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# An Interview with Paulette Nelson

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

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*UNLV @ Fifty* Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV  
University Libraries  
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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The transcripts received minimal editing. These measures include the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the UNLV @ Fifty Oral History Project. Additional transcripts may be found under that series title.

Claytee D. White, Project Director  
Director, Oral History Research Center  
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## Preface

Paulette R. Nelson's life in Las Vegas is a contrast of images. She recalls riding her horse across the wide-open desert, as well as embracing the technological changes that rapidly impacted the UNLV library.

Paulette honed her life skills as farm girl growing up just south of Mandan, North Dakota. She attended North Dakota State University. A post-graduation summer as a volunteer in Kenya, sparked an interest in adventure and travel and she enlisted for four years in the U.S. Air Force. Rather than enter as an officer, she opted to be enlisted personnel so that she could receive technical training.

In 1981, Paulette migrated to Las Vegas, where she had friends at Nellis Air Force Base. She worked at the Nevada Test Site for the next two years.

Then, while looking for a new job so that she could pursue an engineering degree, she was offered a position in the UNLV library cataloging department. It was a career path change that she never regretted. She eventually became the Supervisor of the Architecture Studies Library; a position she held for nine years until her retirement.

Among the highlights of her career was being involved in the change to an electronic catalog system and being on the planning committee for Lied Library.

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV

UNLV Oral History Project @ Fifty



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Name of Interviewer: CLAYTEE D. WHITE

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Paulette R. Nelson 3-2-2009  
Signature of Narrator Date

Claytee D. White 3/2/2009  
Signature of Interviewer Date

**This is Claytee White. And I'm with Paulette Nelson. It is March 2nd, 2009. And we're having the interview here in the architectural library here at UNLV.**

**So how are you this evening?**

I'm just fine. Thank you.

**Fantastic. Thank you so much for letting me come over to do this. Tell me a little bit, Paulette, about your early life.**

Well, I was born in North Dakota and grew up on a farm just south of Mandan, North Dakota. As I was growing up I guess I just started to love working in libraries because we had bookmobiles that would come out and, you know, be able to check out books. And so I was a constant reader of mysteries and anything I could get my hands on. I loved being a part of 4-H and riding horses and being part of the newsletter that was published by the high school, Mandan Senior High School. And when I graduated I was actually the Mandan High School rodeo queen for a year and a runner up in the dairy princess contest for Martin County.

I moved down to Fargo, North Dakota to attend North Dakota State University and was there for five years. And in that time I participated in a summer program that allowed us to travel to Kenya in Africa and spend the summer there working with a Lutheran Church and just traveling around and mentoring or providing whatever services or prayer services to folks in Kenya in Nairobi basically, although we traveled down to Arusha in Tanzania. So that was my summer travel experience while I was in college.

When I graduated I worked with a volunteer organization that did community town meetings and planning things with various communities throughout the states. And then decided to join the Air Force for four years.

**Wow. Wonderful.**

Oh, I'm sorry. I'm going on too far?

**No. I love that. Now, tell me about your parents, of course, were farmers.**

Uh-huh. Yes.

**Tell me what kind of farmers. Are we talking about a dairy farm? I grew up on a farm in North Carolina so I understand. What kind of farm was it?**

Well, it was some dairy and mostly wheat farming and various other products like corn, but

mostly wheat and flax and that type of thing. And we did have a partial dairy farm, maybe about 30 to 40 cows that were kept. I can't think of anything else.

**So what kind of work do the girls in the family have to do on a farm like that?**

Well, you know, as children we might go out to gather eggs from chickens, feed the animals, feed pigs. We didn't always have pigs. They tended to be more problem than not. But generally that and running lunch out to the farmers because often they would share duties as far as harvesting and things like that. So we would be taking meals out to them as they worked.

**So you're talking about the other farmers in the area would share duties?**

Right. And like when they went to harvest their corn to generate feed for the cattle and things like that, they would be working as a group. And if they happened to be working on our farm, you'd run the meals out to them, just helping with the general preparation of meals, which is pretty major.

**Yes. What is the social life like for the kids in the community other than school and church?**

Well, we really are fairly isolated. If you're lucky, you might have one or two play days with someone in a year. And it generally doesn't happen. So you learn to (adjust) -- your friends are your animals. You know, I grew up with horses and dogs and cats. And you really don't have a lot of interpersonal interaction.

