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# **AN INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL LEONARD**

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

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The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV

University Libraries

University of Nevada Las Vegas



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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project.

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ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV

**Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project**  
***Rancho High School Class of '62***



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## Foreword

First arriving in Las Vegas as an infant, Cheryl Leonard's young life included a brief sojourn in Southern California before returning to Las Vegas in 1954. After attending local elementary and middle schools, she started at Rancho High during the day, and working at the Huntridge theater in the evenings and during the summers.

More than just work, though - in this interview, Cheryl recalls school activities from parades to pep club, participating in Helldorado, hanging out with her friends at the Blue Onion and shopping on Fremont Street. After graduation, Cheryl returned to California to attend school before coming back to Las Vegas and taking a job with the Central Telephone Company. This was followed by a brief stint working at the Nevada Test Site before she married in 1964 and concentrated on raising her own daughters in a rapidly growing and changing Las Vegas.



**This is Claytee White and it is February 12th, 2013. I am at Cheryl Leonard's house in Las Vegas. So how are you doing today?**

I'm doing very well, Claytee. Thank you for coming.

**It is wonderful to be here. And I had no problems and I was here in less than a half hour, so that's really good. So tell me a little about your early life.**

Well, I was born in Kansas. My father was in the Army Air Corps at the time during World War II, and so that's why we were in Kansas. Then as soon as he got out of the service, which was in 1945, why, we came to Las Vegas. He had always been involved in the gambling industry originally in the illegal gambling industry in California. Anyhow, but of course, here it was legal. So he was a poker dealer, twenty-one dealer and that kind of thing. So we came probably sometime in 1945. So I believe I was close to a year old when we came. Of course, I don't remember too much about that time, but I know my parents got divorced when I was about two. My mother worked as a waitress. I think part of the time she was a cocktail waitress, but by the time I really remember she was a food waitress and worked at a lot of different places here in Las Vegas over the years.

**Give me your mother's name.**

Her name is Laura Martin Ryan. Anyhow, we lived over off of Ninth and Bonanza at a place called El Encanto Apartments. They were these one-story kind of apartment buildings and they were above Cashman Field there. I know we had—not a babysitter, but a person who took care of us while my parents worked and her name was Ella. She was a black lady. My mother told me that Ella loved going to funerals. So she used to load my brother and I up into the buggy and take us down the hill, down the Fifth Street hill to Woodlawn Cemetery and we attended a lot of funerals down there.



**Did Ella know these people?**

Not necessarily. Not necessarily. But it got us out of the house and occupied us.

**What do you mean buggy?**

Well, it was not a stroller. I think it was like a pram, that kind of thing.

**That's right because from there she could walk down to Woodlawn.**

Yes. We would just walk down the hill and then walk back up.

**What recreation [laughing].**

I also know that at one point my mother entered us, both my brother and I, into the Helldorado Baby Contest. Somewhere around there's a certificate that tells that we were in this baby contest. I was a baby; I don't remember what it was like.

**I didn't know Helldorado had a baby contest. People have told me about everything else; I've never heard about the baby contest.**

Yep. Well, I'll try to dig out the certificate so you can see it. But I don't really remember. But they judged the baby on their healthfulness somehow and their cheerfulness and there was a little contest.

Also, I know that my mother took—I don't know if it was a stroller—some kind of a thing that you would put a baby in. She made it look like a boat and she dressed my brother up in a sailor suit and pushed him through the Helldorado Children's Parade. At that time it wasn't so hard to get in the parade or anything; if you wanted to be in the parade, you were in the parade.

My brother went to North Ninth Street School in kindergarten. But by the time I was in kindergarten we had moved down to Sun Valley, California, which is near Burbank. We lived there for about four or five years. My mother married while we were there. He owned a



restaurant and I think she was a waitress in the restaurant. Anyhow, they married and then at some point the business failed.

So I think about 1954 we came back up to Las Vegas. We lived in a duplex that was off of what was at that time called San Francisco, but it is now Sahara. It was near 15th Street, in that area. We went to Crestwood Elementary School. We moved quite a bit, though, during the time that I was in school.

**So what jobs did your parents have this time?**

My stepfather became a security guard at the old Las Vegas Club downtown. My mother worked at the Pioneer Club and I know that she worked at the Nevada Club. I don't remember anything else at that time period. Later on she worked at many of the hotels—the Desert Inn and the Last Frontier, the Hacienda.

**Was she a food waitress at this time or cocktail?**

Food. Food. She worked days so that she could be home at night with us; at least that was my feeling.

**Was she part of the Culinary Union?**

Yes, she was. She was a staunch member of the Culinary Union. She was just really pro-union. I don't know that she ever held office or anything like that, but she was friends with Al Bramlet. And so I know that she was just really supportive of the union in Las Vegas.

**Any stories that you remember her telling about that period?**

Not really, no. No. I remember that she worked hard. And I could remember her coming home with her tips and we used to sit and count her tips and roll them into coin wrappers and stuff because there weren't too many dollar tips; a lot of it was coins at that time. So I can remember doing that, especially the Nevada Club because a lot of the dealers would go into the counter that



was in the Nevada Club and get coffee and that kind of thing and so she would get a lot of nickel and dime tips because they weren't buying too much. So there was an awful lot of coins at that time.

**Did she ever share with you how much she was getting a day in tips?**

No. I know that at that time that they never claimed all that they got; I can tell you that. That was very common practice that people did not declare fully to the IRS what they were making, but subsistence living anyway.

**It's only very recently that you have to do it; you're sort of forced to do it. How much do you know about your father's work in Las Vegas?**

Not really very much because we didn't have too much contact with him. I don't know what places he worked at or anything like that. I remember the fact that he was a dealer. A little bit older we attended the Lutheran church. What was it called? It's on Maryland Parkway about Bridger.

