

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTHUR C. LURIE

An Oral History Conducted by Cheryle L. Bacot

April 25, 1986

The Southern Nevada Jewish Community
Digital Heritage Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2014

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The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) Grant. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank University of Nevada Las Vegas for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

The transcript received minimal editing that includes 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. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Southern Nevada Jewish Community Digital Heritage Project*.

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PREFACE

Arthur C. Lurie had resided in Las Vegas for 33 years at the time of this 1986 oral history. He and his wife Eleanor had relocated from Los Angeles area to help run his brother-in-law's food market. Over the years his career would include the grocery, bar (Art's Place) and restaurant businesses; including being co-owner of the liquor store at Wonder World.

He shares memories of adjusting to the more laidback culture of small town Las Vegas and how he feels like a native after watching the city grow over the past decades. Art was a founding member of Temple Beth Sholom, where he served as an early vice-president.

Being in the non-gaming sector provided gave him the opportunity to work with youth programs and he started the Golden Gloves gym in Las Vegas. He judged over 40 title fights and had a long career on the Nevada Boxing Commission.

Arthur Lurie past away in 2014 at the age of 96.

My name is Arthur C. Lurie. I live at 557 Bonita in Las Vegas, Nevada, and I have been a resident of the state of Nevada for thirty-three years.

We usually start by asking a few questions about your family. Where were you born?

My parents were born in Chicago.

What were your parents' names?

My parent's name was Ben Lurie and my mother's maiden name was Nathan. Her name was Rebecca Nathan. And her parents and my father's parents are originally from Lithuania, which now is a part of Russia. The country doesn't exist anymore. I have two brothers and a sister living in Los Angeles. I have a son [Ron Lurie] that's a city councilman in Las Vegas. And I have a daughter, Wendy, that's living in Los Angeles. And two grandchildren living here in Las Vegas.

What was your parents' occupation?

My parents' occupation...my father was a bar owner. Originally in his early life he was a cigar maker. My uncle brought over from Europe the art of making handmade cigars. They made special cigars in Chicago for different companies, personalized cigars with your name on it and very fine quality. When my father and family moved to Los Angeles, we had a small restaurant in East L.A. That was in 1918 that they moved to Los Angeles. In 1927, they had a little cafe at Spring Street and North Broadway where the bridges come together over the L.A. River. After 1933 repeal, it was changed into a beer garden called Big Ben's Beer Garden.

Is there any ethnic groups that you identify with?

Ethnic groups?

Yeah, are there any ethnic groups that you identify with?

Yes.

Was English spoken at home as a child—

Yes.

—or any other language?

English was spoken at home for us kids and my folks could speak Hebrew. When they didn't want us to know what was going on, they would speak the Hebrew; although my mother was Italian. My father was the Lithuanian.

As a child did you celebrate any ethnic or special holidays? And if so as a child, do you still celebrate them?

No. There's very few holidays that I celebrate. Since my folks were always working away from the house, the kids—my brothers and sisters, we raised ourselves primarily. And my mother's philosophy towards holidays and church and so on was to treat people the way you would like to be treated and you didn't have to attend a mass or church or the synagogue or whatever your choice was. As long as you were a good person and you treated people the way you wanted to be treated, she thought that was the philosophy of life the way it should be.

She basically gave you some good roots.

Yes.

Can you tell me about your childhood? Where did you live? Do you have any brothers and sisters?

I told you about the brother and sisters of which you can put in the right area. I have a one sister and two brothers. Everybody's alive. In fact, this coming May the fourth will be my brother's eightieth birthday.

Oh, very good. Was your extended family important to you, like your aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents?

On my mother's side and on my father's side, there were fourteen brothers and sisters on each side. When World War II broke out, there was thirty-five first cousins that entered the armed services at one time. We had a write-up in the Los Angeles Times, first cousins entering into the service, different branches of the service. Thirty-five of us served into the Second World War.

What aspect of your life did your parents influence?

