

AN INTERVIEW WITH BESS ROSENBERG

An Oral History Conducted by Jerry Masini

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The Southern Nevada Jewish Community
Digital Heritage Project

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I'm interviewing Mrs. Bess Rosenberg, 422 Rancho Drive. The date is November the 18th, 1975.

Okay, Mrs. Rosenberg, when did you come to Las Vegas?

I came here in the winter of 1942.

Why did you come here?

My husband came here. He was employed here. He came in 1941; I followed the early part of 1942. This town was certainly a great deal different then. It seemed like the town ended about Sixth Street; there was no paving. There was the one hotel on Fifth, the El Rancho. And the Strip was a little two-lane highway with a lot of dirt on each side of it. But when they did put in a big highway, they didn't have anything disturbed. There was nothing there but dust and dirt and probably some bushes and tumbleweeds or something like that. But there was a wide expanse of nothing with this little two-lane highway off the path of, oh, I would imagine where that fork in the road is now where it...down by the post office, in otherwise. That isn't right.

Yeah, it is right. No, that isn't right.

Maryland Parkway?

No, no. It's relatively from the Strip west. I can't think of the name of that street now. Anyway, but from there on it was all just highway. Some of the things I remember in later years as we were settled here and we had bought our first home is where the Frontier Savings is now in that triangular wrought-iron shaped lot that is bordered on one side by East Charleston and the other side by...oh, by Garces or Gass—anyway, on the exact site where the Frontier Savings is there were electrical transformers that carried the power for Las Vegas. I said to my husband, "I'd like to have that triangular piece of property. I think it's distinctive looking and we could put up a nice store there sometime." He said to me, "Way out here? Who in the world would drive clear

out here?" That was just how farsighted some of us were not.

And then as we were having the delay of the nuclear explosions here, it reminds me it was so funny—not exactly funny, but informative thing about the first atom bomb. At that time they called it Jackass Flats where they had the detonation. I was working the swing shift in one of the hotels as an entertainer and went to work at nine and worked till about three in the morning. So in the slack season when there wasn't too much doing and it was this type of weather from about (inaudible), there wasn't too much business. So we would sit around and visit. And we had come to the hotel, three or four gentlemen—and I understood it was hard to keep a secret in this town anyway—but there were three or four at all the hotels—at that time there were about three or four hotels—and they had stationed four or five in each hotel thinking that it would cover up their real purpose in town, which was—some of them were newspaper men, some were scientists—to cover the detonation of the first atomic blast. So they had had one before in Alamogordo, (inaudible) test here. So at that time I became acquainted with all kinds of that. The only gentlemen that were in town with a heavy, heavy sheep skin coats on and hats with (inaudible) on them and everything. You couldn't help but find out after a while what they were doing here, but it was supposed to be a big secret.

So anyway, just before the big blast, Walter Winchell found out about it somehow and he printed something in the paper. Well, it frightened the citizens of Las Vegas (inaudible). So immediately they brought out a very famous PR man. His name escapes me, too, at the time. He came out to try and do some kind of an informative interview with the different scientists of the AEC to tell the people of Las Vegas that their windows were going to be broken and their mirrors would crack and everything, but to pay no attention to it; that it was in the line of defense.

Well, this gentleman had a terrible hard thing to do because once people had become alarmed by the Walter Winchell radio broadcast, they turned deaf ears to anything they would say about how harmless the first blast was going to be. So this fellow was very, very busy around there. It got so that they were laughing. They'd say, "Well, I think we're going to set off a firecracker in the morning."

So anyway, this morning it seemed like everything—they had made many trips up there in the cold, cold weather and there would be no detonation. They'd come back...another one, another time they decided to change. I guess the wind, what it is today, with the wind they won't detonate those blasts. These were not underground.

So anyway, this fellow decided to write, "I think they're really going to have one in the morning." He said, "Now, I'm telling you like I tell everybody else, don't turn around and face that way." Well, I said, "No, goodness sakes, I wouldn't want to do that." He said, "The sky will light up and nobody should look that direction." So I said, "All right."