**I know where it is.**

I can't think of the name of it right now. Good Shepherd, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church. So we lived in North Las Vegas, but my father lived right down the block from the church. So my brother and I would take the bus from North Las Vegas and go to Sunday school and church and then we would go over to my father's apartment after that and usually have a meal with him and his wife and then we would walk downtown and go to the movies. That kind of occupied us for the day when my mother was still working because she worked on that day. So I can remember doing that for a long period of time.

**So Bridger—**

And Maryland Parkway.



**And you would walk—so that wasn't that far. You would go to the movies someplace on Fremont Street?**

Yes. Either the El Portal—that's the one I remember was the El Portal. I know there was a Fremont Theatre, too, because I worked there later on.

**Oh, good. I was going to ask you about that next. But you were near the Huntridge also, weren't you—no. You were too far away from the Huntridge.**

Well, we were. But the problem from there if we went over to the Huntridge, then we had a bus problem whereas if we walked downtown we could catch the bus easily to go back where we lived.

**How did kids know what time the movies started?**

Probably the newspaper, but I really don't remember.

**So do you remember going in and even if it just started you would just sit through the whole thing again?**

No, we never did that that I can recall, no. A lot of times there were double features, and so it took enough time. I don't really remember that.

**What is your brother's name?**

James Martin.

**Most kids worked and you were about to tell me that you worked at one time in a movie theater.**

I did. I worked for the Huntridge Theater. I was actually fifteen when I started. I had to get permission from my mother to get a work permit to go to work. It was during the summer.

Lloyd Katz is the one who hired me. Harry Zumar was I guess like the general manager of the corporation. I worked for them all through high school. My senior year I only took half-day



classes, and so I started working at the Fremont Theatre downtown as a cashier, ticket seller. So I did that my senior year. I think I continued working for them during my summer after high school. Then I went off to go to school.

**Where did you go to school?**

I went to the Lawton School for Dental Assistants in Beverly Hills, California. There were no schools like that in Las Vegas. There were no occupational schools of that nature in Las Vegas that I knew about. My mother had remarried again. My mother was married five times. Anyway, she was married to a man who was a dental technician, and so through that I became interested in what occupation I might be able to go to. And college wasn't really something I thought about doing; I don't know why, maybe money, but maybe just—I don't know. Anyhow, so I went to dental assistant school. My mother was living at Edwards Air Force Base at that time. So I came back up to Las Vegas and lived with my brother and his wife for a short period of time and tried to get a job as a dental assistant and couldn't get a job. And so I went to work for the Central Telephone Company and became a long-distance telephone operator.

**Wow. Now I want to go back just a minute. Beverly Hills compared to Las Vegas, what was that like? Was it culture shock?**

Well, I only went there to go to school. I lived with my grandparents back in Sun Valley while I went to school. My grandparents owned a duplex. So when I had lived in Sun Valley early in life, we lived in one half of the duplex and my grandparents lived in the other. And so after I got out of high school and I was going to dental assistant school, I went down and stayed with them. The school was only like three or four months long; it wasn't very long. It wasn't like years or anything.

**How did you get back and forth?**



I had a car. I had a 1950 Chrysler Coupe. It was like a tank.

**Did you buy it out of your own earnings?**

I did. Yeah, I did. My brother was a little tired of driving me around and I had saved a hundred dollars and the car cost a hundred and twenty-five dollars. And so he loaned me the other twenty-five dollars so that I could get out of his hair and get my own car.

**I love it. Did you pay him back?**

Oh, yeah. My brother was an entrepreneur. When we were little kids we shared the same bedroom and we had these valances, the wooden valances above the windows. So mine was filled with these storybook dolls and I wasn't a very doll type of girl. So he had model cars on his. So I built a model car and I wanted to park it with his model cars. And so he decided he was going to charge me five cents a week to park my car on his valance with his cars until my mother found out about it. So I don't think it took too long.

**Do you still tease him about that today?**

Well, my brother is mentally ill. So no, I don't tease him about too much at all. So anyhow, we only got a quarter a week for allowance. So five cents was going to him. But you could go to the movies; the kiddie matinee movies in California at that time was a dime. And so for a quarter you could go to the movies and get a drink and get popcorn. You wouldn't need any more money than that. But when he took my nickel, why, that really cut into my movie going.

**Was he always mentally ill?**

Not until he was probably late twenties or early thirties.

**I see. So while you were sharing a room and everything, when he was charging you for the parking space—**

Oh, yeah.



**So you came back here and you went to work for the telephone company. I'm going to jump back one more time. While you were driving the tank, did you drive back and forth on Fremont Street?**

Oh, sure. Oh, yeah.

**Tell me about those days.**

We had a lot of fun doing that. The police occasionally didn't like the things that we did because, for instance, we would come to a stoplight and we'd have what they call a Chinese fire drill. And so you put the car in park, everybody jumps out, runs around the car once, and then jumps back in before the light would change.

**Nobody told me that.**

Yep, Chinese fire drill it's called. If the light had already changed and then you were holding up traffic, why, then the police weren't really too thrilled about us doing things like that. But that was at a time when you could still drive Fremont Street. And, of course, the Blue Onion drive-in was down at one end of Fremont Street down here, what is now Eastern, and at the other end was the train station, which had a circular driveway in front of it. So we would drive through the circle, turn around and come back down Fremont Street, go down to the Blue Onion, circle the Blue Onion and then go back up and wave at our friends and whatnot. We loved to be seen.

**Did you know almost everybody in the town, seemingly?**

Not everybody. I knew a lot of people that I went to school with. No. There were the kids from Vegas High. I knew a few from church, but that was really all. I saw a couple of people from working at the movie theater, too, because there were kids from other schools that worked there.

**So were the kids from other schools also cruising Fremont Street?**

Oh, sure.



**Oh, okay. So everybody did it.**

Everybody did it. Everybody did it. I think the kids from Henderson came in and did it, too. I think everybody did. It was just common practice.