I think my parents were very kind, tough but kind, stood up for what they believed in. They were the kind of people that never started any kind of trouble, but they would stand up if they thought they were right; they would stand up for whatever their feelings were. I think that my early influence was never to steal anything, to always ask if I wanted something. A very good bringing up, more or less a bringing up of loyalty to the family. If you did something wrong, you weren't hurting yourself; you were hurting your family, which due to the respect of your brothers and sisters, you didn't want that to happen. So you were pretty much on the ball of your conduct.

Do you remember any special event in your childhood that had a great effect on your life?

Yes. I had a friend—my folks had a little restaurant in Los Angeles that took their time during the day. And since I was the baby of the family, I had to remain at a person's house until my folks closed the restaurant, this little restaurant, and they would pick me up. [Pause]

You asked a question of if there's any special event that happened in my early life that stays in my mind. There sure is. I was raised in my early life by a black family that lived in Lincoln Heights. In Lincoln Heights in Los Angeles there was only two black families; they were all Italian and Mexican and other nationalities, but there was just two black families; one was the Washington family and the other one was the Thomas family. I was raised with a young fellow that was a big influence on my athletic career and his family was on my scholastic studies.

My parents were more educated to work and have a trade and do things along that line. And the Washington family, his grandmother, this Kenny Washington's grandmother was a custodian of Albion Street School of which we both attended. Then after school I stayed at his house. I owe my whole athletic career to Kenny Washington, who became an all-American football player at UCLA and was responsible for bringing Jackie Robinson to UCLA and his career as a baseball player was done by this family.

I didn't really know my own strengths until I was wrestling and playing football with Kenny Washington on front lawns and he told me how strong I was when I tackled and hit him. I never had the confidence in myself until he brought it out in me. That started me off on a very fine athletic career, which I was the chief athletic officer aboard the [USS] Bonhomme Richard in the navy, through my studies in going to Loyola University.

When did you move to Nevada and why did you move to Nevada?

I moved to Nevada to—my brother-in-law, Joe Gordon, owned a market at 121 North Fifth Street, which is now Las Vegas Boulevard. In 1953, I moved up here to run his market for him. I was in the grocery business in Los Angeles. When I came out of the navy, I was in the grocery business in (inaudible). The food business is where my life has been.

Can you give me a more detailed description of your life before and after you moved to Nevada? So this time I would like a contrast; your life before and your life after you moved to Nevada.

Well, my life in California...naturally it's a large city, spread out where you wouldn't know political people unless you were in a top echelon or in the political world. Nevada brings a new light to your life because when I moved to Nevada there was like twenty-eight, twenty-nine thousand people living in Las Vegas, and I knew everybody. I could walk down the street and

say hello to almost twenty thousand people.

You still know a lot of people.

Well, I know more than twenty thousand now. But I think that Nevada gives you a lot of opportunities that other states wouldn't offer to a family of working class people. My son has been a city councilman for sixteen years wherein other cities maybe you would have to be in a more important family than we were coming to Nevada. We're not in the gaming area; we're in the service business part of Nevada. So that gave me a lot of time to spend with the youths of Nevada. I opened a Golden Glove gym of which I had the part in doing, running youth centers, because in the evening I was probably one that had more time to serve the community than to hang around a hotel. The other people that worked in the industry in the early days in Nevada, their working was around the clock and it's a twenty-four-hour town. My job was in the daytime, so I had the evenings in order to control some of the youth activities in Nevada.

When you arrived in Nevada, what was your first impression?

Well, going back thirty-three years, my first impression was that Nevada was a small town. Either you were a part of the community by conducting yourself in a good manner or you were an outcast. There was no in between with it; either you were a good person or a bad person, as far as my first impression of Nevada. Everybody knew what you were doing. It's like living in a glass house in Nevada. There was one street and that's where the convention center is and all through that area it wasn't even paved; it was still desert. North Fifth was not paved past Fremont. So it was like one family; Nevada was like one family. I made a lot of friends and I think that I felt I was more a part of the community in Nevada than I was ever in Los Angeles where I was born.

