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An Interview with Fred Gibson

An Oral History Conducted by David Emerson

The UNLV @ Fifty Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries

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Produced by:

The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries

Project Director: Claytee D. White

Coordinator and Interviewer for Math and Sciences: Dr. David Emerson

Project Editor: Gloria Homol

Interviewers and Project Assistants: Suzanne Becker, Andres Moses, Laura Plowman,
Emily Powers, Dr. Shirley Emerson, Mary K.
Keiser, Lisa Gioia-Acres

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

Table of Contents

Family, education background; organizing company with father, who was mining engineer; father on Nevada State planning board twenty-some years; brother James in Nevada legislature 30 years.....1-2

Trustee director of Nevada Development Authority; beginning of efforts to create school of engineering at UNLV; mention of Bob Gore, Bill Becker, Dave Broxterman, John Heilman, Juan Sotomajor as group that led the effort; encouragement from university presidents Pat Goodall and Bob Maxson; raising money to convince legislature; bill passed unanimously.....3-5

Mention of Bill Flangas, Jack McBride and the meeting in Carson City; endorsements and donations from Howard Hughes Corporation, Summa Corporation, and Nevada Power; opinions on current status of Engineering College; interviewer lists the growing number of PhD programs and the addition of construction engineering.....6-8

Interviewer recounts flight to Reno on Pacific Express with Pat Goodall; recalling January meeting of legislature when square footage of engineering building mysteriously went from 60,000 to 110,000; Fred and brother James lobbied for this change.....9-10

Efforts to get State of Nevada to approve Georgia Tech plan; opinions on finding financial support for College of Engineering to bring it up to MIT or Georgia Tech standards; suggestion for using unclaimed property funds for financing; closing comments on the oral history of engineering at UNLV and other pioneers interviewed, including Bob Skaggs.....11-13

Preface

Fred Gibson's family came to Nevada in 1929; moving to Ely, Carson City, and eventually Las Vegas. He went into the Army after high school graduation and then studied Japanese at Yale. After some time in Colorado, Fred transferred to UNR and graduated from the Mackay School of Mines.

Fred and his dad organized Pacific Engineering and Production Company of Nevada in 1955. The company merged with American Pacific in 1982 and today, among other enterprises, manufactures drugs at a facility in Rancho Cordova. His brother James Gibson served almost 30 years in the Nevada legislature.

As a trustee director of the Nevada Development Authority (NDA), Fred was instrumental in organizing support for the idea of an engineering school at UNLV. He eventually became the chair of the group that worked for the realization of this idea. Fred worked with people like Robert Maxson, Bob Gore, Jack McBride, Bill Flangus, and John Goolsby. He also teamed with Kenny Guinn to elicit donations from individuals and corporations, and lobbied the legislature to garner support for the school.

As a member of the University Foundation, Fred has had a lot of interaction with Georgia Tech, and is trying to get the State of Nevada to approve a Georgia plan. He believes this will help the UNLV College of Engineering reach the level of schools like Georgia Tech and MIT. He also encourages the legislature to allow the university to use unclaimed property funds, but this idea still has not met with approval.

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David W Emerson 2/13/08
Signature of Interviewer Date

It is my privilege today to interview Fred Gibson, who is a businessman who has been in Las Vegas a long time and who was highly influential in getting our engineering program at UNLV moving up a whole bunch of notches from where it used to be. [Interview conducted by David Emerson.]

So could you start by telling us a little bit about your background? Where did you go to college? Are you a native of Nevada or did you come in from someplace else?

Did we blow in? That's -- today? My family moved to Nevada in 1929. So we've lived in the state of Nevada as a family for that period of time. We lived in Ely for several years and then Carson City and moved to Las Vegas in 1936. And I have lived here since then. So that's however many years. That's high math I think.