I also remember one time, though, we were on Fremont Street and there was a Volkswagen parked right outside of the Horseshoe Casino. The Horseshoe didn't have doors on it; it was just wide open. It had like an air curtain they called it, so there was no pillars or anything particularly. So a bunch of guys got out and picked up the entire Volkswagen car and carried it into the casino and sat it down.

We also had parades. Like homecoming parade we'd decorate our cars with little pom-poms and crepe paper and stuff with our school colors, particularly homecoming when Rancho was going to play Vegas; why, that was a big thing, a big rivalry. Although I hear now Vegas has won seventeen years in a row or something, so Rancho is not doing too good. But at that time we had a lot of good athletes and so we were winning state championships in different sports and so it was a big thing. But anyhow, I know we decorated our cars and ran up and down the street.

**And these are homecoming parades. Did the bands play from the two schools?**

I don't remember that particularly. I remember that the Pep Clubs did floats; they would decorate a float. But I can't remember the band. But they probably did, but I don't know.

**What about the Helldorado Parade, how long did kids usually participate?**

Well, I never participated in the Helldorado Parade myself. My cousin, who lived in California, came up here with the Los Angeles Police, a band of some kind when she was in high school and marched in the Helldorado Parade.

**And you didn't participate and you were right here.**



Yeah. Well, I didn't belong to anything that got in the parade.

**Not the band, not the Pep Club, okay.**

I was in the Pep Club, but the Pep Club didn't get in the Helldorado Parade. At that time the casinos were really big into promoting Las Vegas and so Helldorado was a big promotion for the hotels. So they had some really fancy floats and showgirls on them and famous people. So I don't remember so much about the local people at that time.

**So you don't remember it being sort of a parade that brought everybody in the city together?**

I remember it was a big celebration and a lot of people participated in the celebration. I mean you bought your button so that you wouldn't get thrown into jail and that kind of thing. There was a lot of participation from the community, but I don't remember participating in it.

Later on my mother became president of the Emblem Club, which was the lady Elks, and so she was really involved. That was much later, though, after I had already married and had children. She was really involved in selling the buttons and in promoting. There's been some photos of her in the newspaper. I think there was one with my youngest daughter and my brother's son all dressed in their western outfits and whatnot.

**One of the things we want you to do—in a couple of weeks, two or three weeks from now—this is going to be transcribed—you're going to get a copy of it so that you can read through it, make sure that we spelled everything correctly, and if there are things you want to change, you can make small changes in the margin. When you mail it back to us, we would love to have some photographs that we can scan or that you scan at a good resolution and send back to us. So we'll let you know about that.**

We can do that electronically if you like. My husband loves to do that stuff.



**Oh, wonderful. So we'll send you a note telling you what DPI and all of that. So a photograph like that with your mom from the newspaper, we would love to have a photograph like that because I don't think I've ever seen anything having to do with the Emblem Club.**

Oh. Well, they were really active in supporting the Elks with that project. I know she was anyway.

**Good. Thank you. So getting to Rancho High School itself, I'd like to know some of your favorite classes, some of the favorite teachers there.**

My memory escapes me. I was always good at math, and so I really enjoyed the math classes. I remember the first name of the teacher, don't remember her last name. Her first name was Virginia. She taught plane geometry. At that time when you were a freshman—and I went to Rancho as a freshman. They don't do that anymore; they have junior high school. So junior high schools were just being built in Las Vegas. And in the area I was you went to elementary school through eighth grade and then you went to high school. So I finished my elementary at Sunrise Acres School, eighth grade graduation. We actually had a graduation ceremony and all that. So I went as a freshman to Rancho. When you were a freshman you took algebra one or general math if you weren't so inclined. But anyhow, I took algebra one. Then my sophomore year I took plane geometry. And then in junior year you took algebra two. And then your senior year you took trigonometry and—what was the other one? It was a combination. I can't remember the other one.

**Calculus?**

No, I don't think it was calculus. But anyhow, I took all of that. I did all of that. So I always liked the math teachers.



I remember Mr. Miller; he taught psychology. Mr. Swainston, who has a school named after him, he taught government. I really liked government. I was kind of fascinated about the way government works. Those are the things I remember. I remember a Mr. Watts who taught a math class and he wasn't very popular. The kids kind of picked on him in a way.

**So he was a nerd?**

I suppose. So they did things to him when he was not in the class where he had stepped out or something. But I thought he was fine.

**With that kind of a love for math and then you became a dental hygienist.**

A dental assistant.

**I can't put that together.**

Yeah, I know. Your life leads on and just things happen. I didn't plan very much; I just fell into things. And so I would never have dreamt of being a telephone operator, but I needed to work and I needed to support myself and my mother was in California and I couldn't live with her and mooch off her. I couldn't mooch off my brother.

**Because he wasn't going to have that.**

So I had to work somewhere. So I worked as a telephone operator.

**Tell me about that. You worked at long distance?**

Long distance, yes.

**So tell me about the boards and all of that.**

You had a board in front of you that had all these cords. Then there was a panel in front of you that had lights. So you as a customer would call in; a light lights up. You have to plug in your cord. You have a headset on and you answer as the operator. And at that time you could not direct distance dial. So if you wanted to make a long-distance call, you had to call the operator.



The rates for making calls changed during different parts of the day. So during the middle of the day it was more expensive than after eight o'clock at night. So when they scheduled operators a lot of times you worked split shift so that you would work during the peak hours, early in the morning, late in the evening. I can tell you when eight clock struck when the rates changed, your board would just light up. People just waited for eight o'clock and then everything would light up.

**Was calling Reno long distance?**

Oh, yes.

**You could call Henderson, though?**

Yes, you could call Henderson. And I think you could call Boulder City, but probably not Searchlight.

**It was probably long distance.**

Yeah, probably long distance.

