

# An Interview with Eugene Buford

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

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The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

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Produced by:

The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries

Director and Editor: Claytee D. White

Assistant Editors: Gloria Homol and Delores Brownlee

Transcribers: Kristin Hicks and Laurie Boetcher

Interviewers and Project Assistants: Suzanne Becker, Nancy Hardy, Joyce Moore,  
Andres Moses, Laura Plowman, Emily Powers, Dr. Dave Schwartz



Recorded interviews and transcripts composing the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project have been made possible through the generosity of Dr. Harold Boyer and the Libraries Advisory Board. Lied Library provided a wide variety of administrative services and the Special Collections Department, home of the Oral History Research Center, provided advice, archival expertise, and interviewers. The Research Center enabled students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. Participants in this project thank the University of Nevada Las Vegas for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

The transcripts received minimal editing. These measures include the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project. Additional transcripts may be found under that series title.

Claytee D. White, Project Director  
Director, Oral History Research Center  
University Nevada Las Vegas



## Table of Contents

Recollections of moving to Las Vegas, Buford's neighbors, and where African-Americans were working in the city	1-4
Mary Nettles and her husband, Clarence Hodge- highlighting their work experiences	4-6
Boarding houses- reflections on Mary Nettles' and Mrs. Pinkston's	6-7
Church and school- early memories and a look at several classmates	8-9
Early memories of downtown Las Vegas- black-owned businesses and selling newspapers on Block 16	9-10
High school years- Buford reminisces as he looks at old photographs, including a yearbook that reflects the levels of segregation at the time	10-13
Playing on a city basketball team- a look at teammates and sponsoring businesses for a local team called Renaissance	13-15
Work experiences- doing dishes at the Last Frontier, working as a gandy dancer in Herlong, and getting drafted into the Korean War	15-17
Reflections on living in the diverse Westside with neighbors of all ethnicities	17-18
Businesses on the Westside- black-owned nightclubs, restaurants, beauty shops, and various other businesses	18-20
How Buford's mother and grandmother made a living, including ironing shirts for Benny Binion	21
Other places of employment for blacks- work on the strip and the Nevada Test Site	21-22
Returning to Las Vegas in the late 50s- getting back to work delivering ice and working at the post office	22-24
Growth of Las Vegas- how the city has become integrated over the years	24-25
Mary Nettles and the start of the NAACP	25-26
Recreation in Las Vegas- hanging out at "Four Mile" and being banned from local swimming pools	26-28
Churches Buford attended with a focus on his grandmother and the start of Second Baptist Church	28-30
Reflections on the Civil Rights Movement and the integration of the strip, including a memory of attending a meeting to organize a march	30-32
Life after 36 years at the post office and a few memories about Helldorado	32-33
More memories of Las Vegas recalled- playing in alleys as a kid, marriage, children and grandchildren, and being part of a union	33-35
A further look at being a black person in Las Vegas- owning businesses, working for BMI, living in Carver Park, etc	36-38
Elks social club and being a part of Helldorado	38-39
Recollections of Al Bramlet, Sarah Hughes, Jimmy Gay, and the mob	39-44
Reflections on past and present Las Vegas- what the future holds for the Westside and where the power lies in Las Vegas today	44-46



## Preface

Eugene Buford came to Las Vegas from Birmingham, Alabama, when he was two years old with his mother and grandmother. He held several jobs during his life in Las Vegas, including washing dishes at the Last Frontier and delivering ice to casinos like the Flamingo and the Stardust. He is currently retired, after spending thirty-six years working for the Post Office.

Buford's great grandmother, Mary Nettles, was instrumental in the start and growth of the NAACP chapter in Las Vegas. Buford recalls his great grandmother holding meetings in her house and his own role as president of a Junior League NAACP.

It was these early experiences that opened Buford's eyes to prejudice and discrimination. Much of his interview reflects upon what it was like being an African American growing up in Las Vegas. He recalls the attitude of the community at various moments in history and compares them to his own feelings of the time. Buford also expresses many memories of important figures in Las Vegas history, including James B. McMillan, Charles West, Jimmy Gay, Benny Binion, and the mob. In addition, Buford reflects on historical locations and events of the city, such as Helldorado, Block 16, and Carver Park.



**Tuesday, September 12th, 2006. And I'm in the home of Eugene Buford here in Las Vegas.**

**How are you this morning?** *[Interview conducted by Claytee White.]*

Just fine. Just fine. Just fine.

**Great. Great. So tell me a little bit about where you're from and when you first came to Las Vegas. Now, were you old enough to remember?**

No, I wasn't. I was just about two years old and came from Birmingham, Alabama. My great grandmother, Mary Nettles, was already living here. And I came from Alabama with my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother -- well, I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

**No. Go ahead because I do want to know a lot about Mary Nettles.**

Yeah. Well, Mary Nettles, who is my great grandmother, and her husband came to the Valley I think in the teens. And the reason black people were coming here then was to work on the railroad. That was about the only employment that they could seek, then, was at the railroad. They bought a -- I don't know -- I think they called it a section or something. It was up on Third Street across from where Lady Luck is now. Above her right at the corner of Stewart and Third Street where the post office is was another black family, Ike and Nancy Pulham. Well, that's where I was staying when I start realizing where I was.

**So you were downtown?**

Yes.

**What is today downtown?**

Yeah. And that is where most of the people stayed, most of the black people. In that same block on the Ogden side was the Jones family. They had kids about my age who were a couple of years older than I. They're the first people that I remember being in contact with. In fact, I used to follow them to school, which was a fifth grade school, every morning. Ruth, who was older than her brother or me, got so tired of me following her to school and then she'd have to take me back home, which would make her late, just took me on and put me in kindergarten. She took me over to the school and took me to the kindergarten class, left me there, and that's where I started school.

**So how old were you when you started?**

I was almost five.

**Okay.**



Yeah.

**And now, her name was Ruth Jones?**

Ruth Jones, uh-huh.

**Now, how old was she?**

Well, let's see. Yeah, Ruth is -- I think she said she'd be 80. So she's about two and a half, three years older than me.

**Okay. So now, is she still in Las Vegas?**

No, she isn't. But she is living in Pasadena, California.

**Oh, really.**

Altadena, California. She and her brother, they both live over there.

**Oh, that's interesting.**

And I speak to them twice a month, anyway.

**The next time you talk to them, ask them when they will be back in Las Vegas to visit because we would love to interview them.**

Well, they can't stand the heat anymore like they used to.

**Oh, I see.**

But they said they'd be over here when it got a little cooler.

**Well, good. If they're going to stay around for a while, let me know because we'd love to interview them if they will allow it.**

Sure.

**Now, tell me about the work on the railroad. Did you know any men? Was Mary Nettles married at that time?**

Yes.

**So did her husband work on the railroad?**

He worked on the railroad.

**Do you remember his name?**

Sam. After he died, everything that she would sign she wrote "S, dot, M Nettles," I guess in respect of him or whatever.

**Do you remember the kind of work he did on the railroad?**



Oh, I don't know. I used to hear him always say something about a hostler, whatever that was. I think that was the guys that oiled the trains and all that.

There was another family here, the Christiansons. They all worked at the plant or whatever they want to call it, the railroad. Let's see. The Christiansons. There was another neighbor that lived next to door us named Harris, Robert Harris. He was a preacher. I think he was from Georgia, and he worked there. After I moved from Third Street, we moved to what is now the Westside.

**Why did you move?**

Why I don't know. It seemed to be as if one day all the blacks were downtown and then they just faded away to the Westside, you know. Being a child, I didn't understand the politics or whatever the heck was going on, but I can imagine it was just pure segregation, you know.

So anyway, this Harris fellow that lived next door to us, he had I think seven girls and one boy. And the boy was named after his dad, which is Bobby. And let's see. What else? Well, on Van Buren where I was living, I was living with my grandmother.

**That's when you came to the Westside?**

Yeah, when I came to the Westside with my grandmother and her husband, who is my step-grandfather, Bill Haney, William Haney. And I stayed there with them through school.

**What did Bill Haney do for a living?**

Oh, he was a laborer at the locomotive office. And then he went from there after -- they started hiring blacks at the Boulder Dam. He got in because my grandmother was a domestic to the head engineer. The name was Crowe. So he got a job out there. Then after the dam was finished, he still stayed on as a janitor at the dam when mostly everyone else was gone.

**Now, your grandmother worked for Crowe?**

Yes.

**So she had to go back and forth to Boulder City?**

Yeah, sometimes she would go back and forth and then sometimes she would stay over because I know I didn't see her for a while. And she said she'd see me on the weekend or something like that, you know.

**So black people could live in Boulder City if...**

She stayed at the Crowe's house.



**That's what I mean. So they could stay there if they stayed in a house with a white person?**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Like you said, there were no blacks in Boulder City. Let's see.

**What did she tell you about Boulder City? Do you remember any of the stories?**

About the city itself?

**Or about working for them or anything that she would say.**

Well, no. I know that she worked out there with them and she was always getting somebody a job because she worked for the man, you know. So, therefore, she was in a nice position. You know, all the blacks came to my grandma because she had a good job.

**But this was a domestic job?**

Yeah, she was a domestic. Oh, heck, I don't know.

**So did the Crowes ever entertain? Did she talk about their entertaining people in their home?**

No, they didn't do too much entertaining. I think he had two or three daughters. And they were more family-orientated people, you know. They'd go on vacations and they'd go to San Francisco because I went with them one time. They said, yeah, Clarence, you bring your grandson on with you, you know. He said I ain't got nobody to keep him, you know. So I went with them, you know. And I do remember a big hotel we were in. That's about the extent of the Crowes because like I said they were a close-knit family and they didn't -- I didn't know anything else about them.