My father was a mining engineer, had gone to Colorado School of Mines. So that was the background of my family. I went in the Army from high school and studied Japanese at Yale. But later on after a couple years in Colorado, I transferred to the University of Nevada where I graduated from the Mackay School of Mines. And although I've not been employed by the mining industry typical of those schools at that time, I had an absolutely outstanding engineering education that covered a lot of things other than just those related to mining.

In 1955, having worked for my father for several years in the business that he was part of, we organized a company called Pacific Engineering and Production Company of Nevada, which was principally interested in various things for a period of time. But eventually that company was encouraged by the Navy and Aerojet General to build a pilot plant that would demonstrate the utility of an electrode that we had invented to replace platinum metal. That company then, with ups and downs periodically, eventually was merged with American Pacific in 1982 and continues to exist. It's in a lot of other businesses now, some of which I participated in. The principal profitable part of the company now is manufacture of drugs. We have a drug manufacturing facility in Rancho Cordova. So I guess that's why we're here.

What else would you like, David? You just want me to keep going?

Oh, yeah. I'll throw in a question every so often.

So how familiar were you with the origins of UNLV, for example, at the time?

Having my family interested in-- my father in particular because of his involvement in

community and state things. For example, he was on the state planning board for twenty-something years and had a very keen interest in the construction of public buildings, particularly university buildings.

My brother James Gibson was elected to the assembly in I think 1958. He served almost 30 years in the legislature. It may have been a little bit earlier than that. But in any event, he was a very prominent legislator and he took a particular interest in the Mackay School of Mines, for example, and its needs, but more particularly expanding the university system to Las Vegas. He was one of the original very strong supporters. Eventually, of course, when the community college system was expanded, he was very helpful in locating part of that AA branch of the community college in Henderson. But he was a long-term supporter of the university system.

So by the time the engineering school was actually a product of the legislature as well as the Board of Regents, five of us had graduated from the University of Nevada in Reno.

Hopefully that answers your question because we have a very long interest in the system. In fact, I lived out near the location where the University of Nevada Las Vegas had its first building and attended the groundbreaking and subsequent events that were all part of the growth of that school.

I found in interviewing some of the people that were on the faculty that in a regents' meeting of October 1957 they approved a salary of \$562.50 for Herb Wells to teach a surveying course. And that apparently was the first engineering-related course that was offered. Of course, it wasn't UNLV in those days. That took awhile.

That's correct.

So it was called a number of things at first. Southern Branch of University of Nevada. Then it was Nevada Southern University, I guess.

Nevada Southern.

And then eventually became UNLV.

When did the Nevada Development Authority get started? I understand that you had a role in that. Somebody else I interviewed suggested that, anyway.

The predecessor to the Nevada Development Authority was called Southern Nevada Industrial Foundation. And one of the principal founders of that was a guy named Harold Laub, who built

Southwest Gas Company. And there were others, businessmen at least, at that time that founded that group. I became a trustee director of that in 1963. So it was very early after its foundation. And sometime later -- I can't remember when -- we changed the name to Nevada Development Authority. Actually, it was when Frank Scott, who was a very prominent citizen in town, became the president of that organization.

The reason for it changed over time. Initially the power company and others viewed it as a means to develop financing for hotels and other things being built in Las Vegas. So their focus was more on credibility than on actual diversification. But it soon became clear to us in Nevada Development Authority that it was going to take a very substantial effort on the part of the company if we, in fact, were going to grow the community into other businesses. That was the beginning of it. You probably remember the years better than I do.

It was our experience that when we brought in new companies, in their evaluation of this being a place where they would locate, education was always the subject of a lot of discussion. And the more technical these new companies were, at least compared to the ones that we had seen for years, the more interest they had in technical education.

There had been a proposal before the Board of Regents that they build a second engineering school at UNLV. And when that came to a vote, they voted against it. In fact, they had a study that indicated that the redundancy was something that the state could not afford. So they just -- I don't know how to characterize it. But in any event, the Board of Regents did not support a stand-alone engineering school.