What changes have you seen with the state, the city, the county as far as governmentwise or

changes period that you've seen since you arrived here in Nevada?

Well, I've seen quite a few changes. I've seen the city grow. I've seen the areas that we have a freeway now. When you're driving up on the freeway, it's almost impossible to conceive how it was against what you're looking at now with all the lights that are spread out for so many miles in all directions. The city is going in several different directions. I knew every politician in the city because I took part in the city of charitable things that I could do so that my time was occupied and not to gamble or to...because if you live here it's very difficult to be a gambler and liver here unless you have a printing press. You need a printing press to make your own money.

What changes would you like to see in the state, the city or the county?

Changes I'd like to see is that I think that we have too many people running our municipality. I feel that the mayor and a city council would be enough. I can't see the need of Sahara Street dividing the city from the county. Since it's such a compact area, I would like to see one group, either the county commission or the city commission, and one mayor rule all of Las Vegas.

Are you married?

I'm married. I've been married forty-six years to Eleanor. Her maiden name was Eleanor Gordon. She was born in Cleveland, Ohio. She attended school in Los Angeles. I met her right out of high school. She went to Fremont High School in Los Angeles and I went to Lincoln High School in Los Angeles County.

Does your spouse belong to any civil or political organization now or in the past?

My spouse is a housewife and a mother who raised two real fine children. She is not interested in organizations and she elects to have just one friend at a time. She's not a person to be in a whole group of people. I think that I've overpowered her so much that she just likes to do her own little thing and stay home. With Ron and I—with my son as a city councilman and me as

twenty years on the boxing commission, this little lady feels that her place is in the house.

What occupations have you had here in Las Vegas and what (preparedness) are there with your occupation compared to Nevada, being the gaming capital of the world, entertainment capital?

Well, I've had many occupations since I've been here. I've run the Food Fair stores, which are now the Smith's Food King. I was a district manager and had over six hundred employees. I've opened the Silver Slipper and the Frontier Hotel as the food and beverage director. I've owned seven bars in Las Vegas. I have a new bar called Art's Place at 532 East Sahara right now and I have the liquor department in Wonder World on Maryland Parkway at the present time. And I like to keep busy and I'll never retire and I'm going to die in a store. [Laughing]

Why and how did you decide to get into this occupation of the service business, the liquor store business? Could you tell me why and how?

Well, I'm a retailer. So almost any type of business—hello, Harry. That's my friend Harry Bison. When you're a retailer you lean towards any business where there's merchandising and where there's people and that's my life.

Was this occupation a main reason for moving to Nevada, because of your retail experience?

If I told you the truth of why I moved here—I'll put it down; it's a little dirt about my family. My brother-in-law was getting a divorce and he was very upset about getting a divorce and asked me to come up and run his market so he could take a year off and travel around and kind of get his act together and that's my reason for moving to Las Vegas.

Were there changes in your job that you considered important (inaudible) in your occupation?

I found that—I left one thing out. You asked me a question earlier about what my thoughts were in coming to Las Vegas and so on. When I got into the market, I found that people were very complacent. As far as (clubs) were concerned, they didn't move fast. I just came from a big city where there were supermarkets and the one program that we had in the supermarkets was to check people out fast so they could go home. I found that there was more friendly atmosphere between a checker in a market and a customer with, “Hello, Joe. How are you?” More of them being recognized by the person and they worked at a very slow pace. In fact, the first day that I was in the market—this was five in the evening and I had three check stands open. I'm trying to get the people home because people eat between six and seven or eight o'clock. So the idea is to get them out. And being trained in a large city, my thoughts were to get these people out as fast as I could. In one of the baskets was a little baby and the checker picked up the baby and started cuddling the baby and this line got longer in the store. And I said to her, “I like what you're doing, but I don't like your timing. So would you put the baby down and check these people out? They want to get home.” She said to me, “I quit. I quit my job. You can't talk to me that way.”