**Tell me did most people have telephones at that time?**

No. Well, maybe by the time I was operator most people did. I remember earlier when I was maybe eleven or twelve years old we didn't have a phone. I know my father had a phone and his phone number was like eight four seven six J and it was a party line and maybe four people on the party line. And so you never knew who was listening in to your calls. And if you wanted to use the phone and somebody was already on it, why, then you had to wait until they got off and hope they didn't hog the phone too much. But I know that there was a time when we didn't have a phone because my stepfather had a stroke and we didn't have a phone and I can remember running down the street. There was a pay phone down the street in the neighborhood.

**Just on the corner.**



So I ran down the street and dialed the operator. I told her we needed an ambulance. And my brother came running up with a dime because he thought we needed a dime to make a call.

**[Pause in recording]**

**We were talking about phones. Oh, you were telling me about your father had gotten sick and you had to use the phone on the corner.**

Yeah, we had to run down to the corner to get the operator to call for the ambulance. He survived and all that.

**Good. How long did it take the ambulance to get there?**

I don't think too long. It didn't seem like it was very long; I don't remember being distressed about that or anything. Certainly enough time that he was saved anyway.

**So who did the painting?**

Actually it's a photo.

**Is it really?**

If you look at it closely, it's a group of pieces of paper put together. My husband did that.

**Oh, my goodness, that is beautiful. Let me get that with the camera since I have no business talking about it.**

Now, we actually took a photo of my husband by himself and we took a photo of me by myself, just looking sideways. Then he put them together and created that. That is a series of I think eight and a half by eleven, maybe, sheets of paper. There's maybe twelve pieces of paper that are all together.

**Beautiful.**

He has done another one—he's done several. But we have another one that's a collage of pictures of us from when we were very young all the way up to now.



**When we get to your book it's going to be beautiful; I just know it.**

**So also about early Las Vegas—kids worked. You went to school. Did kids actually date?** Everybody seems to talk about kids being in groups doing everything, going to football games, everything.

I dated. I had a boyfriend that I went steady with and his name was David. He lives up in Cedar City now. I dated a few guys, not too many. But he and I went steady for about a year. We went to prom and we went to movies.

**Tell me about the prom.**

Well, you had to go find a dress.

**And where did you go shopping?**

Well, the shops were downtown on Fremont Street.

**And some of those were?**

Lerner's was one. Oh, jeez. Ronzone's. Boy, that's the only ones I can remember right now.

There was a little shop, but I didn't really get a dress there, but there was a clothing store that was down near the post office that was called KKK.

**Nobody told me about KKK.**

KKK. And I don't know if that's Ku Klux Klan.

**What did that stand for? That was my next question.**

I think it was like K and K and K or something like that. But it was on Third Street. The way I remember it, it was on Third Street right across from the post office in that area there.

**So near the Lady Luck?**

Isn't there a restaurant called George's?

**Triple George.**



Triple George, yeah. I think it would be over in there somewhere, in that area there.

**I see. So where did you get your prom dress?**

I don't remember. I don't honestly remember. But the senior prom is the one I remember more than anything because I bought a dress that had spaghetti straps, so your arms were bare and your bodice was bare, not showing your cleavage, but it was a little higher. It wasn't a long dress; it went down below the knee, but it was not all the way to the floor.

**Oh, that sounds beautiful.**

But then the practice was to go and buy cloth shoes and have them dyed to match the color of your dress. There was a place called C.H. Bakers that you could do that. And you could also get purses, little clutch purses and have it dyed, too, so your shoes and your purse and your dress matched. I don't know if they do that anymore.

**What about after the prom, did you go to a casino?**

We went to a show I think. But I honestly don't remember where it was. But that would be a common thing to do would be to go out. We didn't rent limousines. At least I didn't anyway. There may have been somebody. The kids at Rancho to a great extent were in middle- and lower-class economic, so I don't remember being too extravagant.

**But I love that everybody worked. Almost everybody I've interviewed had a job.**

Yes.

**I love that. I think it teaches so much.**

And I think it does. But high school is expensive. It can be expensive. If you start belonging to clubs and different things. Even the sports, why, you wanted your letter jacket or something like that, they cost a lot of money, and maybe you're traveling a little bit and you have to have some pocket money to do that. My mother didn't have the money to pay for that kind of thing. She



was just making enough money to pay the expenses for the house. We lived comfortably. I can't say that I ever wanted particularly, but we were frugal. So working was really a necessity if you wanted to have anything extra. So I could provide my own clothing; she didn't have to do that anymore, and my own entertainment. So I think that helped out.

My brother worked, too. He worked at a meat market, Bernard's Meat Market, which was I think on Ogden around maybe Seventh or Eighth Street, something like that. So he worked there. I'm not really sure exactly he did when he was there, but I know eventually he became a butcher. So he did work as a butcher for a long time.

Anyhow, I think that it was just a necessity. You just didn't have that much money or anything.

**So how long were you at the phone company?**

Not very long.

**Okay. What happened?**

Well, I decided that I might want to go back to school and become a dental hygienist, which would involve going to college. I thought, well, if I'm going to do that, I'm going to need more money than I'm making right now. The phone company, if I remember right, I made a dollar forty-five an hour. I worked at the theater; the first money I made was ninety cents an hour. Then I got a big pay raise and it was ninety-five cents an hour. By the time I left there, after a couple of years I think I made a dollar, a dollar five an hour as a cashier. So when I went to work at the phone company it was like a dollar forty-five, a dollar fifty, something like that. But then if I went to the Test Site as a clerk, then I could make over two dollars an hour. Plus you got five dollars a day per diem, three dollars of which you spent getting on the bus to get out there and back.



**So their bus, you had to pay?**

Yes. Yeah, you paid a fee for the bus.

**But since they gave it to you as a per diem.**

Yeah, they give it to you as a per diem. So the five dollars I spent on the bus and lunch out there because they had a dining hall.

**But still, the two dollars an hour you didn't have to spend.**

Right. So the theory was that I was going to make all this money and I was going to manage to someday go to college and become a dental hygienist. And then I met my husband, so all of that went by the wayside.

