at that point Smiley was pretty old.

But once again, outgoing, smart, tough, stubborn. And those were the guys that I grew up around because they were contemporaries of my dad. I was very, very fortunate in having known a lot of not just so much successful but *powerful* people who weren't afraid to work, who weren't afraid to think, to take chances, but who mostly by and large at the same time, even though some of them were just as high-flying as any characters you'd ever meet, they all seemed to have this thread of humility. They never, when it was all said and done, thought that they were intrinsically any better than anybody else.

And I think that's a rare combination of traits these days.

[00:40:00] Yes. Isn't that the sad truth of it all. It's because people lack self-confidence nowadays, and a lot of it is because of advertising, it's because you're not successful if you don't have this, or this is what marks you as being successful, or why don't you have this. And, I suppose the easiest example in terms of community is when *I* was growing up, when adults were involved in their community, well, that meant they put in time, their own time, maybe some of their money, but mostly their time, their creativity, and it was always a group effort. Now, what do people do now? They don't do anything. They hire somebody. They write a check and they put it in the mail. Nobody rolls up their sleeves and does anything for anybody.

Certainly a different way of life that we live.

And it's a sad one, because people just keep removing themselves a step at a time from the people next door to them. And when you don't have that—you no longer feel that you can *count* on somebody and vice versa, that puts up barriers—then you're, I mean ever since cave dwellers, there's always had to have been this cooperation. Well, when you start losing all of that, you lose

a lot of your identity as a person, and then you start becoming suspicious, then you start becoming territorial, and it's a sad thing really. There's nothing good about it. It's all bad.

Well, it's a state some of us have evolved to, or the way we live. It's more of a lifestyle. It's a personal thing.

Well, if you like helping people, keep carrying the flag. Don't let anybody ever dissuade you from trying.

I think we still have those amongst us.

Oh, I absolutely believe it. Absolutely believe it. And you know, it's funny because people see somebody who's involved and they go wow, isn't that great, I should do something like that. And their wife'll say, because it's invariably the guy who says that and does nothing, the wife'll say well, why don't you? They're taking names and signing people up. Oh, I'm going to have to think about it a little bit. People still think about it, but they're not willing to give anything up. And it's the urbanization of America. We left the farmlands and all of that stuff and nobody needs each other anymore.

Well, we just live so differently.

It's funny, in Prescott, a number of my neighbors, our neighbors, are older people. And you learn a lot about older people. One of the things you learn is that they're not—my parents were very different from these people. Most of these people are what my parents' age would be now. They play *tennis* two or three times a week, they play *golf*, they're out doing stuff *every day*. They're *remarkably active* and *healthy*. And not only that, I'm very fortunate because a number of these people have led some *extremely* interesting, very *high-profile* lives and they're smarter than hell. And they talk about stuff and it's like, you did *what*? You were *where*?

Yeah, people are interesting.

But they talk about it in this simple sort of way. It's not like, catch this! It's more like just telling a story.

It's just what they did. It's part of their lives.

And it's so very, very different, you know. They were brought up in an era where people visited, people played cards. There was a real sense of communication between people, and it's completely lacking nowadays. It's completely lacking.

I think so. I think, certain places you go, it's still there, like you say, Prescott, but by and large, our cities are starting to change.

Yeah. This town will never go back to those days again. Of course it's nice when people do programs like the one you're involved in here because it gives people a taste of it. And **[00:45:00]** people enjoy that because there's an ease of spirit and an ease of tension that comes when you read or learn about things where people were involved and life was simpler and there were well-defined parameters with what you were supposed to do and not supposed to do.

And that's certainly one of the interesting things about this project is kind of, I guess, stepping back into that, or just hearing about it, and it's interesting.

Oh, you've got to have heard some marvelous stories.

Absolutely.

I can't think of a job that would be much more fun that what you're doing.

It's pretty cool. People have great stories. Like the folks you're talking about in Prescott. People are full of information and they have got great stories.

I think that if someone was to listen to these tapes or read the transcripts who doesn't live here or who has *never* lived here, I think that they would be very, very surprised to find out what so

much of this town really is all about. That it has nothing to do with the perceptions that most people have.

And by and large, that's an interesting offshoot of this project is hearing about what it was like, and like I said, just from the interviews that I've done and that I've heard, that the change from then to now, I guess if you just want to classify it like that, has been very quick in terms of time, and it's only been a couple of decades, really.