**Now, tell me about your great grandmother, Mary Nettles.**

Oh, well, she was here --

**When did she come?**

She came -- I think it was around '16, '17; 1916 or 1917. And she came with her son, which was Clarence.

**Clarence Ray?**

No. His name was Clarence Hodge. He was Clarence Hodge. And he went into service. I think he went into the army from Alabama in the First World War. And he was gassed over there and he was in pretty bad shape the rest of his life. But he was one of the first businessmen here in town. He had a shoeshine stand and he had three other people working for him. And in the summers I would work for him shining shoes.

**Where were the stands located?**



On Second right off of Fremont, yeah. Used to be a Chinese place on one corner -- I mean on one side of it and a liquor store on the other side, Ethel's Liquor Store. Oh, God, I used to hate shining shoes. Dogs would come and poop on the sidewalk and he'd tell me to go get it and I would say, "Oh, no, I ain't going to do that." He said, "You work for me; you do that." You know, so I can remember different instances, you know.

But he was a hard drinking man, gambler. But he was a disciplinarian. You know, he would make you understand what and when you had to do something.

**Now, where did he gamble?**

Anyplace, anything on Fremont. He'd go in any joint because they knew he had money.

**Okay. So there was no segregation at that time with blacks gambling?**

Oh, yes, there was segregation. Yes. But if you walked in a place and you wanted to bet your money, hey, you were all right then.

**Okay. So could you eat in those places?**

No, they didn't want to feed you in none of those places. No.

**Even back in the 1920s?**

Now, how would I know?

**Oh, okay, that's right because you're talking about now -- about what year are we talking about when you used to shine shoes with Mr. Hodge?**

Oh, well, that was in the 40s, early 40s.

**Oh, okay. So we're already in the 40s.**

Yeah.

**So now, when you started kindergarten, we're talking about -- okay. Mary Nettles came here in 1916 or 1917. What year did you and your grandmother -- you came here in 1938.**

No, no. I came in '32.

**So around 1938 is when you first start having memories?**

Yeah, I guess around then.

**Okay. Now, tell me what the Christiansons did for a living.**

The Christiansons? I told you they worked at the shops.

**The railroad, also?**



The railroad.

**Okay. So the Pulhams, the Joneses, the Harrises, all of them worked for the --**

Everybody worked there, yeah.

**Now, Mary had her own business, didn't she?**

Oh, she was I think the first one to have a barbeque stand. She always wore an apron, not only to keep her clothes clean, but to conceal her large pistol she had.

**Why did she need a pistol?**

Well, that was just her way, you know. And she didn't want nobody to mess with it. She could speak really rough to any and everybody. All the white people that didn't respect her were the ones that were afraid of her. Yeah. So let's see.

**Did she also own property?**

Yeah. That's what I was saying. Across from Lady Luck.

**So she actually owned.**

She owned property there, yes.

**Did she have a boarding house at one time?**

No, she had no boarding -- oh, yeah, well, she did, too. The apartments we called them. Yeah, I think it was a big shotgun-like building and it had about eight rooms in it I think. Yeah.

**Now, do you remember a man named Clarence Ray?**

Yes, Clarence.

**Now, at one time, according to his memories, he lived in that boarding house at one time.**

Yeah, he may have. Yep, because on the other street on Second Street and Ogden was Mrs. Pinkston. Okay, now, Mrs. Pinkston had a big boarding house. Hers were more or less like apartments. But she didn't rent to anybody but white people. Yeah, no blacks. I used to call her some ugly names under my breath.

**Was that because she wouldn't rent to blacks?**

That I called her names?

**Is that why?**

No. I called her ugly names under my breath because any time you walked in front of her place using the sidewalk, if she was out there with her dog or if she was watering or whatever she was



doing, she'd start giving you this long tirade about you little black so-and-so and all that stuff, you know.

**Why?**

That was her type of persona, you know, because she rented to white folks. I mean during that time, you know, there were certain segments of our black community that just kissed up and she was one of them.

**Okay. So are you saying that everything was completely segregated from the very beginning?**

Really, growing up as a kid, I knew I couldn't go in this place and I knew I couldn't go in that one, you know. Or if I went in a place, they'd tell me, hey, you can't come in here, you know. So then I went out, you know. But as far as segregation, it was just like anything else. It was there and you accepted it.

**Did you ever hear your grandmother or mother talk about the difference between here and Alabama?**

The difference? No. I mean they never...

**Where did you attend church as a young man, a young boy?**

Oh, the first church I went to was Zion Methodist.

**Okay. Was that the first one you remember?**

That's the first one. That was downtown and that's where I was living. So that's the church I went to. Reverend Cook was there at that time. And naturally, my great grandmother was running most of the things around there.

**In the church?**

At the church or wherever, yeah. Oh, wait a minute. I got something --

**Okay. I'm going to stop it.**

-- that they gave us from that church.

**Oh, really?**

Yeah, let's see. Yep. My great grandmother was the superintendent.

**This is from Zion Methodist Sunday School.**

Yeah, that's it.

**This is 1941. And Mrs. S.M. Nettles is the superintendent. 12/25/1941. "Without the word of**



**God in thine heart, life is a failure." Wow. This is wonderful. And it's still in great condition.**

Oh, it's still pretty good condition. I keep all of our papers in here. Got passports and everything.

**I see that you have passports in here. Have you and your wife traveled a lot?**

She travels a lot. I'm not a -- but we go. Yeah, we take a little cruise every once in a while and do something.

**Oh, that's wonderful. That is wonderful.**

**Tell me about -- now, you went to school early, went to kindergarten.**

Yes.

**Was that completely integrated?**

Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was completely integrated.

**Who were some of the students that you remember going to school with in those early years?**

Oh, gosh. Well, like we got one guy here that's a retired judge now, Judge Mendoza. There's a retired policeman, Albert Skalton. These are the ones that I have seen in the last year and I know they're alive. Let's see. Well, there's a number of them, but I don't know if they're dead or alive.

**That doesn't make any difference. I just wanted some names of some of the early people that you remembered.**

Oh. Well, one guy I went to school with, he was white, a white guy -- well, two of them -- McFaden, Wright -- and they both grew up to be priests. Yeah, they went into the priesthood. And then there was George Sullivan. He was appointed by somebody to do something in the state. Mayor Bellig, he was a commissioner. Well, those McFadens, there was a tribe of them -- well, not a tribe. You know, it was a large family of them. Okay. Then there was the Picos.

**Now, the Picos were Mexican-American?**

No. The Picos -- I don't know what they were. But I think one is Italian or something like that.

Then like you were saying, the Mexicans, I grew up with Benny Batista and his family. And they lived over on the Westside. Ozunas, yeah, there were two brothers.

**Now, what nationality is the Ozunas?**

The Ozunas were Mexican. And Batista was Mexican. Boy, I can't remember some of those names.

**Oh, but that's wonderful. So it sounds like in the school you had blacks, whites and Mexican-Americans.**



Oh, yeah, because there was -- okay. Now, I started school over there on Fifth Street. Then as the migration began to move over to the Westside here, I went up to Westside School. Of course, that's KCEP building now.

**The radio station right now.**

Uh-huh. And Ray Christianson was a year younger than me and his dad, Ray Senior, always had horses or whatever. And every once in a while, the old man would let us ride the donkeys to school. And so, oh, boy, we were top dogs then. We would park our donkeys out there and go into the class. (Indiscernible) and get on our donkeys and ride home. Yeah.

**That was the Westside School?**

Yeah, that was at Westside School.

**So the Christiansons had already built that house, the Christianson house that's over --**

Oh, no, no, no. In the late 30s and early 40s, he started building that house, yeah, because my grandmother's house was right across the street on E and Van Buren. And he's on E and Van Buren.

**Right.**

Yeah, I remember when he started to bring the brick home, you know. Let's see. I know all the neighbors used to kid him about what he was going to do, you know. Are you trying to build the biggest house in the world? You know, and all that kind of stuff. Okay. And the guy that used to help him was Ensley, Boise Ensley. He was a great big dark guy. His father was Jake Ensley, which everybody called Uncle Jake. And Uncle Jake had the barbeque stand on 16th Street -- I mean across from 16th Street, from the prostitutes.

**Oh, Block 16?**

Yeah, Block 16. That's what I'm trying to say, yeah.

**Okay.**

Okay. And that's where the first black businesses were up in there. Uncle Jake had this cafe we called it. Then next door to that was Mr. Reid. He had what was supposed to be a pool hall. He had a broken down pool table and all they did in there was gamble. And then they had a barbershop.

**And this was all downtown?**

Yeah, this is all on First Street. It was right across from the whorehouses. I know when I was a kid me and a Mexican kid used to always be into it because we wanted to sell papers down there. You



could always sell a bunch of papers down there because all them girls wanted papers, you know.

**Why?**

Well, to read, you know, read their daily paper, The Age and The Sun. Now it would be the Review-Journal, but it wasn't going on then. Yeah. And so, boy, we would scrap to see who was going to get down there first.

**So what did you do? Did you go to The Age building to buy the papers?**

Yeah, you go there and you pay so much for them. I think we were paying two and a half cents for them and selling them for a nickel or something like that.