**Any brothers and sisters?**

I have two brothers and a sister. Yes.

**Okay, great. So you weren't there by yourself.**

No.

**Tell me what a rodeo queen does. How do you qualify to be a rodeo queen?**

Well, it's basically like a beauty pageant or contest. But when you're competing you're riding, you know, showing off your riding skills. You're showing your knowledge of the care of the animals and just awareness of the field of rodeo. As a young person out of high school they didn't have high expectations I don't think of a high school student. But you would perform at the rodeo, ride your horse in and around and carry the flag maybe or something like that.

**Do you ever go to the National Finals Rodeo that comes here?**

No, I don't.

**Tell me a bit more about Kenya. That's very, very interesting to me. How many people from your area went with you or from the college went with you?**

Well, initially someone had organized the program the year before. And they had taken five people to Ethiopia and they spent the summer there working in the fields of their major, so engineering students and architects. And then the summer that we went my degree was in physical education. So when I worked I worked with the church more directly since the program was related to church activities. The year that I went there were five people that went. But, again, most of them went to Ethiopia, but I had the opportunity to stay in Kenya and just work for the summer.

**That is wonderful. Now, you told me that after college you went into the Air Force. Would you go ahead and tell me about that?**

Okay. I had just felt the urge to have an adventure or do more traveling. And the Air Force gave me the opportunity to achieve that. And so I went in as an enlisted personnel even though I had my degree. I could have been an officer, but I really wanted technical training, technical background. And so I was trained to work on computer equipment off the F-15 Eagle jet. Once I completed that training, which was about -- you know, you go through your basic training and then you go to an electronic training school. And once that was completed I was assigned work in Germany for two years. And then after that I moved to Holloman Air Force Base and then completed --

**Where is Holloman?**

In New Mexico, Alamogordo, New Mexico. I guess I decided that I had enough at the end of four years. And so I just spent a four-year term and then moved onto Nevada after that.

**So why Nevada?**

I happened to know people from Nellis Air Force Base. And so it gave me a base to live for a few months anyway. And then moved onto a job. I worked up at the Nevada Test Site for two years.

**So now, when did you come to Nevada to work at the Test Site approximately?**

I would say I made the move to Nevada in 1981. And I think I started working up there shortly after that. So it would have been 1981 I believe.

**What kinds of things were they doing at the Test Site in 1981? Were they doing any kinds of**



tests?

Well, I'm really not allowed to talk about that because of the security clearance on it. So we can't say anything.

**Wow. Oh, isn't that amazing?**

You know, some of the things that I saw up there have become public knowledge like the stealth jet. But some of the other things that I worked on I just can't. It has a security clearance and I'm not supposed to speak of it.

**Isn't that amazing? How long were you there?**

Just two years.

**Did you go from there to UNLV?**

Yes. Basically I decided I wanted to work towards an engineering degree. I had started taking a few classes and in the meantime was looking for job opportunities of some sort. And the job at the library in the cataloging department opened up. And I just snatched it up.

**Well, what about the engineering degree?**

Well, I decided not to continue working on it at that point. You know, I seemed to be happy starting work with the library.

**Who did you work with in cataloging and who hired you, some of those people?**

Laverna Saunders was the person who interviewed me. I started working with her. Gosh, Lamont Downs was my, I believe, immediate supervisor at that point. And I stayed with them I would guess -- ooh, gosh. I moved around a few times within the library. So after working with cataloging for three or four years, I moved to government documents, which was in the old James Dickinson Library on the second floor of the round building. And I worked with Chester Davis and Peter Gratton. I worked there for a couple of years.

And then the opportunity came up to take a promotion and move back to cataloging. And so I moved back to cataloging for almost ten years I think after that and stayed in cataloging. I loved cataloging. I just really loved the processing of books and getting them out to the public as quickly as possible.

**And did your cataloging duties take you into the new Lied Library?**

Yes, it did. So I was actually on the planning committee for the library. And so I was there at the

initial conception of the idea and the presentation of the architects about the building and participated in all of that. So I have tons of pictures, but most of them have been turned over to the library administration office.

**So was that exciting?**

Yeah. Exciting and scary because, you know, it just meant a change for all of us. We must have recycled hundreds of bins of materials that we kept on file to keep track of materials and books in the cataloging department. So, yeah, it was a major accomplishment to get moved into the new facility.