**Was he working at the Test Site?**

He wasn't. He had, but he was working in town. He's a construction electrician, and so he was working in town. We got married in January of 1964, so that was only like a year and a half out of high school.

**Oh, that's right. So how long were you at the Test Site?**

I think about three or four months.

**What did you do there?**

I worked at the main gate and I was a clerk. We worked in what's called the badge office. So anybody who was going to go onto the premises had to get a badge to wear with their picture and everything, and so we were the entity that issued that. It was part of the security system for the Test Site.

**Did you ever get to go around the Test Site?**

No.

**What did you hear about the tests? Did you know in advance that they were going to have**



**one?**

Sometimes. I know one time in particular we were asked to work on a weekend because they were going to have a test on a weekend and there were people coming in who were going to need badges, and so we were asked to work. I remember we begged and begged the sergeant to take us out and let us see the site, see the blast. He told us no that was not possible. Anyhow, we worked during the day. I don't even remember feeling it or anything like that. We may have, but I don't remember that at all.

I know I was working there when Kennedy was killed because everybody remembers where they were when Kennedy was killed. And I know one of the other clerks was an older woman and I remember that she was very upset. I was only nineteen; what did I know? But she was very upset, enough so that she had to go home because she was upset about him being assassinated.

Anyway, so I got married in January of '64 and I probably worked about another month and my husband said you're gone all day long, you don't get home until six, six thirty at night. He was getting off at three, three thirty in the afternoon. So he really thought that it would be nice if I was at home and he felt that he made enough salary that I didn't need to work.

**Did you tell him that you wanted to go to school?**

No. That all went by the wayside. When I got married and he told me I didn't have to work anymore, all thoughts of a career went right out the window. And then we had babies.

**Yes. How many children?**

We had two. We actually had three; one we lost at birth. We had two daughters. They were both born in Las Vegas and grew up here and went to school here.

**Tell me about the difference in your schooling and theirs. What were the changes that you**



**noticed?**

When I was in school I felt very comfortable and safe. I don't ever remember feeling like there were gangs; if they existed I was not aware of it. But by the time they went to school—and they went to Las Vegas High School downtown, the old Las Vegas High School—by that time the Cholos and the other gang kind of groups, Twenty-eighth Street Gang and that existed. And so I don't think there was as much security. But in terms of teaching and that kind of thing I don't think there was a whole lot of difference. In fact, I worked at Vegas High School for a period of time, I think one year, in a classroom. I was working in a special ed classroom with high school kids. I remember one of them threatening me. They didn't pull it out, but they threatened to knife me. So there was that kind of thing that I don't remember existing.

**And that was so fast.**

Well, that was fifteen years.

**So could they enjoy the same kind of freedom that you enjoyed? Did you feel good about letting them—**

I didn't feel they were unsafe exactly because they knew how to avoid it. They said if there was an incident—some kids are drawn to incidents. Both my girls said that they just went the other way. So if there was some incident that was going to happen on campus, why, they just stayed out of it and stayed away from it.

**Did they cruise Fremont Street when they were in high school?**

I don't know. I have no idea. I can't remember at what point that it quit being cruise-able.

**Not until the nineties.**

Well, they probably did, then. They probably did. I know my oldest daughter—well, actually she had to have gone with somebody else because she didn't get a driver's license or a car until



she was way out of high school. The other daughter was four years later. So she did get her license and did get her car, but she was a little more adventurous than my first daughter, too. So I suppose they did, but it's not something I thought about.

**At that time, especially getting back to the Rancho High School days, the city was controlled by the mob.**

Yes.

**What did that mean to a regular family going to work every day, coming home for dinner?**

**What did that mean?**

I think we felt safe. I don't remember locking the doors. It's possible to live in Las Vegas and not have anything to do with casinos or anything like that; I mean you can do that. A great many people don't, but you can live here like that. My mother worked in the casinos, but I don't think she had anything to do with it. My father, however, was involved, at least in the forties he was. And before he went into the Army he was listed as the owner of a casino in Reno; he didn't own the casino.

**But they used his name?**

Yeah, yeah.

**What did that mean for him? Did he earn more money?**

Oh, yeah. Well, he was a gambler and so my father never had anything; he never owned property and he didn't even own a car or anything like that because he gambled most of everything that he had away. He made money on occasion. But he was addicted to gambling. You'd think as a dealer that he would know better. He just liked gambling.

**And I think it does become an addiction even if you want to quit.**

Yeah. But the mob, as far as that goes, I can't say that it—maybe there was some extraneous



effect that I wasn't aware of. But on a day-to-day basis, I don't think life was particularly any different for me than it would have been if I had lived in a community that didn't have a mob. I think there was less crime because they just controlled everything. If you wanted to be a criminal in Las Vegas, I think you had to have permission. But I don't think we gave it a whole lot of thought one way or the other.

**When you see Fremont Street today, what does that mean to you, what memories and how do you feel about the difference?**

Well, I wish that more people would go downtown. I wish that it would be a place that would attract more people. When we had our reunion we went down to Hennessey's and had a Friday night party at Hennessey's. We were able to park in the parking garage and I didn't feel unsafe or anything like that. I was accosted on the street by a fellow who claimed he was gathering money for a charity, but I think the charity was in his back pocket.

**But don't you think more people are going downtown now?**

Well, certainly there's an effort to try to attract people downtown. The Neonopolis business was kind of not a success.

**But now we have the Smith Center and you have new restaurants opening on Fremont Street East and you have Zappos getting ready to go downtown.**

Yes. That's true. And we've gone to the Smith Center I think three times. But you're across the tracks; you're not on Fremont Street and you're not on Casino Center or Third or whatever.

There's still some unsavory people around. For whatever the local entities can do to clean that up would be helpful. I know when we proposed that we were going to downtown for this reunion, why, there were a couple of people that said are you sure you want to do that? For one thing, there had been a knife incident right outside of Hennessey's like the week before we went.