So by the time I got home and my dad got up and we were having breakfast...and you couldn't help but see it. But I didn't mean (inaudible) when I went to work that night. Dick Porter—that was that fellow—came in and he says, "Oh, did you see our firecracker?" And I said, "Well, I don't know how you could miss it." Because I was sitting at the kitchen looking out the window, just exactly what he told everybody not to do. But I really wasn't looking right at it; it's just that you couldn't...and the sky was so bright. I've never seen such brilliance. There were windows broken and mirrors and shattered. And for many years after that people, when they would have cracks in their ceiling and whether they were caused by the successive blasts we had, they would always say, "Well, we didn't have that crack in the ceiling until we had the atomic bomb out here." So then I don't know how many more we had after that, but the first one

I remember it. After that I sure looked the other way. But I just wasn't thinking. And he looked at me with utter disgust after I said it because I knew I had said the wrong thing. But I really wasn't looking out the window; it was just that I was facing in the direction where it happened that way.

And then my husband and I became very friendly with a gentleman by the name of Dr. Ralph Carl Smith who was here, oh, quite a long time. In fact, I think he married a Vegas girl, a girl that was working here. He was an atomic scientist who had a degree in law and a degree in medicine and physics. He was just fantastic. He had helped Dr. Lilienthal write the book on the atomic warfare, which I think later was issued to all troops that were in any way connected with the youth of like atomic submarines and the weapons and the whole thing on there. That was a guide book, one of the first ones.

Of course, as you became progressively friendlier, he became Smitty. We were talking one night and someone said that they didn't know who he was and they said they thought Smitty was so much fun. I said, "Yes, he is." And (NAME?) said, "I wonder what he does for them." And I said, "Well, I really don't know." And they said, "Do you think he ought to try for a career in show business?" He was (inaudible) man, but he was so witty and so funny. It (inaudible) because here was a man with all these degrees and everything and (inaudible) that he was really quite a (inaudible). He was a fine man.

Oh, I made lots of friends in those days (inaudible). But Las Vegas was a very small, friendly, little village. I know that the wheels of progress must turn, but sometimes I look back and think that the warmth and the friendliness...was something to remember. It was great fun.

Where did you entertain?

Well, I worked at the Last Frontier when it was the Last Frontier. There were (inaudible) room.

Then in the big room I think Elvis maybe did an appearance there and Shecky Greene. We had Freddy Martin and Merv Griffin was the pianist with Freddy Martin at that time. And Liberace, that was his first introduction to Las Vegas. While they would be playing—of course, Liberace for many years played the (inaudible)—he was playing in one room while I was playing in the other with Merv Griffin. Then the next time Freddy Martin came back, he also had a Las Vegas resident who still working here I believe at the MGM, Murry Arnold. Murry was (inaudible) for a long, long time. But, as I say, I have many fond memories of the good old days.

What were you saying about if you sang while you played the piano?

Oh. Well, you asked me if I sang. Well, in those days they had an entertainment—and they passed a bill—that you could have a pianist; that was all right. But if there was any singing, you had to pay a 20 percent tax, entertainment tax. So all of the hotels that had lounge entertainment would not let you sing because they didn't want to pay the tax. And in those days, of course, it would be an entertainment tax. So the singing that was done was done very late in the morning when they figured that the spies weren't out somewhere. Anyway, I'm glad to share these cute little stories with you.

What about when you first came, how did you feel about—why did you want to—did you want to come?

Well, I liked Las Vegas. I had been through here several times on trips to the coast. I'd always said, "Oh, I think I'd like to live there." And my husband said, "You must be out of your mind." It was a hundred and ten even then, no air-conditioning. Everybody had a swamp cooler. Anyway, I thought I liked it and I always liked a small town. Then when he decided to come out here for employment, I was very happy about it although I didn't know many people. It was the start of the war. I joined the Red Cross and many other things I could do that I thought, well, I'd

help out along with meeting people. So I've always liked Las Vegas. Oh, I got homesick a few times. And I was (inaudible) and I'd go back there and I'd be maybe three or four days and I'd be ready to come back to Vegas. I've heard this; there's an old saying that once you get sand in your shoes, you never want to get away from the desert. And I just feel it's true as far as I was concerned. I was very happy here. I (inaudible) my days right here in the desert.

Now, what were your secrets for keeping cool?

Oh, keeping cool. Well, there was a gal came here from Donner Village, I think, or Donner somewhere; it was outside of Chicago. She had a rather sheltered life and I would assume from what I knew of her she had come from a rather upper-class home. She married a soldier and he was immediately sent to the Gunnery School, which it wasn't called Nellis Air Base then. So they came out here and she didn't know how to cook at all. They didn't have even a swamp cooler. And they bought the house next door to me. This poor little gal, I saw her out there and she was just drenched with perspiration. So I started to visit with her a little bit and I said, "Well, there are a few things you can do to alleviate some of this heat." So she hadn't gotten the curtains and drapes up, but she did have rolled up window shades in her windows. So I went over to house. I said, "Now, I'll tell you what we'll do first is close all the windows and pull down the blinds."