In truth, yes. The Strip. You know, people talk a lot about Howard Hughes. That's not when the Strip really took off. The Strip really took off in the late 1970s, around '78, '79, maybe 1980. That's when there was a huge transformation in the industry. There were a couple of things that happened. One of them, of course, was the aging of America. That started around then. And Steve Wynn was the first one to implement that. You know, and I was in the business and I worked for Mike Gaughan over at the Barbary Coast when they first opened up.

What were you doing?

I was a pit boss. And they pooh-poohed Steve Wynn like crazy, you know, that his ideas just were too outlandish. Even the Strip operations, they still had—have you ever heard the terms "sawdust" and "carpet"?

I have not.

OK. If you're a sawdust floor operator, you're like a downtown operator. If you're a carpet joint, that means you're a high-class place. But even the carpet joint places had this very small mentality. They never trusted anybody. You never spent any of your own money. And when Steve Wynn came on line and started with what was then revolutionary thinking, there were people who thought, this is never going to work, this guy is nuts. Well, he was the first one to actually go out and view two things: first off, the gaming industry as entertainment, and

secondly, the aging of America. There's a term that approximately 50,000 people a day turn fifty-five. Now, those people are now going into a range of expendable income. Their kids have grown up, most of their kids are out of college, and now they don't mind spending some money *if*, and this is the different, you give them value. Steve Wynn was the first one. Even though Caesars Palace was in existence, Caesars Palace was a pimp joint. Steve Wynn was prepared [to] give value. We're going to give you nice, luxurious amenities everywhere and in every aspect of this building. The *difference* was that back in those days, if you were a tourist, you weren't used to paying any money for anything. Steve Wynn said, I'm going to give you all these things but you're going to have to pay for them. And guess what happened? He found out that if you give people quality, there's a growing segment of the population that's willing to pay for it. And *that* is what has spawned *all* of this. When I first started out at the Barbary Coast, when we first opened the Barbary Coast in March of 1979, you could get, for example—well, not even in 1979, even a couple of years later than that, but we'll say '79—at Caesars Palace where they **[00:50:00]** had that tower where they had the nice round windows where you could look out on the Strip, you could get one of those rooms for $150 a night. *Now*, what is it? Two hundred and fifty to rent a cubicle at any one of these places.

Yeah, it's crazy.

Outrageous. Well, all of that started to change. Now, all of a sudden, it was, you want a cabana? We've built *cabanas* and we will *rent* one to you, but it's going to cost you this much money. Guess what? People would pay for it.

They'll pay for anything.

That's right. So he was the one, when they talk about what he did, it's true.

So he was the one that began to transform the Strip as we know it now.

He's the one that took the chance. There's absolutely no question about it. Now, of course, he was like Sheldon Adelson, he didn't do it with his money. Mike [Michael] Milken is the one that got him involved in the junk bond business, and he was probably a half-step away from going to jail just like Mike Milken did.

See, look at all this Vegas history.

Yeah. But those are when things really started to take off. Because the town actually was in a little bit of a doldrums financially. For example, the slot business. The slot business was *flat*. People were becoming *bored*. Then what happened? Video poker. Video poker rejuvenated the slot machine industry, not only in this city but in the whole *world*. That is the greatest single technological achievement in gaming *ever*. It's a *bad* game because it's *highly* addictive, but I'll give you an example of the *dollars* that are involved. The guy who didn't—he didn't invent video poker but he invented the platform that allowed for playing multiple games. His name was Williams. He holds the patent for that. And it took him eight years of negotiation before he came up with an agreement that was acceptable to all parties. Well, he gets $3.00 a day for each game. And when you talk to people about that they'll go, what's the big deal? Well, when you think about how many slot machines there are everywhere, let's say we're going to make this math real simple and real meager. Let's say there's only a thousand machines in the whole world that have that. That's $3,000 a day, seven days a week, so he's making $21,000 a week just off of a *thousand* machines. Now, how much money do you think this guy's making? It's *gigantic*. Gigantic.

It's a lot of money.

That's right. Revolutionized slot machine playing, though. So when you see things like that happen, the town, it jumps in spurts and so on and so forth, there are people now that are starting to complain a little bit about the cost.

Sure. Yeah, it's growing.

People are starting to say the restaurants are getting a little too expensive and we're getting a little tired of these room rates, but whatever the city needs to do, they'll do it. They'll find a way.

Seems like they always do.

Well, anyway, I'm cutting into your lunchtime and all kinds of time.

No, I definitely appreciate you taking the time to do this.

I enjoyed it thoroughly. It's a great project. Do you have any idea at all when you may have something on paper?

Yeah.

[00:54:09] End Track 2, Disc 2.

[End of interview]