I think that could have happened other places, too, in Las Vegas and has. I know that another lady, Sydney and I went down during the daytime a few times when we were making plans and we had a good time going down and eating lunch and visiting and whatnot and wandering around. I think the Fremont Street Experience—I mean when I have people who have not been in Las Vegas come, I always tell them they need to go downtown and see that. Las Vegas has a lot of free things, little entertainment things that are free. If you went to another city, you'd be charged for seeing this overhead thing or the volcano at the Mirage; those kinds of things you would be charged for whereas here they're all free. So there's an awful lot you can do here without spending any money.

**That's what I do when people come to see me, too.**

**When you were at the Test Site you went back and forth every day.**

Yes.

**At that time were there people who worked there who stayed out there?**

Yes, yes. I didn't, but there were people who stayed out there. A lot of them that was their residence and they would stay out there all the time because it was cheap. I don't really know exactly what they paid, but it wasn't very much money as compared to having an apartment or something in Las Vegas. I know that there were people who did that. And there were some people who would stay out there during the week and then go home on the weekends, too. There was a variety of things. I remember one guy that I met; he had his own private airplane, so he used to fly from North Las Vegas airport. That's how he got to work is he flew his airplane out there and back. I don't know what that costs.

**Amazing. That's a great story.**

I don't know where he landed or anything, but that's what he said he did.



**That Test Site is so big, I'm sure they had a landing strip out there someplace.**

Probably.

**These are the kinds of questions I wanted to ask. Any other thoughts about Rancho High School that I missed?**

Well, Pep Club was a big thing. Pep Club was a big organization. I would say there was well over a hundred girls that were in Pep Club. We went to the football games and the basketball games; that's the ones I remember. I don't know if people went to the baseball games or not, but I know football and basketball. And there would be a section blocked off in the grandstands for the Pep Club. It just happened to be the best seats in town. If you were at the football game, you were on the fifty-yard line.

I do remember that I was a sportsperson and so I felt like I knew a lot about football. But there were a lot of girls who were in Pep Club who didn't know when they should cheer for what. And so sometimes a penalty flag had been thrown and they're screaming and yelling happily and their team has had this penalty against them. So the coach decided that he was going to instruct the Pep Club on how to understand football, the poor man, I tell you. I remember it because we felt so sorry for him because it's hard to explain to somebody who doesn't know what you're talking about. He started talking about we've got this team and that team. There's eleven people on each side and they're trying to get here and they're trying to get there and there's four downs. And you don't know what a down is and don't know what a quarterback is and what is a penalty and what can you do and what you can't do. Anyhow, one thing kind of overlapped into another and questions would come out of the audience and he would get stopped. So he had a terrible time and I'm not really sure he was very successful. But at least then they stopped cheering at the wrong moments.



**Tell me about lunchtime. You had an open campus.**

Actually part of the time I think we had a closed campus if I remember right. I don't remember leaving campus. There was too short of a lunch hour and I wanted to eat. I can remember going down to what was called the snack bar. It wasn't a cafeteria because you ate outside. So it was a covered area that was between—they had what they called the gym and then the little theater and the snack bar was near that with a covered tabled area. And so I can remember the different days they had different food and on Fridays it was fish Friday. Catholics influenced a lot even if you weren't Catholic. So they had tuna fish sandwiches and they had grilled cheese sandwiches on Fridays along with bread pudding with lemon sauce on it and I liked all of that. I can remember stuffing myself every Friday with one of each. It was cheap; it was not very expensive. I do remember taking lunch, too. That was not uncommon to take a sack lunch. There was no stigma to taking a sack lunch.

**And when it was cold did you eat in the gym or what did you do?**

I don't really remember that.

**Kids probably didn't get cold.**

You just did what you had to do. I don't remember that particularly. I do remember that there were what they called mat dances that took place at lunchtime. I think it was just like on Friday or something; I can't remember exactly. That was in the little theater. And so they would play records and people would dance and look at each other and long for other people.

**Would the boys participate in those mat dances?**

Yeah, the boys went in. But the boys probably all stood together on one side and the girls stood somewhere and then occasionally some brave boy would come over and ask a girl to dance.

There was a couple of guys who were really good dancers, not necessarily in my class but in



older classes. They would get out and dance and do fancy stuff and everybody would clap and watch and appreciate them and wish they could do it.

**So did the black kids participate in those kinds of dances?**

I have to tell you we didn't pay too much attention to the black kids. I don't remember a forced segregation. I don't remember feeling differently about black people. But there was like a separation in many ways. And so I don't honestly know that.

**So did you see that with Latinos and Asians or any other ethnic group, as well, all ethnic groups, Native Americans?**

No. For one thing, there was certainly not as many Hispanics as they were; I think there was a much larger black population than there was a Hispanic population at that time. I do remember an incident that I felt bad about; it had to do with Pep Club. There were black girls who were in Pep Club, very nice girls and good students, just normal people. We were going to go up to Reno for a ball game, and so it would involve spending a couple of nights in a motel. So we had to have roommates and there were four girls to a room. I was an officer. This was senior year and I was an officer in Pep Club. And so the president of the Pep Club called me up and said we have a problem. And I said what is that? She said so-and-so and so-and-so have been assigned to a room with these two black girls and they don't want to do it. And I said why, what's the problem? They said, well, just because they're black. And I said, well, why don't you and I room with them then? She said okay. So the next thing I knew, though, the other two girls finally decided it was foolish what they were doing and so they roomed with the black girls.

**Could the black girls stay at the motels in Reno?**

Yes. Yeah, that was not an issue that I ever knew about. Frankly, I don't know if I was just too blasé about life or what, but I don't remember feeling prejudice towards black people and I think



I just didn't think about it one way or the other.

**Right. And it was probably the way it was because you lived in different areas of the city.**

Yes. Although I do remember my mother had a coworker and one Thanksgiving we went over to the Westside to go to Thanksgiving dinner. I don't have any idea who the people were, but I know we did that.