There was a group of Air Force people who had a similar interest in higher education and particularly engineering. They found that to be a thing that was absolutely lacking and something that we ought to build. I was not part of that group but knew a lot of them. As you've said, Dave, you've talked to Bob Gore. And Bob certainly was one of the critical people in that group. They were frustrated in getting the attention of the regents or other government officials, and they came to the Nevada Development Authority to ask if we would help them. Jim Cashman, the third, was then chairman-president -- I can't remember when we changed the title -- but anyway, he was the principal volunteer head of Nevada Development Authority. We agreed in executive committee meeting that we would do that. And that began my little odyssey.

They asked me to chair that part of the NDA operation, which I did.

The ones that I remember from that Air Force group were Retired Brigadier General Bill Becker.

That's right.

And Retired Colonel Dave Broxterman.

That's right.

And John Heilman. I think he might have been a retired third colonel, also. And Juan Sotomajor and Bob Gore.

That's correct.

So that's when I came into contact with that group. And they expressed their strong interest in developing engineering. We got considerable encouragement from then president Pat Goodall to start moving ahead in that direction. He had heard from a number of sources, perhaps including the Nevada Development Authority, that seemed to be something that ought to be done. Bob told me that at that time, sort of at the beginning of this, that he was working for the Howard Hughes interests.

That's correct. He was. That's correct.

And that he was essentially told to cool it, stop promoting engineering at UNLV.

That's correct.

How did we get out of that pickle?

You know, David, I can't remember the periods of time involved. But Bob Maxson succeeded Goodall. And Bob was a cheerleader, absolutely. We found him an extremely supportive person for our diversification efforts. And he certainly reflected what President Goodall had said; that he thought it was a great idea.

As it turns out, we knew rather immediately that we were running into some very substantial opposition from the northern part of the state and the rest of the university system and the Board of Regents. So we elected to do whatever we had to do to overcome those objections.

Bob Gore was the right person at the right time. He was a good speaker and he was very enthusiastic. And he and I worked together. It became very clear that he couldn't serve both masters; that is, us and --

Right.

So I asked John Goolsby and -- who was his cohort then?

Will Lummis?

No, no, no. This is before Lummis showed up. Well, anyway, there were two people involved.

Fred Lewis?

No, no. This was more than Fred. This was a guy that was the same level as John Goolsby. And I don't know why -- I may think of it before we finish. But I approached them to see if they would loan Bob Gore to us and pay his salary while he was doing his work for us. And they were agreeable to that.

So we then decided that this was going to take a legislative action without a doubt. The legislature was going to have to help substantially with the funding. But we also knew that they would not do so unless there were matching funds. So the big effort then was to raise money. And we undertook that with Bob Maxson. Bob was very good at that. Whenever we wanted him to speak or encourage others to give money, he was right there. And we raised -- I can't remember how much. But I think that was my principal duty was to raise money. And, of course, my brother being majority leader in the state senate was complicit in everything we did in helping us get the proper legislation and all the rest.

That's pretty much the way it went. We raised enough money to convince the legislature that it was worth their support. And I think the first bill out of that next session of the legislature was a bill for the support or the construction of an engineering school.

My understanding is that the first bill that they passed was the funding of the legislative session.

Yeah. That's right. And the second one --

And the second one was this one. And that it was passed unanimously, which was a rather unusual thing. And the governor signed it into law right away so we could hire an architect.

That's right. I don't think we missed a living soul. We got every one of them -- it may have been coercion -- it surely was coercion. There wasn't any question about that. Who was chairman of the board then? I don't know. It's not McGuire.

No. Again, it's one of those "it'll come to me" things. Jack?

McBride.

McBride, yes.

Jack McBride. So we went to a meeting for this purpose in Reno or Carson City. I had a company plane and I had Flangas and Jack McBride with me. That became an interesting flight because there were some comments about throwing somebody out the door of the plane before -- Jack was one of the best men in the world I think. He was a very, very dear friend. And, of course, Bill Flangas and I have known each other since we were first in college and still see each other all the time.