So I had a problem understanding help at first up here, how to talk to them, how to approach them so that I could get the most out of them. I did try. But I also quit the first day in the market. I threw the keys on the desk because my brother-in-law called me upstairs and said the checker was going home, that I upset her, and that she'd be back tomorrow. And then I said, “If she comes back tomorrow, I'm not coming back tomorrow. So here's your keys.” Then we got everything straightened out. But to end my little story, she did not come back the next day.

How does the standard of living in Nevada compare with other areas that you have lived?

I think the standard of living in Las Vegas or in the state of Nevada is much nicer for people than any place in the world because of the low price of food. If you don't feel like cooking, you can

go to one of these buffets and have dinner for two or three bucks, and there's no way you could make that same dinner at home for that kind of money. Also, rents and other products in Nevada are reasonable.

Do you prefer Nevada to other areas; why or why not?

I love Nevada. I feel that I'm a native now. I've been here for so many years. I don't think you could find a better climate and a healthful environment than you do in the state of Nevada as far as the air, as far as Lake Mead, as far as your nice mountains and the skiing. In thirty-five miles you can ski or thirty-five miles the other way you can go boating.

Do you belong to any civic organizations? Do you belong to any political organization?

And how important is that?

I'm a Democrat because my father was a Democrat and that's the only reason I can tell you I'm not a Republican because if my father was a Republican, I would have been a Republican. I vote for the person that I feel is going to be the best job whether they're Republican or a Democrat. I belong to the Masonic Lodge. I am a charter member of the Zelzah temple of the Shrine in Las Vegas. And I belong to the Boys Club. I'm on the board of directors of the Golden Gloves of Nevada. I'm a director of ex-boxers, Post 711 ex-fighters. I just work with the community because I've made my living here.

What is your religious affiliation? How have you participated under (inaudible)?

I find that when you live in Las Vegas or in Nevada, you have to identify your religious background. I was vice president of the Temple Beth Sholom at 1700 East Oakey. I built that with some other people. With a few of the native of Nevadans, I helped build that temple.

What are some of your hobbies and interests and how have they affected your life in Nevada?

Well, I love boxing. I've served four governors on the boxing commission. I have judged forty-seven World Title Fights. I referee and judge here. Also, I love golf. I love swimming. I'm a booster of UNLV. I follow the basketball team. Both my wife and I follow the basketball team. We go to most of the games in town and out of town.

At what addresses have you lived in Nevada?

I've only lived in two addresses since I've been in Nevada; one of them was 2005 Hassett Avenue when I first moved here, and I've lived in the house that I'm in now for twenty-two years, which is 557 Bonita. And I own the house and I have a five and a half percent mortgage on the house. And I won't pay it off because you can't borrow money for five and a half percent.

Have you witnessed changes in Nevada gambling or the gaming here?

I sure have. There's been many, many changes in gaming especially control of gaming. In the early days when the natives of Nevada owned the casinos, they counted their own money. Today a person owning a hotel, his money is counted by other people that don't have an owner's interest in the casino. I think there is much more security in our gaming and I think there's more tax collected today by the way the entities are run than in the past years by the security they have for gaming.

What would you list as the advantage or disadvantage of living in Nevada or Las Vegas or North Las Vegas or Henderson or Boulder City? What would you list as an advantage or disadvantage in living in the city here in Las Vegas or the outskirts, North Las Vegas, Boulder City?

I don't find that there's any advantage of living in Henderson or North Las Vegas or any other little community around Nevada because you can cross our whole city within twenty-five minutes in any direction. And you can be in Henderson...it's fifteen miles from the back of the

Desert Inn, and Boulder City is forty-five miles. It depends on what kind of environment you want for your own life, whether you want it nice and quiet out in Paradise Valley or you want the hustle bustle of the apartments around the center of town where most of the dealers and people that work in casinos have to live for the convenience of transportation. I think we could improve our transportation in Nevada. I don't think our transportation for local people is qualified.