**So do you remember Ella's last name?**

I don't, no. I just remember my mother talking about Ella. I don't really remember Ella; it's more from my mother talking about her. There weren't very many black people in the schools. Even at Sunrise Acres there were probably, I don't know, maybe four eighth grade black kids.

**Because they had to live in North Las Vegas to go there.**

I don't know where they lived. They could have lived out of Nellis Boulevard out that way somewhere. I really don't know. It encompassed such a large area. Sunrise Acres was down off what was Stewart and Eastern area, near Hadland Park. And so the next school to the east was quite a ways. And so I don't know; I have no idea where they lived exactly.

**So how did you feel in later years when you hear about the riots at Rancho High School?**

**Could you believe that?**

I don't understand the riots anywhere whether it's at Rancho. I mean I don't understand the despair that people felt. I never experienced prejudice myself, so it was hard to understand. And I think violence is not always a way to solve things. Dr. King had his peace marches and that kind of thing and they were peaceful. Well, they were peaceful until people attacked them. But from his point of view they were not violent. I think that was a better way to go, but not everyone felt that way. When the riots took place in Watts and all of that, I just don't understand that because you're destroying your own community, so what good does that do?



**Later on when you were adult raising your family probably and they had the Welfare Rights movement here, do you remember any of that where the welfare mothers, black and white, protested?**

No. I remember there was a lady who was real prominent, a black lady who was real prominent and they always talked about her welfare Cadillac.

**She didn't have a Cadillac, but I understand. Are you talking about Ruby Duncan or are you talking about the woman in Los Angeles?**

No. Here, here. So probably Ruby Duncan, but I really don't remember who it was. I think I just set myself away from all of that.

The closest I got involved in the black community was after my children started going to school and I became involved in PTA. Through PTA I ended up serving on the block grant committee for the City of Las Vegas, which was doing federal monies that were used for projects in the Westside community. And so they had citizens from different areas that served on that committee. And so I was escorted over into the Westside community to look at some of the projects that were being funded to see if they were going to continue to be funded and that kind of thing.

**So tell me more about the block grant funds.**

Well, they were federal funds that were applied for by the City of Las Vegas. They were supposed to be for brick-and-mortar kinds of projects. So improve the streets, put up streetlights, tear down old structures, build community centers; that kind of thing. I didn't serve for real long, but that was the kind of thing that we looked at. There was a daycare.

**Now, was this the Economic Opportunity Board?**

No.



**Okay. This was different.**

Yes. Richard Blue was the Las Vegas city government person that was overseeing that committee. I can't remember everything that we did, but that was the purpose, to try to improve the bricks-and-mortar kinds of things within the Westside community.

**And do you remember anybody else—you can tell I don't know anything about this—do you know anyone else who served along with you while you were there?**

No.

**You don't remember any names, okay.**

No. I know that there were people who weren't always real honest, like in life. I remember this one; it was a minister whose name I don't remember, but he wanted to start a credit union. He wanted to start a credit union and he wanted to get fifty thousand dollars from the block grant funds to start a credit union. Well, the problem with that was we were really supposed to be building buildings and that kind of thing. And besides that, from my point of view because I was involved in a credit union, I felt that the money comes from the people who become members and you take the money that they put in and then you loan it out and then you make a profit and you pay your interest and that's the way it was supposed to work. So we did turn him down. I don't believe that he was as honest a man as we would have liked him to be.

**So do you remember any other people who applied for these block grant funds or any of the end products?**

I know there were streets and streetlights. I know that we supported a daycare center, too. That was kind of a little iffy because it wasn't bricks-and-mortar kind of thing.

**Was it Lubertha Johnson? You don't remember that name?**

Huh-uh, I don't remember. I'm thinking that would probably be maybe in the seventies, in the



1970s because my kids were in elementary—well, Tracy didn't go to school till '75 and I don't know if it was before that or after that.

**I've got to find out more information about this. But you don't remember EOB or Economic Opportunity Board as part of this?**

I've heard of Economic Opportunity Board, but I don't believe that we were part of that. This was a government committee that was through the City of Las Vegas.

**Wow. This is interesting. I'm so glad you mentioned this.**

Well, good.

**Wonderful. You gave me lots of good things.**

Little tangents to go off.

**Yes, lots of them. But that's the beauty of doing a project, not just interviewing one person about an event or a couple-year period, but interviewing five or six or seven or twelve people about it like we've done this time. We must have all the information now because everybody has shared little tidbits that nobody else remembered. So this has been excellent.**

And we all did different kinds of things. One of the things I was thinking about yesterday was television here. In 1954 when we came back there were just a few television stations and they were not on twenty-four hours a day. So if you turned on the television in the middle of the night, you got what was called a test pattern, which was this little kind of, I don't know, drawing of some kind; it looked kind of like a flag. So there wasn't as much television, as when I was in California we had a lot of stations. So that was kind of a shock to come up here. Of course, I remember Gus Giuffre's show because he had afternoon movies that he hosted and whatnot and I used to watch that a lot. There was a children's program; I believe it was locally produced and it



was called Cinderella. I think that's right, Cinderella.

**Oh, did it have a character like—**

It had a woman who was dressed up in this fancy dress and she had a little crown and she had this mirror that the mirror was gone out of, so it was just a frame. So when somebody had a birthday and they would write in about a birthday, she would hold this little thing up and she would say, "And I see Johnny Miller and he's five today."

**I love it. That's great.**

Anyhow, it was an interesting time. I don't think it was a bad place to grow up. I know that my husband's family came in '51 and they came because his father, my husband's father went to work as a lineman out at the Test Site. He worked out there for a couple of years with his family living in Kingman, Arizona; that's where he was from. So he would travel back and forth on the weekends to Kingman, Arizona and back. He didn't think that Las Vegas was—the reputation was not a place that you would raise families. And so after a period of time of working out there and meeting a lot of other men who worked there who did have their families there, he was finally convinced that he could have his family move here and then they did. They lived here for a long, long time, until probably—jeez, I'm trying to even think when they would have moved away. He died in the seventies. I guess his wife moved away after that and went back to Kingman. But he worked at the Test Site for some time.