**So any other black businesses down there other than the barbeque stand and the barbershop?**

**(End tape 1, side A.)**

**Oh, this is your high school diploma?**

Yeah.

**Oh, look at the -- oh, this is beautiful. And you finished high school in 1946.**

Right.

**Okay. George Harris. So there was a white family named Harris, as well?**

Oh, yeah. That was his school.

**Oh, Maude Frazier was the superintendent.**

Yeah. Well, I got something here before that.

**Okay. Eighth Grade Graduation, 1942.**

Yes.

**Oh, look at all the students in the class.**

Yeah.

**Oh, my.**

I think all those students there, that was all the students, period.

**Oh, all the students in the school. Oh, this is great just to have all these names. So are you going to let me make copies of this?**

I don't know.

**Wow. This is wonderful. This is your program for the graduation.**

Yeah.



**Okay, this is great. And what kind of book do you have here?**

Oh, this is my yearbook.

**And this is the high school yearbook?**

Yeah, high school yearbook.

**And it's called the Boulder Echo, 1946.**

Yeah. Don't date me.

**I'm sorry. Okay. Oh, now, who is this handsome young man I see here?**

Oh, that is me.

**That's a wonderful photograph.**

I didn't get my picture put in the book because I called a teacher some foul names, and he said, "Not only will your picture not be in the book, but you won't graduate this year." And he made me go another half year in high school.

**Well, why did you call him bad names?**

Because he called me one.

**Oh, I see.**

See, and I was raised by Mary Nettles. And she told me don't take that stuff.

**That's right. Now, just turning through the book, just flipping through, I don't see anybody but white kids. Why is that?**

That's all that was there.

**But now, the school was integrated.**

I know, but you have to go slow. You'll find some in there.

**Oh, okay. So I am going to see some black kids?**

Oh, yeah.

**And I will see some Mexican-American kids?**

Yes.

**But I see from this, though, that -- what are we saying? -- 80 percent of the population is white?**

Oh, it was 90 percent.

**90 percent was white?**



Yeah.

**Okay. I see one here. As I look in the classroom photos, I see a few black students. But when I look at the groups, like the athletes, basketball team --**

Oh, well, it was still segregated. If you weren't an outstanding athlete, they said, well, you can't play, you know. But if you were outstanding like this boy that I told you I grew up with, Robert Jones -- he was an outstanding basketball player -- oh, they loved him, you know.

**Okay. So he was on the basketball team.**

He was on the basketball team.

**Now, I see somebody on the track team, Theodore Freeman.**

Freeman. Hey, he was good, yeah.

**Now, when those teams would travel to play in different places, were the black students allowed to stay where the other members of the team stayed?**

I remember some of them like Freeman and a couple other guys that were on different other teams, it always came up that they were sick or something. They didn't travel because they knew they couldn't stay, you know. Yeah, um-h'm.

**Oh, this is wonderful. Now, do you have any other records like this, any other things that you've saved?**

This is the basketball team that won the championship. What year I can't remember.

**The first citywide basketball team. So they played for the city of Las Vegas?**

No. This is just a pick-up of all the guys over here on the Westside. And, see all those businesses that represented us?

**Oh, yes. Now, are you in this picture?**

There I am over there.

**Wow. Okay.**

I was about 16, 17. I was the youngest one there.

**So now, this is a city team. You played other teams here in the city?**

Yeah, um-h'm.

**So give me an example of whom you would play.**

Firemen.



**Oh, I see.**

Policemen. Some club downtown or whatever.

**Okay. So some of the names on the sweatshirts are some of the businesses that sponsored you.**

**The Brown Derby --**

Those were all black businesses.

**Okay. Smokey's -- I'm just reading them off for the tape -- Smokey's Billiard Parlor, the El Morocco Club, the Westside --**

Shopping Center.

**Oh, okay. Westside Shopping Center. Deluxe?**

Deluxe Shine Parlor. Jack's Cleaning, Dave's Cleaning.

**Cleaners. Okay. So these must be dry cleaners?**

Yeah.

**And the?**

The Roundup Club.

**The Roundup Club. Silverado -- no.**

Shine Parlor. That's the Silver Shine Parlor.

**Silver Shine Parlor. And we can't read that.**

I don't know what Herman was. Now, this is Herman Moody. He's a retired --

**Police officer.**

Yeah.

**Okay. So I see Herman Moody. I see someone whose name is S.D.**

Yeah, well, he's dead. He was my best man in my first wedding.

**Wow. What is his name? "S.D.," what does it stand for?**

Samuel Denton.

**Okay. And here's someone named Ruebens?**

No. His name was Rueben without the "S."

**Without the S, okay.**

Rueben and I were in school at the same time. He was a couple years older than me, but we were all in the same class.



**Okay. And here's someone that was called Popeye.**

Yeah, that's Popeye. Popeye was here. His dad worked at the railroad.

**What is Popeye's last name?**

Powell.

**So that was another black family?**

Oh, yeah. They were here, oh, a long time. I think they came here even before my grandmother, if I'm not mistaken.

**Oh, so before 1916, 1917, okay. And here's Troy.**

Yeah, Troy. Troy was more or less a late-comer. And then this is -- I can't think of his name.

**Okay. Well, here's someone whose other name you have written here, Junior.**

Yeah. I can't remember his name, either.

**These are all very handsome young men.**

Yeah. That's Sammy.

**So ten of you. So you had enough for two teams?**

No, just one team.

**I mean but you'd play five at a time. Five of you would play at a time?**

Yeah.

**So that is wonderful. You have anything else like that that you can show me?**

I don't know. Oh, that was the name of our team.

**Renaissance. Okay. And what else is written there? Is that a date?**

No. I just wrote on it there. My daughter wrote the Renaissance. And then I wrote under there what it meant, you know, new birth, born anew.

**Okay. Renaissance; that's great. Now, I notice on this Eighth Grade Graduation program that you showed me the program took place at the Memorial Building. Where was that?**

The Memorial Building was where City Hall is now, yeah. Yeah, City Hall, because I remember the Memorial Building had a huge concrete entrance and that's where we used to play hockey. Yeah.

After school or whenever there wasn't anybody down there. I remember I was short, fat, and I was always the goalie because I couldn't skate worth a darn.

**Now, tell me do you remember a building called the Biltmore?**



Yeah. The Biltmore Hotel was right there at the entrance of Bonanza and Main Street.

**Now, was that ever used for black activities?**

Yeah. I mean they had black entertainers over there and a lot of black people went over there, you know. I even went over there, but I was in the kitchen washing dishes.

**So tell me about the different jobs you had. Once you finished high school, what did you do?**

When I finished high school, I was working part time at the Last Frontier.

**What kind of work did you do at the Last Frontier?**

Kitchen helper.

**What kind of other jobs did blacks have in the Last Frontier?**

Bar boys. Most of the black bar boys -- well, Rueben was one of them. You saw that picture. And Rueben turned out to be a fine bartender. And then later on he got to be a bartender.

**At the Last Frontier?**

I think it was the Last Frontier. I think he was the first black bartender out there on the Strip.

**Do you remember which year or about which year?**

It had to be probably '49 or '50 because after I got out of school and washed dishes around there, I couldn't get nothing else. I wanted to work in one of the hotels, but the only thing you could do was either wash dishes or clean the floors. So I said the heck with it. I left there and went up to Herlong, which is outside of Reno and it's an Army depot.

**Not Hawthorne?**

No. Herlong.

**How do you spell that word?**

H-e-r-l-o-n-g, Herlong. It's an Army depot up there. I got a job working up there as a gandy dancer.

**Now, tell me what a gandy dancer is.**

A gandy dancer is the guy that puts down the railroad tracks and in the meantime kills snakes. Yeah.

**So you actually laid a track?**

Yeah, we laid tracks down, big logs and everything. Put the track there and then nails.

**So why the name gandy dancer?**

Gandy dancer, now, where it derived from I don't know. Anyway, when you get out there you're just supposed to be jumping all the time, gandy dancer. And from there after I got to Herlong and got



this job working as a gandy dancer, then I was drafted into the Korean War. That was 1950, I think.

**Fifty something, uh-huh. So you graduated from high school in --**

'46.

**'46. Okay.**

And just worked a few years around here. Then Herlong and then in the war.

**Okay. Your other friends, like all the guys that I just saw on that basketball team, did they also have to do some of the same things? Did they have to leave Las Vegas to find a decent job? We know that Rueben became a bartender.**

Yeah, Rueben became a bartender. And then eventually, he opened up a little bar over here on the Westside.

**What was the name of his bar?**

Somewhere I've got a menu of his.

**But we'll think about it later. What was Rueben's last name?**

Bullocks. He was the nephew of Woodrow Wilson. I know you've heard of Woodrow Wilson.

**Of course.**

The malfeasance gentleman.

**Yeah, that was too bad.**

Yes.

**Now, we've talked about three groups of people: Mexican-Americans, whites and blacks.**

**What about the Native Americans that live right here near Las Vegas? What about them?**

Well, I knew two of them, I mean that come to mind. Evans, there were two brothers, the Evans brothers.

**Now, did they go to school with you guys?**

Yeah. Then there was Japanese, Toyota -- not Toyota.

**Tomiyasu?**

No. Tomiyasu went to school, but he was older than me. And his folks, the Tomiyasus, they had a farm out there, grew vegetables.

**So how many Japanese people would you say were living here back in the 30s and 40s?**

About three or four families.



**Okay, three or four families. And Native Americans lived on the reservation.**

Reservation. And then some of them lived off the reservation.