**What was your major challenge during the planning phases of the new library?**

Oh, gosh, I really can't think of anything that I guess I could consider as a challenge. I draw a blank on that kind of.

**What was the change itself, from Dickinson Library to the new Lied Library, like? What did you miss about the old one and what did you like about the new one?**

Well, in a way the technical services area in the old library, James Dickinson Library, was big open space. It was not enclosed at all. So you could look across the office way and talk to your coworker. And when we moved into Lied Library it was more of an enclosed space. Everybody was in cubicles. You're attached to the things that you have at your desk. And we are going to be moving into all new furniture and all new cards and all kinds of things like that. And so it was hard to let go of the old procedures and old ways that you would do things and establish and plan out the way the new technical services was laid out. That was the challenge is laying out in basically what we thought was a smaller space everything that we had in the new library. So as far as a challenge that definitely was something.

**After the law school moved into that round building and you went back over to see it, what was your thinking? What were your thoughts?**

Well, the change in the feel of the architecture and the interior design because James Dickinson Library was very much a modern contemporary feel and that was all gone. Definitely it was a lovely new interior design, but it was just not that old contemporary, modern design. So it was quite a shocking change.

**Yeah. I think it was.**

**So tell me how, then, you got from Lied to the architectural library.**

Let's see. The position opened for a supervisor in the architecture library and it was a promotion for me. And I was looking for something that I could move onto that would be a little bit more challenging and give me a place where I could step away and retire after five to ten years. And it's been about nine years. So it's almost time to do it. And so when I interviewed with Jeanne Brown, I just kind of told her that this is something that I would like to do until I was ready for retirement. She thought that I would fit the bill. And so I moved into this office and I've been happy ever since.

**That's fantastic. Name some of your coworkers from the 1980-81 -- I guess it was later than that, about '83, that you started here?**

Uh-huh.

**Who were some of the other names that you would like to mention that you don't want to forget that we need to have on this tape?**

Oh, gosh, you know, everybody has been such wonderful individuals to work with. Lamont Downs, Vicky Diaz, Laralee Nelson, Laverna Saunders and Sharon Drouin were all lovely people to work with, Marilyn Vent. That's from the cataloging department. And then Chester (Davis) and Peter (Gratton) from government documents. And Annie Sattler and Mary Ellen Olson later when I moved back. And, oh, gosh, I hope I haven't forgotten anyone there.

But I also was a student supervisor when I was in cataloging. And so actually one of my duties that I'm really proud of while I was there was to actually bar code and get all of the books in the collection into the cataloging system so that people could check things out electronically rather than doing the hand cards. And so I supervised about 15 people that went through the entire collection applying a bar code to the books and then taking all the information back so that we could type it into a cataloging system. And so the students that I'd like to remember were wonderful as well, Bernice and Layla and Maulia and Maricar. And she had a twin sister, but I can't remember her name. You know, they were just all a great bunch of students to work with. And Tiny Tim and Mini Matt. They were just a bunch of kids that were great to work with. So I loved being a supervisor over there and accomplishing that.

**That's great. Who were some of the library administrators that you remember? So you**

**started in '83.**

Mary Dale Deacon was the first dean that I worked with. Matt Simon for a short period of time. And then Dr. Marks and now Patty.

**Okay. And in there in between was interim Myoung-ja.**

Yes, Myoung-ja Kwon. Yes, absolutely. Thank you. Yeah. I think that's all of them.

**That probably would be.**

**What do you remember -- is it sometimes too far removed to talk about the university administration? Do you remember any of the presidents and their administrations? Do any stand out?**

Well, I certainly remember the individuals, but not necessarily the names. Carol Harter was probably the most outstanding. And the president before, do you remember that name?

**Was it -- yes, I do.**

At any rate I can't say that their administrations particularly stand out in my mind other than just being aware of their community involvement and being part --

**Maxson.**

Maxson, yes. Was it Robert?

**Yes. And then Kenny Guinn for just a short while.**

Right. Right. I do recall their involvement in the community agencies and the government agencies and the interaction. I guess that's about all I can say about that.

**Did basketball mean anything to you?**

Well, the year that they did the Final Four and won that championship and for probably two or three years after that while we were in James Dickinson I kept a poster up on one of our cabinets of the team. But, no, I wasn't a big basketball fan. But certainly that brought us our moment of fame. Wherever we went in the country people would ask about the basketball team.