But Jack reflected the view of the Board of Regents, that they still didn't want it. They didn't want to support it. I don't think they ever did come around. Oh, they have in years since then, but not during that period of time. They found it very dillutive (sic) on -- with their very limited budgets and everything.

Yeah. The feeling was apparently that the state budget was a zero-sum game and if we got something here for engineering --

Yeah. That was going to come somewhere else.

-- it would come out of Reno's hide.

That's right. I can say, David, though, that there is absolutely no question that that made a difference in our ability to bring in these companies that required employees with a technical education, technical background. It just absolutely made a difference. So for whatever value that is, it worked.

Now, one of the other things that we ran into in just the doing of this was that gaming viewed this as an effort to use infrastructure resources that they wanted for themselves, and rightly so. If they were going to grow, they wanted to make sure there was enough water and enough power and enough land and everything else. So they didn't embrace us enthusiastically except for Hughes. And John Goolsby and his associates were absolutely magnificent I think. Summa Corporation contributed a couple million bucks to this thing, didn't they?

Yes. That's right.

Two or two and a half million.

And Nevada Power came through with a million and a half.

Well, that was interesting because a number of us were on the Nevada Power board. So that was -- I can't say it was a slam-dunk. But that's right. So we had a lot of people who were very supportive.

And Tom Beam was --

Oh, Tom was a super guy.

So, did Bob Gore suggest a plan or did you give him direction about what he should do to stir up public support for this project?

Well, Bob undoubtedly had a -- he was not a person without direction. I mean he had his own ideas about what should be. And he was a marvelous proponent of that. He did the things that none of the rest wanted to do, and that was going to the Rotary Clubs and the Lions Clubs and all of those community things. I've always thought that there should have been a better outcome for him in all of this because he really -- if there's one individual who was really the Pied Piper of the whole crowd, it was Bob.

That's what I've heard from a number of --

Yeah. It was hard to get him to talk about anything else when he was doing that.

And he apparently had developed some public relations expertise when he worked with the Thunderbirds.

Yes. And he was -- well, yeah. That's correct. And Bob was also on the national board of the Air Force Association. So he had a lot of involvement and connections with the military. He was a super guy.

As a good bit of time has passed since the engineering college was founded as a separate entity, what is your feeling about how it's developed? Do you think it's fulfilling its potential? I mean is this something you were glad to help support in the past?

I helped -- well, sure. I've had a lot less involvement since I've retired from my company. But my brother, who's our CEO, I think he's on their advisory board, at least he was for a long time. And when anybody wants to talk about money, I refer them to him. I think he's been very supportive. I don't think he's probably reached the level they would like him to reach. But there is a continuing family interest in the whole enterprise.

It's pretty amazing. Have you been on campus recently?

Well, I'm on the UNLV Foundation. So I'm out there every couple of months anyway and have been on campus. The answer is yes.

So you're familiar with the new building that's going up?

Isn't that something? Yeah. Incredible.

I haven't been inside of it just yet, but it dwarfs any other scientific or engineering building.

All of it put together a long time ago. Yeah.

And they have Ph.D. programs in most of the disciplines. And they've added construction engineering, which is certainly a rather large activity in this area at the present time. So it's fun to look back and see how things have developed.

It is. Well, you should take good pride in the way it's turned out. You certainly were instrumental in getting that thing going to begin with.

It was a particular situation because there was a lot of opposition. And university employees have to be kind of careful about meddling in politics and lobbying regents and things like that. So it was a tense time there.

That was hard for you. It was not hard for us at all. Dorothy Gallagher, who is a regent of course -- I see Dorothy quite often. We talk periodically about the low point in our relationship -- when we decided to defy the Board of Regents. No, I don't -- she was, in the end, extremely supportive of what we did and what we're doing.