"Oh," she said, "I'll never be able to stand it if I don't have any air."

I said, "You'll have air, but pull all the shades and keep it dark in here." She had two or three. Her living room faced the west, so she really had an oven going in there. And then I said, "By the time your husband comes home tonight, you can open all the windows and leave them open all night long because the desert cools off."

Well, she said she tried, but she was just utterly miserable. Well, it worked and she was

very grateful until they could later get a swamp cooler. But that's true. Just close your house in the summer in the daytime when the sun beams and keep the sun out and then you open all the windows at night because always it cools off. So that made it livable. So anyway, he finally (inaudible) swamp cooler. Oh, her discomfort was really something to see.

Oh, I imagine.

Yeah, (inaudible). But a swamp cooler was adequate in those days. There wasn't the humidity. We had very little humidity. A swamp cooler was fine. People didn't want anything more.

Do you remember any kind of storms, snowstorms, anything like that?

Oh, yeah, I've seen snow a few times (inaudible). I think about the second year we had the pool here I looked out one morning and it was snowing. I got the camera, rushed out there and took a picture of the snow all around the pool. It's a good thing I did because in a couple of hours it was all gone as soon as the sun came out. But I had to send it back to some friends. People that haven't been here and they know it's on the news, they think it stays hot and sunny and they don't think we have snow. And then when we have two or three days when it rains, they can't understand it. They think it's like a movie in the Sahara Desert all the time. People don't realize we have a change of seasons. No, I don't remember too much about—I know there was a big blizzard in nineteen something, but I'm very bad at remembering dates. But it's much better than the weather somewhere else. When you read about (inaudible). I think we can avoid that in Las Vegas.

How about any flash floods, do you know of anything like that?

Oh, yes, we've had those, too, ever since I've been here. I always said if I got into politics one of the things I would do from government appropriations (inaudible) for many, many years, but there has never been a solution. Every time we have a real heavy rainstorm (inaudible). And I

can't understand it, why there isn't a solution to it. Whether they don't apply themselves or (inaudible) from year to year and watch the flow of the water. As long as I can—twenty-five, thirty years there's been appropriations for flood control, flood control, but it doesn't seem like it takes hold very much. Take people's property and dirty their homes. I don't know. (Inaudible), but they should have done more. Federal appropriation of funds, but nothing has ever been done conclusively.

Where did you first live when you first moved here?

Well, first I lived on, oh, (inaudible), so First and—Third and (inaudible). Through friends we got a small apartment for a while on Fourth and Garces. Then we bought our first home; that was at 107, I think it is, East Washington. I don't even think it's called Washington anymore. I drive by there occasionally, oh, maybe once every three or four years. It was in what they called the Biltmore section. The Biltmore Hotel was on the corner of Bonanza and Main Street. It was very (inaudible) they opened, cabana rooms and then they had individual little cottages like the Rancho did. They were really supposed to be something. Well, it's been town down now. (Inaudible.) I think the furniture store is still using the part that was the lobby. Cutlery Furniture Store owned the building. But anyway, they took in all that property. And then these homes were built for the same builders. Those are called the Biltmore.

The first lawn I put in was really something. I wasn't used to the idea that you had to bring in everything. Back from Iowa and Nebraska, you put a seed in the ground and it grew. So I hired some fellow to put in the lawn. That was fine. That lawn was beautiful. I was so grateful, my clean house and then a nice lawn. And here came one of the desert winds and all my seed wound up on the neighbor's lawn, I think.

So anyway, I thought, well, there's got to be an easier way. So a friend of mine said he'd

go to the Basic Magnesium and they used peat. They had peat to give away. You could get it for going out there and hauling it. Well, I didn't know what (inaudible) peat moss. (Inaudible.) I didn't know what peat was. He said, "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll take your car and my car and we'll go out to Basic Magnesium and get you some peat moss." I said, "What in the world do you need that for?" To hold the moisture. And she's a pretty sharp little gal.