**Lived where in town? Did they live on the Westside?**

Westside or North Las Vegas, mostly North Las Vegas.

**Oh, okay. Where did the Japanese people live?**

On the Westside. Yeah, on the Westside.

**So the Westside is where everybody lived.**

Yes. Oh, yeah.

**Because there were whites on the Westside, Mexican-Americans --**

Oh, everybody.

**Everybody.**

Yeah. But they pushed the blacks this way, you know. All the whites were up from Bonanza back about four blocks, three blocks. In fact, Bonanza was -- they changed the name of the street. It used to be Clark Avenue. That was before they dug the hole up under the tracks. I remember going over the tracks, yeah.

**Oh, so even though everybody lived on the Westside, they were still segregated from each other?**

Oh, no. You lived next door to one another, yeah.

**I see. So the Westside was integrated. Now, what about the Westside businesses?**

The Westside businesses, they were mostly together more or less because everybody wanted it more or less -- when they built a business, they put it where everybody could walk to it easy, you know.

**So Jackson Street, D Street?**

Jackson, D Street, Van Buren; all of that was the area where people, if they were going to open up a business, did it. The Brown Derby, the --

**Who owned those businesses?**

Blacks owned them. The Community Store was run by Johnson. They called him "Sideburn." Community Store was owned by Harvey Jones.

**Now, which one was "Sideburn"?**

"Sideburn" -- was it Westside Grocery? Yeah, I think it was called Westside Grocery. I don't



remember.

**And who was the person who owned -- what was it? -- Community?**

Community was Harvey Jones.

**Okay, Harvey Jones owned Community. Was that a store?**

Yeah. I worked there.

**Oh, really?**

Yeah, with his stepson S.D.

**Who was on the basketball team, as well?**

Yeah. That was his stepson.

**So tell me about some of the other businesses. I heard that someone had a little candy shop in part of the house.**

Oh, yeah, there were always people doing different stuff like that. But I mean, heck, I can't remember because I know my grandmother would bake something or bake more than she wanted to and somebody would say, "Tansey, you got so-and-so?" Yeah, yeah. I'll give you a quarter for it or blah-blah-blah, you know. You know, stuff like that. But I mean she didn't have a business, you know. And you were talking about people making candy...I don't know.

**Well, I heard that there was someone who had a little candy store in the front part of the house.**

I don't remember.

**Some of the nightclubs, the Brown Derby and all of those clubs, did blacks own all of those clubs?**

Yeah. I know that they were all fronting them. They were all there. Yeah, blacks owned them all. The El Morocco, the Cotton Club, all those. Let's see.

**Do you remember the Green Lantern?**

Oh, yes, the Green Lantern. That's where I first learned how to dance a little bit.

**So there was a dance floor?**

Well, just a little cafe like and it had a jukebox. And that's where all the latest songs and everything came out by black people. They put it on the jukebox. That's where the youngsters all went, to put our nickels in there and listen to the music, you know.



**So who taught you to dance?**

Well, kids, you know, we taught one another.

**I see. What about restaurants?**

Well, the restaurants were in the joints just like they are today, you know. They had one place up there next to the Cotton Club called Mom's. Mom's had a restaurant in there, yeah, real greasy spoon.

**What about beauty shops?**

Oh, beauty shops were right down the street from there. What was her name? Collins, she ran that, tall, dark, pretty woman. Then next door to that was Duran, Trish's. Do you know Trish Duran?

**Oh, yes. So Hazel Duran?**

Yeah, her husband had a barbershop next door to there. Then on the corner somebody put up something like a gym there where guys would train. You know, everybody wanted to be a boxer, because I know I went out and sparred out with one of them professionals. He hit me so hard it was days before I knew where I was.

**Oh, wow. Oh, my goodness. So you didn't do that again.**

No, I didn't do that again.

**Now, do you remember who the professional was that you were sparring with?**

Let's see. Fleming. He had a nickname. Can't even think of it. Dixie Fleming. Dixie Fleming, good boxer, hard hitter, too.

**That's great.**

Hard hitter, too. Now, he still has a brother around here, Eddie, who was the oldest of all the Flemings. And the Flemings were related to "Wingy" Hughes. I guess everybody's heard of "Wingy" Hughes.

**No. Tell me who that is.**

Oh, "Wingy" Hughes, he was a one-armed black man. He cut lawns and did yards and all that stuff, and he had a son named Nathaniel who was about my age. He used to work that boy something terrible. But they made money. He opened a liquor store there on Jackson and a little grocery store.

**Oh, great.**

Yeah. When he first moved over there, he had a little store. He had the liquor store. And behind



that he had hogs he kept. And he'd kill hogs and sell meat.

**Now, give me his first name again.**

Hughes? I don't know. Everybody called him "Wingy."

**Wingy?**

Wingy. He only had one wing.

**Like a chicken wing?**

Yeah, because he only had one arm.

**Okay, so they called him "Wingy".**

"Wingy," uh-huh. Yeah, white, black, everybody, "Hey, Wingy."

**So now, he cut lawns all over the city?**

Yeah.

**Now, tell me about the Binion house.**

Oh, the Binions -- I don't know. Well...

**Do you remember when that house was built? I'm talking about the one right there on Bonanza.**

Yeah, I know. My grandmother, she used to do Benny Binion's shirts. In fact, she did shirts for a lot of the gamblers downtown.

**Now, what was your grandmother's name?**

Tansey. And she used to do all the shirts. And that's when I learned how to iron. Yeah, right now my wife washes all my stuff, but I iron all of it because I'm darn good at it.

**So she had an actual business of doing that?**

Well, yes, because people brought them to her and she did them. Yeah, that was her business. And sometimes grandma would get full of that gin and I'd have to finish the shirts. So that's how I learned to iron.

**Now, tell me about your mother. What was your mother's name?**

My mother's name was Annabel.

**Now, what kind of work did your mother do?**

She was a domestic. Yeah, she always did domestic work.

**Did she work in people's homes or some of the --**



No. She worked in people's home. Well, then later on she got a job at one of the hotels on the Strip -- what was it? -- as a maid. The Stardust or Flamingo? I don't remember. Before she died, yeah.

**So as those hotels were being built and opened, did they start using black women right away as the maids?**

Oh, yeah. Yeah, because a black woman could go out there and get a job anytime because they needed them, you know, needed somebody to do that cleaning. It was a boom to the black men around here, too, because building those hotels you had to have laborers. And, see, at that time they didn't have a lot of this modern equipment, see, and you had to do all this work by hand, you know. And black men were doing it, you know.

**Okay. So a lot of black men were in construction.**

In construction, yeah.

**Now, tell me about the Test Site.**

Oh, the Test Site.

**In the 50s, black men started working out there.**

Yeah. I don't know too much about the Test Site because, see, after I got out of Korea, which was in '52, I lived in California, in Los Angeles, until '57, '58.

**So you were gone most of the 50s.**

Yeah, most of the 50s, yeah. See, in the meantime they had opened up this Moulin Rouge. And I had never been in it, you know.

**And it closed probably before you went in it.**

And when I got back it was just closing up, you know. I came back home. Like I said -- what was that? -- '57, '58, something like that. My grandpa was real sick. So I said I was coming over here to stay with him for a couple of weeks or so. And I've stayed here ever since.

**So now, where was your family living at that time?**

On Van Buren.

**So still across the street from the Christianson house, okay.**

Yeah.

**So when you came back in the late 50s, what kind of work did you start doing?**



First job I had was at The Icehouse. I was delivering ice. I was sacking ice and then delivering ice. They had a run from Nellis in the morning and a bunch of little bars and things on the way out. Then in the afternoon I'd get more ice, ice up, and then I'd go out on the Strip. And I'd drop ice at the Stardust, Flamingo.

**So how much ice are we talking about for a hotel?**

Oh, God, I don't know.

**So how much would you drop off at the Stardust, let's say?**

Okay. Maybe 50 bags, maybe.

**Are we talking about crushed ice?**

Yeah, crushed ice, shaved ice. They had all different ice for different processing.

**Right, okay.**

And the bags are about 50 pounds. And I was about that big. And I'd be worn out in the afternoons.

**Oh, I can imagine.**

Yeah, tired like a beat dog. Then what did I do? Oh, that's when I went to work at the post office. And I stayed there for 36 years.

**Oh, wow. Okay. And because you were a veteran, you were --**

Well, yeah. But I mean my veteran preference never came into view because at that time --

**(End tape 1, side B.)**

-- old man named Jennings. He was a robust man, but he got lost out there in the desert. And they had everybody in town, white and black, looking for him. And they found him. And they asked him, "Ooh, how did you stay out here so long and didn't have any water?" And I remember him saying something about that he had a stone that he had picked up and put in his mouth to keep moisture in his mouth. And he survived. He was out there about four days. You know, in the summer it gets a little warm out there.

**Yes.**

In fact, I think it's cooler here in the summer now than it was then. Because as a kid all of us kids used to go out and hunt, stay overnight with rifles, shotguns, you know.

**Where would you stay?**

Sleep on the ground or wherever, you know. We'd kill rabbits and eat them, birds.



**And you would cook them? You would build a fire?**

Yeah, uh-huh. We'd stay out there. Go out there on Friday night and come back maybe Saturday night, Sunday.

**So was that supposed to be fun?**

Yeah. We were just having an outing with folks that were going out there, you know.

**So did you bring some of the game back --**

Oh, yes.