There were two crucial regents' meetings. One was up in Reno. I think it was December '82 or '83. I guess it was probably '83.

Eighty-three. Yeah.

So we had become aware that a number of forces had been lined up to speak against this. One of them was a long letter from the president of Sierra Pacific Resources, who argued against wasting a lot of money on building two engineering schools in a small state. I guess there was some agitation among UNR engineering alumni. Somebody had been trying to get them opposed. So Pat Goodall and I flew up there the night before the meeting.

Remember Pacific Express -- the airline that came to Reno at that time?

Oh, yeah.

Well, there was a big windstorm, about like today here. The pilot made three passes at the airport and he decided he couldn't land safely, so we flew on to Sacramento. And the airline said they would rent a bus and have us driven to Reno. Now mind you, this was about nine o'clock at night. It turned out that all of a sudden the wind died down. There was another airline that had a flight that was supposed to stop at Reno and had plenty of room. So we got on that. And we got to bed at about midnight or so.

So one of the northerners they had lined up to oppose this was the executive secretary of the Nevada Mining Association. So he got up to speak and he said --

Who was that?

I don't remember his name.

I knew them all at some point.

And he said, you know, in the mining business we don't just hire mining engineers. We need engineers of all kinds. And we can't hire them from University of Nevada Reno in enough numbers to meet our needs. I think we need engineering programs at both ends of the state. And you could hear a mighty hissing as the wind went out of the sails of those who were in opposition.

So at that point the regents let us go ahead with an interim. I think it was called the Howard Hughes College of Science and -- no -- of Engineering and Computer Science.

So in the January meeting the question of asking the legislature for money came up. I think it was a seven-to-two vote eventually. Somehow we had asked for a 60,000 square foot building and over the lunch break it suddenly went up to 110,000 or something. Did you by any chance have something to do with that?

Oh, we were -- that was fun times, David. I don't know whether you remember. We brought people down to the legislators, in particular. We gathered them up. And with my brother's influence they almost always came if we asked them to. So there was a lot of lobbying going on, no question.

Oh, yeah. Lots of visits to the campus at that stage. So it was exciting times.

The governor was very supportive.

He had to find out whether there was some possibility of this happening I guess before he fully made up his mind.

So anyway, I certainly appreciate the input that you had and the support of the NDA and business community. Of course, you got a chance to talk to your brother every so often.

Oh, he was absolutely delighted to do it. He really was.

And I remember both of you also helped later on. The National Science Foundation program called EPSCoR came up.

That's right. They had -- what were they called? Anyway, you had to have state support to go along with the --

(End Side A.)

Sciences and engineering are closely related, as you know, and we needed that shot in the arm really badly. We had some people, particularly in the physics department, who had some good ideas about what might be possible in the way of really upscale research if money was available. So that worked out quite well. It has allowed the physics department to move ahead quite well indeed. So we certainly appreciated your help in that enterprise.

When you go back and look at what happened and this cast of characters that were around that have gone on to other things since then -- but the one I remember best was Kenny Guinn. Kenny was assigned with me to try to get money out of folks, the two of us as a team. And Kenny was a very nice man. I hadn't had a lot of experience with that kind of stuff. But he learned all about extortion I think. It was interesting. It was a demand that was kind of like Jim Cashman the Third. And that was his claim. Fundraising is pure extortion; that's all it is. And he was a master at it, very good, I mean for community purposes certainly.

Well, sometimes the ways things get done are not what are all on the surface.

The other thing, David -- I thought about it the other day -- at that time we were doing it for the university. The foundation was never a part of this effort I don't think, UNLV Foundation.

Nowadays, of course, that's the principal fundraising arm of the university.

And I think actually Bob Gore went to work. That's what he did after this thing had been approved -- he worked for the university in the foundation.

Right. For about a year, or so he told me.

Yeah. He wasn't very happy about it all.