**That's right. Even now when I'm in my small hometown in North Carolina if I say UNLV somebody will say Runnin' Rebels.**

Uh-huh. Yes.

**When you first got here from being in the Air Force and all of that, what kind of impression did you have of Las Vegas?**

Well, it certainly had a small-town feel to it. I'm sure a lot of people say that. But, yes, it's grown and expanded so much. It just really had a neighborly feel. It seemed like you had to drive across the desert to get to UNLV. So I guess that's the main reaction.

**How long did you live at the base before moving --**

Well, actually I never did live at the base. I just lived with someone because I actually was released from the air force when I was still in Alamogordo. And then I intentionally moved here and I did stay with friends who were in the Air Force. So that's where I continued my love for working with horses because I was able to keep a horse out at the base as being ex-military. And so for a few years I kept her there. And then I rode her about 25 miles across the desert to find a new stable area. Yeah, back in 1981 it was all desert. And so it was not a problem to make that ride to move her.

**Do you still ride?**

No, not so much, not with my aging. I have two horses still, but they're elderly animals. And I just keep them as kind of family.

**Oh, that's great.**

We're still a horse town, but not very much. Used to be when you would ride out into the desert you could ride five miles and tie your horse up at the bar and go in and have lunch and a drink and then come out and mount back up. But that's certainly changed over the years. I'm sure people just don't do that anymore.

**So where would you ride to that you could find a place like that to have lunch and tie your horse up outside?**

Well, actually I would keep my horse down on Sunset. So we would ride over toward I-15, Las Vegas Boulevard and just very much to the south. But there was a bar where they had a place that you could tie your horses up to.

**Isn't that amazing?**

Yes.

**How that has changed.**

It certainly has.

**The 215 Freeway is probably in the way now.**

Absolutely. And the streets. I mean it was all desert down in that area. So riding across the desert was not an issue at all. And you'd be riding down streets now.

**You've told me about some of your accomplishments here at various jobs in the library and I really appreciate that.**

**One last question, we constantly talk about UNLV becoming a Research-1 institution. What does that mean to you and do you think that's a possibility?**

I certainly do. I have watched the capability we have of providing information exchange with the advent of the Internet going from BITNET when that was pushed so hard by Kay Tuma. And very few people would listen or acknowledge that this was ever going to be worthwhile. You know, nobody had email. Nobody had Internet access. And to try to understand how to use this BITNET network was incredibly complex.

**What is BITNET?**

BITNET is the precursor, you know, came before the Internet. You moved from BITNET to another system, which I'm not sure. There was ATEL net service that gave you a text-based log-in for email. And then you moved to an Internet that allowed you to have text only on display. And so in the cataloging department we developed the website. And initially that was only text. And it was an incredible, incredible, exciting day when someone actually figured out how to take a picture to scan it, which scanning technology was almost unheard of back in the early 90s, and to actually put one tiny picture up on that website that was a picture of James Dickinson Library. We've moved from that initial one text-based page to a gray page that had the picture and had more interactive links that would take you to department pages and to basic information, how to do research. And then the next pages moved onto -- oh, let's see. What did it look like? It just had some basic red and white -- well, actually brown features. There was a brown paper background. That was a more complex site with more pictures. And then they moved onto another type of page. And then the current page that we have provides so much research information, indexes and things that people used to have to go. And the only way they could find articles would be to look them up in paper indexes. And now all of that is online.

So that kind of research capability just provides the people who are doing work here at the university with so much more access to the actual scholarly and academic resources that they

need. And so that's I think going to really help with this Research-1 institution that we're striving to be.

**Why do you think Kay Tuma was so ahead of the game?**

I think she was just the kind of person who loved the technology and the educational aspects of it. And she perhaps was able to connect with some of the people who were the leaders in that initial Internet access or networking access. She was very much into education for everyone. And so I really can't say. I guess that would be a great question for her.

But she really was instrumental in creating a technology committee. I remember meeting in the round red room in the James Dickinson Library. And we would talk about helping people in the library learn to use computers because everybody freaked out initially when they had to learn how to use computers and how to help them learn to use the first software that they created like WordStar. And nobody was really comfortable learning to use new computers.

When I worked in cataloging we had three computer stations that were considered OCLC [stations that came in while I was working there. And we would have to schedule time to go work on those three stations. It's just amazing that we've moved from that to actual computers all over the library and a laptop.

**Yes. Just a couple of more questions.**

Okay.