**-- for the family?**

Yeah, yeah. It all depends on how much we had. We'd bring rabbits back. I haven't had no rabbit in so long. My wife won't stand that. "Don't you bring no rabbit in here." I tell her it tastes just like chicken.

**Sure. Sure. Yes.**

You know, anything that tastes good, it tastes like chicken.

**Right. Okay. So now, getting back to the post office, what kind of jobs did you do at the post office?**

Just like they do now.

**So did you sort mail? Did you deliver mail?**

Oh, I was a letter carrier. Yeah, I was a carrier. So I'd sort my mail in the morning. Each carrier did not have a vehicle. What they did, they had these gang boxes. You probably saw them when you were a youngster. And they'd drop you off at the corner and you'd start delivering down one way and come up the other and then come to your gang box. That's where you used to see the postman with the key on there and he'd unlock the box and put your mail in your sack and start marching someplace else.

**Oh, okay. So you really knew everybody in town, especially being a mailman.**

Oh, yeah.

**And working from the different post offices everywhere.**

Oh, yeah, I knew the whole valley. Now I go out there and in ten minutes I'm lost.

**Isn't it something?**

I swear this town has grown so.



**Oh, the changes you must have seen. What are some of the things that you've seen change that strike you as being impressive, different?**

Well, I guess the gradual evolution of the society being mixed now because I don't care where you go in this valley now, you see black people, you know. And before, you know, it was here on the Westside. And everybody knew everyone and all that. But now this has become a city, you know.

**I have a question about that. Even though there are Mexican-Americans, Japanese, whites and blacks, did you consider everybody white that was not black? Was that the way it was considered?**

In some instances especially when -- well, I know like in school, anytime something was going on and they wanted to exclude the blacks, all the Mexicans turned white, you know. Yeah, they were all white except the Japanese. I remember once this -- what was his name? He got up and somebody said something to him about him being Japanese. He said, "That's all right." He said, "I'm learning just like you. You can't take that from me." And I never will forget that, which was right, you know.

**So the distinctions that were made when we talk about the majority and the minority, then the minority would have been blacks and Japanese?**

Oh, no. No. It was Mexicans --

**But Mexicans could pass for white?**

Well, they could and they couldn't. It all depended on what was needed at the time, you know, their situation. If they see that this group over here, which was white, was against this group over here, which was black, they would go with the white because that was the biggest number of people, you know.

**So being Mexican-American was kind of fluid. You could go in and out.**

Yeah, you'd go in and out. Yeah.

**Okay. Now, I have always thought or read that Mary Nettles helped start the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People].**

Yes.

**Did you ever hear that story, as well?**

Yes.

**Okay. Tell me about that. Did you ever hear her talk about it?**



Well, as a kid when I first can remember, she always had the meetings at her house, NAACP meetings at her house. And she and Mr. McCants, he was the one-eyed barber, they were always saying, "Well, we're going to go downtown and tell them," you know, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. But, hell, I didn't know what they were talking about, you know. But I remember the meetings. Yeah, they had the meetings there at my grandmother's house. Yep.

**Were you an early member of the NAACP?**

Yeah. Well, we had a Junior League NAACP and I was the president.

**Wow. What are some of the things that you did?**

Have meetings, go and have little talks. I remember we had one little talk at the First Baptist Church, which is the white church, on the other side of town. Yeah, gave a little speech over there. That was the first time I started thinking about prejudice and all that, you know. I knew it all the time, but things were starting to really impress me about this or that, you know.

And I remember when I was 21 my great grandmother said, "Okay, you've got to vote." And I said, "Vote?" She said, "Yeah, you're 21 now. You've got to vote because if you don't vote, you can't complain." She took me downtown and we registered. And I said, "Well, what am I; a Republican or a Democrat?" She said, "You're a Republican. You always remember that. Abraham Lincoln was a Republican, you know." So I said, "Yeah."

**Are you Republican today?**

I'm Libertarian today.

**Okay. Now, tell me what that means to you to be a Libertarian.**

Oh, just less restraint, more individualism of movement and thought rather than being restricted with this political correctness bull, you know, and all that kind of jazz. But, heck, I guess I'm like everybody else; I flip and flop, too. But I mean I would like to have that thought of being a Libertarian, but then the Democrats will put you in one little box and Republicans will put you in another box. And you're wondering well, hell, am I doing this right? Instead of doing your own thought, you get categorized.

**That's true. At that time also, probably when you were younger, there was a Republican Club and a Democratic Club. Do you remember any of those clubs?**

I remember people talking about it. I never attended them or never went to them or anything. But I



remember them, yeah, yeah. But I really didn't know anything about it.

**What kind of recreation did adults have? Other than the clubs on the Westside, what other recreation was there?**

Oh, gosh, the only recreation was going out to public parks. Everyone would go and have picnics up at Charleston or we had a place up here by where the Texas [Texas Station] is now and it used to be a flowing spring up there and they called it Four Mile. And at Four Mile -- no. See, they had a Four Mile over here and the other Four Mile was right on Boulder Highway where they had the whorehouse. But that was it.

Our Four Mile had this great big, huge sand dune that all the kids -- well, we loved that, you know. And all this running water and we'd go out there and they had a great big cottonwood tree. And we'd go out there. Where this water came out there would be crawdads in there and we'd get them crawdads out and we'd cook them and eat them right there. Hey, you just made your own fun.

**So why did you call it Four Mile, and exactly where was it?**

Well, it was right up here where Texas -- you know, where the Wildfire [Wildfire Casino] is up there?

**Oh, okay. Now, is that four miles from here?**

Huh?

**Is that four miles from here?**

I don't know.

**Okay. I'm trying to understand why you call it Four Mile.**

Now, why they call it Four Mile I don't know. Everybody called it Four Mile.

**Okay, that's interesting. Did you ever go to Lorenzi Park?**

Lorenzi Park was off limits. Oh, I was never hurt so bad the night they had the party over here for this eighth grade class. Everybody went over there and they told me that I couldn't swim.

Something else they told me. And I told them what they could do.

**So did you actually go over there?**

I went over there, but I couldn't swim, I couldn't do this, I couldn't do that.

**Who would tell you?**

The adults, your teachers, people that owned the place.



**So how many black kids were in your class? Because this was the party for the graduating class?**

Yeah.

**Okay. So how many black kids, approximately?**

I think I was the only one. I'm not sure. For eighth grade, yeah. And I remember in the eighth grade I walked by myself. They paired me with this Mexican girl and she started crying. She didn't want to walk with me. So I said, "It's all right; I'll walk by myself." And I remember walking by myself. You know how they paired you off? And I walked by myself. But when they told me all that stuff... I couldn't do this; I couldn't do that. And I'm saying, now, I've been going to school with all these kids, you know. And before that they had had a pool -- damn, what's that? -- Fifth Street, Fifth and Fremont.

**So that was the city pool?**

Well, it was privately owned I believe. Anyway, they had a contract with the school. And when it first opened, they don't want no blacks in there.

**What is this about water and blacks? Explain that to me.**

I wish I could. Anyway, I remember my great grandmother, Mary Nettles, and somebody else went somewhere and raised a lot of hell. And if you were in school, you could go down there and go swimming.

**So she was able to get that changed?**

Yeah. Oh, she had a lot of things.

**Do you remember anything else that she did like that?**

Oh, heck, I don't know. There were a lot of little things, you know.

**Did she ever say why she felt the NAACP was so important?**

Yeah. She used to always say black people, they've got to -- well, she said, "Them Negroes, we've got to be organized. We've got to be together and thinking like one person." I remember that; thinking like one person. Yeah. I didn't realize how smart she was until I was about 30 years old.

**Yes. So what was it like walking all over the city delivering mail and getting to know everybody? What was that like for you?**

Oh, no sweat, you know. No sweat. I'd be called nigger, just nigger that, you know. But I'd just



keep on delivering the mail. And I might have something to say to them, too, you know. But other than that, hey, I got along with everybody, you know. Heck, I don't know.

**Now, after Zion, when Zion was downtown, then it moved over to the Westside?**

No, it didn't move. It closed downtown.

**So now, this was the black church downtown?**

This is the black church downtown, Zion. On the Westside you had a bunch of little churches. I can remember right around the corner from where I stayed on Van Buren -- well, the church is still there. As you go down Owens, D Street and Owens, there's a little church there.

**Is that True Love? No.**

No, no. Heck, I don't even know the name of it. And that's one of the churches that I went to when I was small. They had a preacher there named Hamilton. Yeah, Reverend Hamilton.

**Was that a Baptist church? Methodist?**

I'm trying to think. Heck, I don't know. I don't even know what denomination it was.

**So now, does your family consider themselves Methodist, Baptist, or what denomination?**

Well, I guess they're Baptist. See, now, my great grandmother started that Zion thing over there downtown. And when that closed up, preacher left town and took his family, Reverend Cook. So they didn't have a church to go to. So she was going to build a new Zion Methodist Church on the Westside. But all these people that were coming in were coming from the South. So she built the church and called it a Baptist Church.

**Now, which one was that?**

Second Baptist.

**Oh, so your great grandmother was one of the ones that started Second Baptist?**

No. She was the one that started Second Baptist; she wasn't one of them.

**So she built the building, the first one?**

She got all the men there to build that building.

**At the present location?**

At the present location.

**So was it her land?**

Well, she worked kind of a deal with real estate people. And that's where she put her money in



there, yeah.

**Do they give her the recognition for that now?**

No.