Was life in Nevada better at any other time in comparison to today; why or why not?

Well, I think life in Nevada depends on your income as to whether it's better today or not as good as it was in the past. It depends on the individual. Nevada's been very good to me and I live within my means and I can do what I want to do and I am doing what I want to do, but that doesn't go for everyone. Other people that are not in business for themselves that have to depend on a job might have other ideas of whether it's good or bad. Most people would say it's good if they're making enough money to pay their bills and to enjoy life, and other people that are not doing so well might feel that it's a bad place to live. Without money, Nevada is not a good place to live.

Do you remember any specific historical events, such as the visit of a president or visits from movie stars? I know with your boxing involvement and your commission appointment, your ringside judge appointment that you're hobnobbing, rubbing elbows with stars. But do you remember any specific historical event?

I think the one earlier that stands out in my mind is the fact that I told you earlier in this interview that it's a pleasure to live in Nevada where you can walk down the street and say hello to Paul Laxalt and he says, "Hi, Art," and Senator Cannon that calls you by your first name. It would be almost impossible in another state of any magnitude where you would know all of the political people that run your state in Washington. Also, I represented at one time—I'm on the

loan committee for the Small Business Administration, appointed by Senator Laxalt, and I had the pleasure of going to Washington and representing the State of Nevada in the small business conference. I also had dinner with President Carter and his daughter and his wife, with eight of us, just eight people from the United States Small Business Administration. In fact, that was one of the highlights of my life.

Do you remember early aboveground atomic testing and what was your reaction to the tests? Can you tell me anything about the testing out at the Test Site?

I'm really not into the Test Site. It's a hundred miles away and I really didn't think about it. I only know what I read in the paper about the atmosphere going towards Utah and some people would get cancer from whatever it was. I don't know if it's ever been proved that that's what caused their cancer or not. But I'm not too much into the Test Site. I'm not an engineer and I don't understand too much about atomic energy.

Did you live in Nevada during World War II?

No.

When you vacation away from Nevada, where do you go and why?

When I vacation away from Nevada, I still have my brothers and sisters that are with me and my folks are (inaudible) heading towards Los Angeles or Beverly Hills or San Diego. I like San Diego. If I was ever going to retire that's where I would retire is towards San Diego because I love the ocean.

Do you have much contact with people in other areas of Nevada?

When I served on the boxing commission, I had contact with people in Reno and Carson City and other areas of Nevada. I'm known throughout the state of Nevada except for maybe Ely and Elko and Tonopah. But the major cities, everyone knows Art Lurie.

o you plan to stay in Nevada permanently?

Well, I'm sixty-eight and if God is good I'll live here a few more years, but this is where I'm going to end it, right here in Nevada. [Laughing]

What do you think is Nevada's greatest asset, or in Las Vegas, and Las Vegas? What do you think Nevada and Las Vegas' greatest asset?

I think the greatest assets of Las Vegas or Nevada is what it has to offer to people other than gaming. Gaming will take care of itself. I feel that if the convention authorities and people that are promoting the state of Nevada would emphasize the things to do in Nevada, at night eventually the people would could in and gamble. You don't have to say, "Hey, you're going to a casino; come and see us." Tell them about your beautiful mountains and our lakes and the boating and things to do during the day and our tennis. You can play golf here eleven months out of the year. There's only one place in the country that you can do that and that's Las Vegas, Nevada.

Is there anything else you would like to discuss at this time?

I would like to go to work. [Laughing]

Thank you for participating. (Inaudible) another time?

Yes, I would.

Thank you, Mr. Lurie. It's been a real pleasure.

Thank you. And I wish you the best. I wish you the best in your future as a teacher. You are an asset to this community and your enthusiasm of raising your daughters and being part of the education department of Nevada. I salute you and wish you the best.

Thank you.

[End of recorded interview]