And I've been able to stay here because my husband's work as an electrician because Las Vegas grew the way it did—there were periods of time when it didn't grow, as we've just experienced. But for forty years it grew and grew and grew and because he was a construction electrician, why, that kept him working here. There were very few times when he didn't have work. At one time he did go up to northern California for about three months and he went up to



Alaska during the pipeline building because there was no work here at that time. He was a union electrician. But that was it and the rest of the time basically he worked. He might change companies. He would always tell me as soon as you finish a job, why, you've lost your job because you finished the buildings now.

**What were some of the buildings that he worked on?**

Oh, jeez.

**Some of the casinos.**

Oh, the Dunes, the Desert Inn. Oh, my goodness. He worked on the City Hall.

**Oh, the new City Hall?**

Uh-huh. Not for very long, but he did work there. He worked on Sunrise Hospital, a long time on Sunrise Hospital doing remodels. There's a place out in Henderson called Berry Plastics; he built that. He worked for twenty years for Mohave Electric, so they did an awful lot of commercial work. I've often thought we ought to make a list of all the places that he built because it's just a big, huge, long list. And he worked at the Test Site, too, for a short period of time when he was an apprentice. He worked on what's called the BREN tower, which is this big; huge tower.

**At the Test Site?**

At the Test Site, yeah. I believe it was for an aboveground test, if I understood right.

**I want to ask you about Sunrise Hospital. While you were at the Test Site or your husband being at the Test Site, any stories about protesters out there, people protesting what happens?**

No. And remember I only worked there for about four months at most. When he worked there I'm not sure that—I don't think he worked there real long, either. There were people that he



knew that worked there for years and years and years. He didn't like it all that much. It was away from home. It was a long day because you'd have to leave here at five thirty, six o'clock in the morning and you weren't getting home until six, six thirty at night.

**Right. So a full day. Last question...you mentioned Sunrise Hospital. You were probably here when there was no Sunrise, probably.**

Oh, yeah. I was here before there was a Women's Hospital.

**Who was rumored to have built Sunrise?**

Oh, jeez, I don't even know.

**So you never heard the rumors?**

No, I never heard the rumors, no. Our first child was born at the old Las Vegas Hospital, which was owned by the doctors.

**So that was the down on Eighth Street?**

Eighth Street. And then our second daughter was born at Women's Hospital, which was over on Sahara near Bruce. I don't remember particularly Sunrise Hospital.

**Supposedly some of the owners of some of the casino families helped to build that.**

They could have. I don't know.

**And it's probably pretty accurate. We've heard some unusual stories, some just fantastic stories, the whole gamut.**

Well, I think that there's been a certain segment of the community that hasn't been happy with the county hospital. And so I could see why some people might want to build a hospital that they felt a little bit better about. I have to say that my husband in the last few years has been in Southern Nevada Memorial—is that what they call it now? I don't know what they call it now.

**University Hospital.**



Oh, University Medical Center.

**UMC.**

Yeah, UMC. It's changed names over a period of time.

**That's what it's called now.**

I can remember sitting with him for five hours in the emergency room with X rays that we had just taken that showed that he had a blood clot in his leg. And so we all knew that he was going to be entered into the hospital and he was going to be treated for this blood clot. They had him sitting there for five hours before he got into the back of the emergency room. Then when he was there for a while before he finally got up to a room and they never gave him any medication until two o'clock in the morning. The process was so slow to take care of a patient.

**He's lucky to be alive.**

Yep. The reason we went there was because he had had surgery just a few weeks prior to that; that was very successful and handled a lot differently. But the emergency room was a mess. A lot of people go to the emergency room when they really should be going to the Quick Care.

**And now we have those Quick Cares.**

But even then people didn't go to the Quick Care like they should, and so it puts a lot of people into the hospital. And then the one roommate he had I know was a homeless man. I don't know what he came to the hospital for, maybe to get a bath and food. But a social worker came in to see him and offered him a place to live and he turned it down.

**We have some people who are homeless and they want to be homeless and there are other people who are homeless and they do not want to be homeless.**

Absolutely, absolutely. And from what I understand more and more families have become homeless.



**I just heard a report on NPR on my way over here about that same thing.**

Yeah. We're a big city now and you have to remember in 1954 that were only 45,000 people here.

**So what are the major changes you've seen over that time, let's say from the time of your memory? What is the biggest change?**

On the good side there's more culture. I think the fact that the races can now live in any part of the community—at least I feel that way from my observations they can live in any part of the community, so they're not segregated. The schools are wide open. I think the schools are a mess, but I think it's partly because of administration's fault. If they just let the teachers teach, it would be okay. All this testing and all this other stuff just clutters—and paperwork just clutters everything up. So let them teach and get out of their way.

On the bad side I think there's much more crime, the gangs, the drugs. I don't remember drugs being a problem when I was young. Musicians smoked marijuana. I do know that when I went to Sunrise Acres there was a local drug dealer that hung out.

**Really?**

Yeah, there was. But most people did not participate in that.

**But he wasn't selling it to kids.**

Oh, sure, yeah. Yeah, he was only a kid himself.

**Oh, my goodness.**

Yeah, he was just a little older brother of another person. He would hang out off the grounds after school. That existed, but it certainly wasn't as prevalent as it is today. My grandchildren went to high school here, too. And by that time it was really prevalent.

**So did they go to the public school, also?**



They went to Valley High School; they did. Both of them graduated, so what can I say?

**That's right. I appreciate this so very much.**

Well, I'm glad to have you come over and do this.

**Thanks for all the memories.**

You're quite welcome.

**This is perfect.**

**[End of recorded interview]**



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