**Working in the library means sometimes that you don't work a regular eight-to-five job.**

**How has that affected your life? What has that meant to you all of these years?**

Well, I'm very much a morning person. So when I moved over to the Architecture Studies Library the need for particular architecture students was that someone be here later at night. And so that meant that oftentimes I'd be here from ten till midnight. And that was just I think providing a service that allowed them to access the materials and help them with the research that was needed. But since I did so much of the web work for the Architecture Studies Library going from one basic page with links to maybe another 20 pages to a major page that links sub-links to over 2,000 pages, working evenings allowed me to accomplish a lot of pages that just provided the service and the insight to what kinds of books and materials are critical to an architecture student. So I guess that's why I've really appreciated this nighttime schedule is the interaction with the students

and being able to analyze and bring together so many pages.

And certainly I didn't do that all on my own. Much of it was through Jeanne Brown's direction. But when we created the -- initially she had created an Internet resources database of architecture resources. And that's become well known internationally. I mean everybody had used it as a resource. Now, as time has progressed and the blogs and online access has improved, it's not as critical a resource. But for years and years and years it was considered the primary resource. And then she had graduate students and staff work on a word list of all the architectural firms and buildings in Las Vegas. And that continued to grow and grow and grow until it was over 600 pages in a Word document. And we initially with the help from the WDS Department took all of that material, moved it into an architecture and buildings database. And now it's a continually growing and enhanced thing that the staff are working on.

**Explain to me a student going through the field of architecture. How many years is it?**

**What do you end up having?**

Well, it's considered a five-year program. Initially they may declare an architecture major, but they have to complete a year of school before they'll actually be accepted into the program. And then as first-year they have certain projects that they need to complete. And then when they move onto the second year, again each year they develop a project, which they present in a jury at the end of the semester. They're not officially accepted into the program until their third year. Then from there they begin to keep a very careful record of all of the projects that they develop for a portfolio. And they continue to do jury presentations at the end of the year, which is they present to a panel of instructors and whoever they ask to be on the jury. And they grill them to test their knowledge on their project and the concepts that they've developed. So it's a very challenging program for them to participate in.

Interior design and landscape architecture is also a part of the program. So each one of those programs are involved with the juries. And then part of the projects that we put on display every semester are actually the best of jury for each semester. And so those are on display in the gallery for several months.

Let's see. And as far as continuing to work through the architecture program, the fifth year is almost the equivalent of a master's, but not quite. But it's just a more involved program where



they have to complete a grad book of all their portfolio projects and things. And then there's also a master's program involved with school.

**And we have a master's program here?**

Yes.

**My last question, what do you consider some of the perks of working at an academic institution like you have over the years? And I don't just mean our health benefits and things like that. But what are some of the perks?**

Oh, wow, for me it's just been the incredible Internet access and access to the research material. For the last five years I've actually done volunteer work with the Channel Islands National Park Service working in their library and just trying to get a number of things input into a database that they call NR Bib, which is National Resources Bibliographic Citations. And as I'm doing that I often am contacted by the scientists that do the research for the park service. And being able to access the databases here has allowed me to track down historical or scientific documents that have been helpful to them. It's given me access to the indexes that allow me to do very thorough analysis of particular projects, say like the Loggerhead Shrike, which is a bird that is known nationwide, but it's becoming somewhat extinct, the Rufus-crowned Sparrow, just all kinds of animals. The Island Fox is an animal that was listed on the endangered species. And so doing research to help pull together documents that assist their research has been very exciting.

And we have a lot of people that come from all over the country to use the Architecture Studies Library. And being able to assist them. I guess from 20 or 30 years ago I just have always wanted my life to be a lot of service as far as a job that I would do. And that opportunity is prevalent in an academic library. So I really have regrets to leave. But I also plan to continue the kinds of research assistance that I'm doing.

**So my last question -- this time it's the last question.**

Okay.

**So what are you planning to do?**

Well, I'm going to continue to do volunteer work with the Channel Islands National Park. If the opportunity prevails I would love to do a volunteer program for the Architecture Studies Library that would involve retired people in providing information and images for their database, both

historical buildings and new buildings. And I will have a lot of -- I have two full-time jobs planned, really, the work with the park service and then just working around my house and my yard and getting it all pulled together because I've certainly neglected that over the years. So it definitely is something that needs to be done.

**Well, I really appreciate this so much.**

Well, thank you so much for doing this.

**Thank you.**