No. He didn't feel that was really his bag. So he and Bob Maxson came to an agreement that he should look elsewhere. And Bob was quite happy to --

He did.

Well, do you have any other final comments to make on this event?

As a consequence of -- I guess this is out of line altogether. But as a consequence of our involvement in a lot of national programs principally for NASA, we've gotten acquainted with other schools and their efforts. And the one that we do the most business with is Georgia Tech University. And we have tried to -- it's one of my unfilled ambitions. I've tried for five years to get the State of Nevada to approve a Georgia plan for the state. We keep getting within one or two votes or something like that. Two sessions ago the state senate approved our approach unanimously and it went to the assembly. And for whatever reason, they didn't approve it. And, of course, the economics of the situation has changed now. But I think if any of our schools are going to be of that level like Georgia Tech or MIT or others of those top four or five, there has to be substantial other financial support. You can't grow it internally.

That's right.

So that's still my mission. Now, I don't know. This year I think they've changed. Brian Kralicki is trying to help us. But we're just going to get passed by if we don't. And I've been with Georgia Tech -- I don't know how many visits I've had there. We have research contracts with them. So I know all the people and what they do and how they do it.

They have a real powerhouse there. That's for sure.

But they started kind of like UNLV. So there's my -- if I could lobby again -- well, as I said I've done it for five years and we spent a lot of money. We've had Georgia people out here -- I don't know -- several times. And they've been very, very helpful to us. But somebody has to spend the money.

What we propose and what Brian Kralicki proposed was the use of these unclaimed property funds. They're talking about it now like it's something brand-new. And it isn't, of course. The state has had these unclaimed properties for a very long time. And they vary year to

year. But it keeps growing 20 or 30 million a year. And they have to hold that for a substantial period of time before they can spend it actually.

I don't think you and I've ever talked about this. But the last session we'd take eight million and bond that for a hundred million. And the way it's done in Georgia, that Georgia Research Alliance, they're the recipients of that money and they have a program among their research. In that case there are only six universities participating in this. And it's all for infrastructure and/or people. And they don't pay for the research itself. That's usually done by grants from somebody else. But they build the buildings and they hire the eminent scholars. And that's all engineering. Well, it isn't all because Emory, which is a medical school, is a part of that. So they have medically related kinds of things that go on.

Well, I can keep talking. But, in fact, technology for this state is an absolute essential. If we don't get on the train, we're going to be just what we are.

There are still plenty of challenges that lie ahead.

Oh, tremendous. It's going to be a different world.

Well, I certainly appreciate your willingness to take some time.

I'm delighted to get to see you again, Dave.

My pleasure. I haven't seen you in a long time.

So the library has an oral history program. And they have somebody who heads it up. So I raised the question about whether the center would be willing to undertake the history of engineering at UNLV because it was kind of an interesting chapter in our relatively short history.

It really was.

I came to the realization that those that were in there founding and so on are getting up in years, including me.

No kidding.

And if it's ever going to be done, now is the time. Actually, one of the early engineering faculty members retired and moved to Chico, California, Bob Skaggs. He drove all the way over to be interviewed.

Oh, good.

Six weeks after that he died.

That was timely.

That was timely. And we managed to get all four of the real pioneers in this thing together for lunch at the Boulder City Hotel, Boulder Dam hotel. So I got them in contact with one another. And they said, oh, you've got to come. And I said I wasn't one of those pioneers. Oh, you've got to come. So it was an interesting thing, hearing the back and forth and discussing the old times. Unfortunately, the tape doesn't -- person who transcribes these can't quite get everything untangled. So I think I may try to have a go at it because I can recognize the voices. And if it got recorded all right, I might be able to make something out of it.

But anyhow, I've certainly enjoyed the project. In due time, you will get a little clip with your interview on it. It's also going to be set up so you can access it on the Web.

Anyhow, that's where we are.

Well, thanks, David.

(End Side B.)