**Why not?**

Because somebody else wanted it, so they took the recognition. I know a lot of people -- I go up there every once in a while and I listen to them. It seems as if every black person that was associated with anything, they wanted to be the first. "I was the first." I listen to them. What the hell are you talking about, you were the first?

**So they want to rewrite history.**

Yeah, they want to -- hey, in their image.

**Yes. So now, if I wanted to find the old records of Second Baptist Church, where would I look?**

In the hall of records, I guess.

**So you don't think the church kept its own records?**

They may have. They may be there, but I doubt it.

**I called over there. They said, no, you can't see them.**

You can't see them. A church? Why can't you see them? Just like that money that was missing; you can't see that either because it's gone.

**Now tell me, most places, even some small places, had sit-ins and all of that when we got to the late 50s and into the 60s. We had sit-ins and all of that. When you look at Las Vegas and look at the Civil Rights Movement, what would you say that we did here for civil rights, to bring civil rights?**

Well, it was the integration of the Strip. That was the main thing.

**Now, how did that happen?**

Well, after the laws were passed, still the black people were reluctant to go out there. During that time you had like Bob Bailey. He was instrumental. Well, he was a young, educated man and he knew what the law said and everything. So, therefore, he pushed. He didn't push too hard, but he pushed.

**And McMillan [James B. McMillan] and West [Charles West] and all of them...**



Well, see, we didn't have any professionals here. Then McMillan and West came into town. And they are intelligent, educated people. They knew what the law said and what it meant, and they'd go out there and talk to the white dudes out there and say, "Hey, this is it," you know.

**So according to the stories that I've heard and what I've read that McMillan put in his book, he talks about giving them a certain amount of time; sending a letter, giving them a certain amount of time, and then he said they threatened that they were going to march on the Strip. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.**

**And supposedly they started organizing. Now, do you remember them organizing people to get ready to march on the Strip?**

Yes. Let's see. Where did they have this big meeting? It was on Lake Mead and D Street before they put those apartments in there. And they had all these people down there and they were going to -- you know, they were having like a rally or something. And they were talking about if they don't open up the doors to let the blacks in we're going to march down there. We're going to do it peacefully and blah-blah-blah and do this and do that, you know.

Now, what was at the corner of Lake Mead and E at that time? Lake Mead and E -- no -- D.

**Where did you say they had the meeting? D?**

D.

**So what was located on that corner?**

I'm trying to think what it was. Bob Bailey had an apartment house over there. Yeah. And I remember because it leaned forward. The whole building leaned. It had this great big, huge backyard where -- okay, from Dolittle to the next corner there, see, that was all vacant in there then because we didn't have the library. Yeah, that was all vacant and that's where the meeting was.

**So it was outside?**

Yeah.

**Okay, I see. Do you remember attending the meeting?**

Yeah, I remember that. And I listened to them. And I knew what they were talking about, but I didn't agree on what they were doing.

**Oh. So now, tell me why you did not agree.**

Well, I always thought that I was as good as anybody else. That's the way I was raised. And so,



therefore, why do they want to march down there? Wait. If the law says you can go in there and go down there, open the door and go on in.

**I see.**

Yeah. That's the way I felt. So I wasn't a big -- I just didn't like that.

**Okay. That's interesting.**

**So now, did you have brothers and sisters?**

No.

**Okay. So you're an only child.**

Yes.

**Now, after 32 years in the post office, did you continue to work?**

No. Thirty-six years.

**Thirty-six years in the post office. Oh, okay.**

No. I've been -- well, let's see. '97 I think it was --

**You retired?**

Yeah. And you said do anything else -- I avoid my wife because if I don't avoid her, she's going to have something for me to do.

**I see. Now, you have a beautiful house. It looks as if it has been remodeled at some point. I love the way you have this island in your kitchen.**

She did all that.

**Oh, wonderful. She did the floors, as well?**

She put in the floors, yeah.

**Oh, my goodness.**

She and I both built that little addition on the back. See, on the back there, that's my room out there.

Come and I'll show you my room.

**So, you know, I think this is wonderful. Now, I was asking you earlier, though, when we talked about the Civil Rights Movement, did we have any organized protests, any sit-ins or anything organized?**

No, I never knew of anything that was brought to fruition because of organizing this or organizing that. You know, I guess it was like this in every city, so fragmented. See, the law stated this. Then



you have all these so-called leaders that want to do this, and this group over here wanted to do that instead of following the law. That's why I said I'm not a Democrat or a Republican. And it was so fragmented. You had the preachers going one way. Bob Bailey, he was going another way. West and McMillan, they were going another way. And they never could seem to be cohesive enough to get together to do anything. Everybody wanted to be the first, which is what a lot of black people think they've got to be. They've got to be first. First what? You know.

**Yes. Tell me about Helldorado parades.**

Oh, Helldorado. Loved the Helldorado parades. Heck, I forget -- what grade was I in? Sixth grade, fifth grade? And we had a janitor -- he was white -- named Kelley. He stayed on the Westside and road a bicycle to school, Fifth Street School. Kelley got all these big old drums, metal casings that that they brought oil and stuff in. He took --

**(End tape 2, side A.)**

**(Tape 2, side B is blank.)**

**I think it's working wonderfully this morning. Just say a few words. How are you this morning?**

Well, I'm just fine. And you?

**Good, thank you.**

That's good.

**This is Claytee White and I'm in the home of Mr. Eugene Buford. We're in Las Vegas. How are you this morning?**

Just fine, thank you.

**And the date is September --**

The 18th.

**-- 18th, 2006. Okay, that's what I forgot to say. So you're doing well this morning?**

Fine. Fine.

**Okay. So last time you had talked about your early life, you had talked about your career here. Do you remember some of your first memories of the city?**

**[He was two years of age when he moved here.]**

Oh, gee, I don't know. I guess being a kid, running up and down the streets. That's what I really



remember. I don't know. I know how the things are so much different, you know, now than they were then. We had lots of alleys to play in. We don't have alleys anymore.

**Where were these alleys?**

Now, where I stayed on Third and Stewart, the alley ran behind us over to Second Street. And in between Second and Third was a long alley all the way to Stewart, from Ogden to Stewart. And so that's where everybody would go to visit. You know, you'd say go over to so-and-so's. Well, I'll just go on down the alley, you know. Very seldom you go to somebody's front door. You know, you always go to the back door because it was easy access. The doors were all open. And so, therefore, I guess that's one reason I remember as a child running up and down there.

And everybody was like a big family, you know. If you'd go to somebody's house as a kid and they didn't want you there, they'd tell you go home, you know. Yeah, you know, or whatever. Or maybe put you to work doing something around there. Then you wouldn't want to go by there anymore. No.

Yeah, those are the things that I remember as a youngster growing up. Oh, boy, isn't that something?

**Did you ever join a union, a labor union?**

Well, the only labor union I was in was the Postal Union.

**Was that a very active one?**

They only had one strike and that was in 1970. I was part of that. In fact, I was looking at something the other day that I had on there. They had a negotiating committee. I was one of the alternates. And that was the only time that the post offices all over the country struck. Remember they had the army trying to sort the mail in New York? And they were goofing it up and throwing it away and everything else.

**What were some of your demands?**

Money. Economic always. Yeah, economic demands. That was the main thing. And then you also have your different things that taper off from that.

**Do you remember how long you were out on strike and how you survived?**

About eight days. Yeah, about eight days.

**Oh, not that long.**



And the only way you survived is hoping that your wife, whatever kind of job she had, was still working. But it didn't last very long, no.

**Now tell me, you did get married at some point. How many children did you have?**

Three, three girls.

**And now how many grandchildren?**

Well, I had three grandchildren -- I mean I had three children. My oldest daughter died when she was what -- 30, 31. And let's see. I had been married about 22 years and that ended in a divorce. Got married again.

Speaking of grandkids. Let's see. I got -- well, on my side there's four. On the wife's side there are nine I think. Yeah, I think there are nine on that side. So we have quite a few grandkids just scattered all over. In fact, we've got one that's living here now and he started himself a little trucking outfit. He does interstate hauling. And he is moving to Mississippi where his wife is from. And he wants to settle there.

**Has he visited there?**

Yes, they visited. In fact, they bought a house, but they just haven't moved into it yet. So I imagine they'll be going -- he's waiting for his oldest son to get out of some kind of school he's taking, a special school in computers or something. And it won't be over until I think he said the first of October. So I imagine by that time he'll be going --

**Ooh, so they'll be going right away.**

Yeah, so they'll be going right way. He's been talking about it since June, yeah.

**Wow. So have you visited their new place in Mississippi?**

No, I haven't. Huh-uh, no. Although I was born in Alabama, I have never been -- well, yes, I did. I did go south to Texas when I was in service. But other than that, I've never been south anymore. So I guess after he gets settled, maybe I'll go down there and visit him.

**Good. We were just talking about union membership a few minutes ago. Were there a lot of men in the community in various unions when you were a young working man yourself?**

Oh, unions?

**Like the Culinary Union, Teamsters.**

Mostly, I can remember growing up that the Teamsters were strong because the plants had opened



up in Henderson. You had Titanium [Titanium Metals Corporation]. There were a number of smaller outfits. They weren't hiring any blacks. And one of the big union heads, which was named -- name goes by me now -- anyway, he was a friend of my grandfather's. And they had worked as laborers and everything around the city. There was a drive to get more workers. And the Teamsters wanted to get black workers that live here to join the Teamsters to strengthen it, you know. So that was one of my first jobs in organized labor I'd guess you'd say. It lasted about a week. And I said, "Oh, hell, I can't take this."

**Why?**

We were emptying cement out of a boxcar. And, heck, I was a teenager and I must have weighed about 105 pounds and I was almost six-foot tall.

**Now, you came here in the early 30s. Do you remember the early 40s when BMI [Basic Magnesium Incorporated] started over in Henderson?**

This is what I'm talking about now. Uh-huh.

**Tell me more about BMI. Tell me some more about what you heard people who worked over there talk about.**

Oh, well, let's see. What was the name? They had a segregated place.

**Carver Park.**

Yeah, Carver Park. And there was another little area in there where blacks were staying, but I can't remember what it was.

**Not Four Mile?**

It was down the street.

**Not Four Mile?**

Oh, no, no. It wasn't that far back. Huh-uh. It was almost into Henderson.

**Did you know anybody who lived in Carver Park?**

Oh, gosh. I knew some people and I can't even remember their names.

**Do you remember them talking about it, what it was like living there?**

Well, it was just like living anyplace else. You were separated and segregated and that's the way it was.

**Did any men ever talk about the work that they did at BMI other than the cement on the**



**truck? Any other work?**

Oh, yeah. Well, the only people that I knew that worked out there were laborers. The first I heard of anyone, any blacks being elevated was Woodrow Wilson, who was later a councilman. He worked out there. He and his brother, I remember those guys. They were years older than me, but I knew them as young men. And they were pretty active in -- I think it was the Teamsters if I'm not mistaken. I believe it was the Teamsters Union. That was the only thing that I used to hear, you know, because they were the prominent people that were pushing for these different things.

**One of the things that Woodrow Wilson did was to help start a credit union --**

Yes.

**-- over on the Westside. Do you remember anything about that credit union?**

Well, that's where I used to put my money.

**Do you remember the beginning? How it started?**

How it was started? All I know is there was talk about Woodrow is going to open up a bank. So this evolved. But what he was doing, he was opening up a credit union. And a lot of people -- well, I guess a lot of them had gone through the Depression and they didn't want to put their money in no bank, let alone a black-owned bank, because they figured he doesn't know anything about what he's doing. But eventually, it seemed to get up off the ground. It was a growing little project there for a while.

Now why it just faded I don't know. Well, for one thing I do know, too. By that time integration was coming in. So, therefore, people were -- hey, you get your check over here and there's a bank right there, so you just put it in the bank there instead of bringing it over to the credit union. And I think that was the biggest thing.

**Do you remember Mabel Hoggard?**

Yes, uh-huh. Yeah. I remember when they first came to town. I was living on Van Buren. They were living on E Street. The old man had a service station in there.

**This is her father?**

No. This is Hoggard's husband.

**Okay. J. David?**

Yeah. He had a service station there. My grandfather used to go by there and tease him all the time



and say, "Is that place on fire?" And he'd say, "What do you mean on fire?" Because he always smoked cigars and smoke was all over, you know. Yeah. And I remember when his kids first started going to school. Yeah, I used to stop by there all the time. He was fixing kids' bikes and helping us with our old cars.

**Now, that service station wasn't successful either, was it?**

No. It finally folded, yeah. But there were two black-owned service stations. He and another one by Marion. They called him "Red" Marion. And that was right across from the Cotton Club on Jackson. And that service station, it went on real good until "Red" started prospering in the area and he couldn't stay out of the Cotton Club.

**Wow. Okay.**

He gambled his money off in there, you know.

**Oh, that was too bad.**

Yeah. Oh, that's when they had a number of little businesses all along Jackson there.

**What organizations did you belong to? We talked about the NAACP. Did you belong to any organizations?**

I belonged to what they called the Junior Elks, yeah.

**What kind of projects?**

Well, the social thing on the Westside was the Elks. Everybody went to the Elks. Finally, someone came up and said, well, we need a junior Elks. You know, all the people going. So it was formed by a fellow named Freeman, Mr. Freeman, yeah. I think I showed you my yearbook and it had the Freeman. His father had started that. Yeah. And that's the one I think I told you that -- yeah, the Elks -- I was Junior Exalted Ruler.

**So what does a Junior Exalted Ruler do?**

Whatever he was told to do. Well, you know, how you have an organization like that with young people in and you have the adults that are helping you and they're telling you how to do this because we didn't know anything about any organization. So they were telling us what to do, what you're supposed to do, what this Elk represented and all that, you know, yeah. So I guess that was about it.

**So did you have any projects other than social events? Did you work on community projects?**

No. That's the only thing that we did, mostly just social events. There was never any cohesiveness



to get, say, a basketball team or a football team or anything like that. One reason they didn't is because there was no finances to push things like that. And then all the kids, we all wanted to join wherever everybody else was, you know. So it lasted a while and then it seemed to just fade away.

**The Elks in the white community started the Helldorado parade.**

Right.

**Did the black Elks ever work with the white Elks?**

Only during Helldorado. There was always somebody from the other side of town that wanted the blacks to participate. That's the only time I've ever seen them together doing anything together. And the Helldorado, oh, that afforded jobs for a lot of the kids. We all wanted to work over there, raking manure and having a good time, you know. Yeah. And then some of the guys would take money and some guys would take tickets. If you wanted to go back at night and get on the rides and all that, you'd tell the guy, "How much money have I got? Well, give me so many tickets." That way you'd go out and have a good time or on the weekends. And, oh, I hated to work on the weekends because everybody was having fun. But then you could make the most money on the weekends. Yeah.

**All of the Helldorado events were integrated?**

Integrated? Yeah, well, I mean at that time it first started we had mostly horse-drawn things. Ray Christianson, he had horses and a couple of wagons. So he would get his stuff together and have a float. Maybe kids in the neighborhood or maybe the Elks, the black Elks would want to have a float in there. So, therefore, they'd get Ray to set it up and then they would all decorate it.

I think I told you that this janitor at the Fifth Street School, this white janitor named Kelley, took these old cans of oil that oil used to come in, drained them all out, made them into drums, put a strap on them, and he had all the black kids, all of us, he taught us how to hold the drumsticks and beat on it. And there must have been about 8 or 10 or 12 of us. And we were in the parade. That was the first time I had ever been in a parade. And we'd beat on our drums and, hey, we had a good time. Yeah.

**Now, did it sound like a drum?**

Yeah. It was a little tinny. You know, down in the islands where they have these tin things, you know?



Yes.

So this was similar to that. And after a while, after you got to beating on them, it was almost just like that because it would start getting thin, you know. Yeah, yeah.

**Oh, good. A few minutes ago -- getting back to unions again, you probably remember this man. Do you remember Al Bramlet?**

Bramlet, yes, uh-huh, yeah.

**Culinary Union.**

Culinary.

**What do you remember about him and any of the people that worked with him?**

Well, he was a hard-nosed negotiator. He always appeared to be helping the guys that were working. He had his little shady side, too. Everybody that's ever had any power in Las Vegas has always had a little shady side. Well, I guess that goes for any city. Once you get power, you get a little corrupt, you know, because it's easier up there to be corrupt.

**So do you think that's always the situation?**

Yes.

**That power corrupts?**

Yeah. As long as you're playing politics, it's going to be corruption in there. I guess it could be avoided if you could get two people to say, well, we're not going to do it that way. But you can't get two people to do it, you know. We're having a little trouble with people who don't know where they stay now. In district so-and-so and...you know, and all that. And then we have one senator that's only supposed to take 5,000. He took a 100,000 here and 50,000 there. Now, you're going to tell me that that man is in politics and he doesn't know how much money he's supposed to take from each individual? Huh? And he's got his staff and they don't know? That's why I say they...

**Was there ever any talk about Al Bramlet in the community that you remember?**

Well, he was head of the union and he was this and he was that. He was trying to help the little man, at least that's the speeches that I always heard coming from him. But then you had this other side where, you know, you read in the paper where he did this or he was accused of doing this or whatever. But, yeah, he was --

**Do you remember Sarah Hughes?**



Oh, yeah, Sarah Hughes. Now, Sarah Hughes came from Alabama. She was a neighbor to my family in Alabama. And she came out here I guess about late 20s, early 30s. And she married "Wingy" Hughes. Remember I told you about "Wingy"?

**Yes.**

That was her husband.

**Oh.**

Yeah. Then later on I think in the 40s a lot of her family came out. They were the Flemings. In fact, last Friday I met one of the old Flemings that I grew up with. I thought he had left town, and he stays right on the street where I walk my grandson. Yeah. Yeah, then the Flemings were Mrs. Hughes' relatives, brothers and sisters. Now, the -- let's see.

**Do you know anything about Sarah Hughes' work with the union?**

Her work with the union...I'll have to say that Mrs. Hughes, she had a grocery store, liquor store. She was supposed to be a prominent lady on the Westside. So, therefore, to help Bramlet and whoever else was in there, they had to have a black person looking like they were doing something. So they used her. Yeah, they used her. That's right. And also she was part of City of Hope. Oh, that's where she was really shining, or so I thought. And then when she was passed, there was no mention of it in the paper. I couldn't understand that. But that's the way it is, you know. In fact, she was at one time chairman of the City of Hope for Las Vegas. Gosh, I don't know.

**That was strange.**

Yeah.

**Getting back to other people, tell me about Jimmy Gay.**

Jimmy Gay. Jimmy Gay, he came here -- what was it? -- early 40s? Yeah, I think the early 40s. We had Westside -- what was that? -- Jefferson Street Center. I was the emcee down there. I must have been about 16, 17 years old. Anyway, Jimmy Gay, the first time I met him and he was on his job and he was the janitor there at the center. And naturally, I'd see him all the time, you know. Being a youngster I kind of looked up to him because he could talk and blah-blah-blah-blah.

So that's about all I know about Jimmy. Then he started working his way through the system. He made some good connections. That's when he started doing things. Like any good politician, he did things.



**Do you remember any of those things?**

Well, anything that was done and he was close to it, he always said he was part of it just like anybody else, whether he was part of it or not, you know. But he always kept his nose pretty clean. I mean whatever he did, if he was doing something underhanded --

**(End tape 3, side A.)**

That's where I think he really got his start, Sands. Let's see. I don't know. I think it was Nate Adelson that liked him. So he made Jimmy a supervisor. Of what I don't know, but I know he was a supervisor. And from there on Jimmy started progressing. I had forgotten he had worked there at the Sands until you mentioned it. But I know he went out there because he went from being a janitor to boss of the janitors.

**At Jefferson Center or at the Sands?**

He left Jefferson Center, yeah, and then he went out to the hotel.

**But didn't he have a pretty good executive-type position out there?**

He started as a supervisor. And that's what he did for a number of years. Then one day I read where he is an executive. I think they gave him an office and all that jazz. He was still doing what he always did. But as far as doing things for the community, he was always there in the public eye. Now, I could never put my finger on what he was doing or how he was doing it, even. Maybe he was just such a diplomat that he didn't have to be in the limelight.

**Now, wasn't he also very active in the NAACP during those years?**

Oh, yeah. Well, see, once he got to be an executive, then he got in the NAACP. He was a pretty well-educated man as far as I could talk to him. And I always thought he was. So, therefore, he was a vocal part of the NAACP and the people that were in the NAACP, they always wanted Jimmy to do this because he had connections. So, therefore, if they needed this or that, you know, put Jimmy up to, get Jimmy to ask Mr. So-and-so, you know. That's the way that was.

**Okay. And one last thing about him, he also left there -- oh, wasn't he also credited with getting a lot of employment for other blacks?**

I imagine so because he was in that position. But it was integration making its way through the community. And, therefore, he was just part of the flow, you know. He happened to be recognizable. But it was an evolutionary thing that was happening anyway.



**So he wasn't actually doing anything then until the 60s? This didn't start for him?**

I don't know. Like I was saying, this was all part of the whole change within the lifestyle here. So, therefore, they were -- I don't know what he could have done, you know, that wasn't being done. He just happened to be in a position to say, well, I was there; I did this or whatever.

**Now, did he also do any work as a mortician?**

I don't know if Jimmy worked as a mortician or not. But I think he told me at one time that he was a mortician. No, I can't say whether he worked as a mortician or not. *[Jimmy Gay was the first black mortician in Las Vegas.]*

**During those years that you were here, especially beginning in the mid to late 40s, the Culinary Union is growing, started growing. There was also the mob.**

Yeah.

**It was very active here. In the black community, tell me how the mob -- was there any mob influence in the black community? Did they own any of the businesses over on the Westside? Was there any connection at all, or how did the community see the mob?**

Oh, no. Well, I mean the black community knew as much about mob involvement as anyone else. And you know always the underdog's going to go for the bad guy, you know, and they liked it, you know, because, man, you can get a job out there at so-and-so's place and make good money and they don't care if you keep it or not and blah-blah-blah-blah. Like tips and all that kind of stuff they were talking about.

I think I told you when I was in high school and they opened up the Flamingo. And that first night I parked cars. And talking about mobster, I never saw so many mobsters in all my life.

**How did you identify them?**

Somebody would say that's so-and-so or that's so-and-so, you know.

**So tell me about parking the cars at the Flamingo.**

Oh, first night I parked cars I made \$75 I think it was. I went on with \$75 and my grandpa, I thought he was going to kill me. He thought I had robbed somebody. Yeah, because, heck, I think his paycheck was about \$75 every two weeks, you know. Being a young kid, you know, I told everybody about what I was doing and everything. Let's see. I think I worked about seven or eight days and I went out there and they had hired another guy, an older black man. He heard about how



much money I was making and he went in there and took my job. Oh, well, part of growing up.

**That's right.**

Yeah, part of growing up.

**What kind of things did you hear about the mob living on the Westside?**

As far as I know there was no connection to them. Once in a while you'd see four or five of them come over and gamble or something. But other than that, nothing. They'd come in and gamble, set up the house with drinks or something like that, and then they'd be gone.

**Why would they do that?**

Because it was something they wanted to do. They had the money to do it and they wanted to do something. They'd go, well, let's go over on the black side of town and shoot some craps or blah-blah-blah-blah, you know. So that was the only connection that I know of any of the mobsters. Yeah.

**Tell me some of the -- from 1932. I would say you have memories from about 1935. What was the major change in this city or some of the major changes that you have seen?**

Well, there were no major changes until they started integration. Up till then, everything was status quo. There was no difference. Then things started changing because the blacks wanted jobs and they wanted better jobs than just the maids and the porters. I worked for different hotels out there as bar boy and I got to where I was pretty good. And then another young man named Rueben -- he and I went to school together; he was a couple years older than me -- but he got to be a real sharp bartender. And he had a personality that everyone loved. And he went on to be one of the first black bartenders on the Strip.

Then from then on, there was people coming in from different places and they knew how a lot of black people from larger cities knew how to come into an organization. So, therefore, they came in and they were the ones that really helped the black people that were here to get these different jobs because they would get a job and they were good at it and blah-blah-blah-blah. The other people over here say, well, we'll get us one of them, you know. Yeah.

**Tell me about the Moulin Rouge.**

Now, that's when I told you I wasn't here.

**Oh, that's right. You went away for a while.**



Yeah, I missed the Moulin Rouge.

**What do you think the future is for the Westside?**

I don't know. I think it's just going to be part of downtown. It will be exploited for that. But you're getting so much flak now, putting up a lot of businesses over there on Martin Luther King. Now, I think the planning commission and the city manager are at loggerheads because I think one wants to do one thing and one wants to do another. And then we have a councilman over here named Weekly [*Lawrence Weekly*]. He wants to do one thing, but he's being told to do something else. So Westside's going to be up in the air for a while, yeah.

**Do you think it's a good investment right now to buy property on the Westside?**

Gee, yes, if you can find any to buy because it's been swallowed up by the political gangsters.

**So when you say that the Westside might become a part of downtown, what do you see as downtown later on? What's going to happen?**

Okay. Like you've got Furniture Mart. You've got all those businesses up in there. Eventually, it's all going to move this way. See, because you've got all this building going up in the northeast and the northwest. So, therefore, the town has got to expand. And this is the only place it can because property is cheap over here and the people keep sopping it up. That's just my opinion.

**Yes. Do you still see Las Vegas, though, as a land of opportunity?**

Yeah, I guess so. I mean it's nothing like the place I grew up in. But, yeah, I can see young people, entrepreneurs, hey, you know, put your nose to it, you can probably eke out a real good living here because of the diversity. You've got your entertainment. You've got your gambling. Hey, you know, if you're smart, get out there and get with it. I would like to do that. I'm smart enough, but the energy's gone.

**So right now with what you see, if you wanted to invest in something or if you were starting a career right now, what would it be?**

Personally, oh, gosh, I don't know. Like I said, there are so many opportunities out there, you know, because the reason I don't know is because I've expended no energy thinking about it.

**Okay. And my last question is: As you see this place growing more and more, who do you think holds the power? Is it our politicians or is it the gaming industry? Where do you see the power these days?**



The power is with the gaming industry. They have all the power. But you're going to have a segment of people. I hear different things. And you have a segment of people that want to bump these casino owners down a notch because, for one thing, their percentage of taxes that they pay in this state is more than they pay anyplace else. And where did all the gambling come from? It came from here. But these people don't have the wherewithal to push for what is right. You know damn well, here they are paying 7 percent, and they pay 15, 18 percent in Alabama, in Michigan and all that. Huh-uh, see, that isn't right. Then we're back to our politicians. Soon as we get all of that stuff straightened out, well...

**Joe Neal fought for years. He was in the house here in the state of Nevada for 32 years. And that was one of his major fights.**

Oh, yeah. Yeah. He would always say that. But he knew that they couldn't do anything to him because the blacks voted as a block and he knew he would always be in office. So they never gave him no money. "Say, Joe, how you doing out there on the Strip?" He'd say, "Man, they wouldn't even comp me a hamburger." Yeah, wouldn't even comp him a hamburger.

**So are there any other memories that you would like to share, anything that you've thought of since I was here last week?**

Oh, gosh, I thought of a thousand things. What I'm going to have to do is make a heading for each one, you know. Oh, gosh. No. But I have really enjoyed you prying open some of my old "forgettings."

**Well, that's good. I appreciate all the information. And if you do make a list and you think of other things that we didn't talk about, I'd be happy to come back and look at some of your photographs at the same time.**

Hey, and what I'd like to do is I'd like to see what you're doing out there. Can I come out to the university?

**Of course. Of course you may.**

Okay.

**I'm located in the library, Special Collections, third floor of the library. Right now we're finishing the project of Early Las Vegas. We have about a hundred interviews. Emily is going to help me begin to put those interviews in some kind of order so we can have them bound.**



**And she's learning to do interviews, also.**

Oh, great. Great.

**So I thank you so much.**

Hey, I certainly thank you.

**Okay.**

**(End tape 3, side B.)**