So I listened to her and we made a mulch and we got out there, she and I, and seeded. I was so proud. I had the nicest lawn on the block. Even the people that got my first batch of seed didn't have as nice a lawn as I did. But it was really something trying to raise my first lawn. With her tutelage I finally got a lawn. Every time I see people buying a new home now, I mean the whole section, I think, oh, I hope they've got an ambition. No seeds and no lawn. That to me is just...I thought, too bad. I'd never have another place that didn't have it already installed, the lawn and the trees. That's back breaking labor and it takes a lot more than people think (inaudible). Get it out here. You have to seed and fertilize. It's really something.

What kind of groups were there, social clubs, things like that? Were there any when you came here?

Well, not too many. The Mesquite Club was a nice one at that time. But most of the civic clubs were all war oriented. The Red Cross, it was always there. And all the veterans' associations (inaudible) many years later. But American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars; they were real gung-ho in those days because people would feel a reminder. But you didn't have much social life going on because people were rationing, number one, and gas was rationed, food to be rationed. It just wasn't a conducive time for entertainment, the groups. And there were things to do. People were working hard and worried about their family and friends that were in the service. I think I did more baking and packing boxes and making fruit cakes and that really took

up your time because people were very happy to get things like that. And when you got sugar...sugar was rationed. You had to save up for sugar so you could make these things. I remember that. It was not a (inaudible) time. (Inaudible.) And because of the inflation here, there's always (inaudible). Just past California, they would certainly try to knock out Nellis Air Force Base.

And Hoover Dam.

Yes, Hoover Dam. So I think that's probably in the back of people's minds. This is not a peppy time at all. Then the later years (inaudible) very active. It has grown, this economy. People bring their ideas from different parts of the country and they start branches of groups, variety club or whatever from wherever they've been. They start them and I understand that is two hundred and forty-seven different organizations in town, which is a far cry from the few that were here when I moved in.

How did this town seem during the war years?

Well, you mean...they had a curfew. They finally put a curfew on.

Were there a lot of tourists when (inaudible)?

No, nobody had gasoline to travel with. (Inaudible) part of the business. But the downtown business...there was one hotel that really took care of the tourists. But the downtown area on the paydays with the Gunnery School was their biggest time because most of those young men had to go to Las Vegas. And then they put a curfew on. As soon as they put on a curfew, the servicemen couldn't drink after twelve o'clock. So that really was the difference. They would curtain off like the bar area. Civilians could go in there and have their totty or their bottle of beer or whatever they wanted, but servicemen couldn't enter, which I didn't have to tell you. But many a serviceman that was in civilian clothes, if he wanted to come in town—of course, the

MPs, everybody got so they knew the whole entire force of MPs. But if the fellow wanted to have a night on the town, they were (inaudible) to do it. But that didn't last very long. There were (inaudible) and nobody thought it was fair, which it wasn't. (Inaudible.) Then they put a curfew on the entire town at midnight. Then that was better. Everybody (inaudible). It didn't make any difference. Everything was (inaudible). But it seems strange (inaudible). Just like recently when they've had the lights out, you just couldn't believe what Las Vegas looked like without them, what the old town looked like (inaudible) during the war. But that was the only (inaudible). It wasn't successful. (Inaudible.) So that didn't last very long, curfew for everybody.

What were the clubs that were here when you came?

I can remember all of the ones that are on Fremont now. There was the (inaudible) jackpot. I think around the corner from the Pioneer. And then the California Club. And then the Frontier Plaza; that was (inaudible) that was the Frontier Plaza. And the Mandolin Cafe was in there and (inaudible). And then there was the Boulder Drug going up the street. (Inaudible.) Then on the corner of the Nugget, across from the Horseshoe that was a little bar called the Kiva Bar. I'm trying to think. I never forgot (inaudible). I don't remember. But on the street there was the Horseshoe and then there was the Boulder Club. Let's see. I can't think of one. And then there was a liquor store in there. And then on the corner was the Bank of Nevada on the corner of First and Fremont. So as you can see both sides have all been taken over by casinos now. But there were many little bars and little places right there, many private owners (inaudible). We didn't have any conglomerates coming in and buying out the people. So you really (inaudible) walked down the street and because you knew everybody you ran into them.

What about on the Strip, what were they?

There wasn't anything on the Strip. There was the El Rancho Vegas Hotel and that was it. There were two or three little, oh, I guess you'd call them bars. But outside of that it was just open air from here to, oh, probably Mountain Pass or somewhere out in there. Then there were two or three little super clubs opened up out there. And the Players Club was on the other side (inaudible). There's a liquor store in there now behind Fanny's. Well, there are two stores that are behind Fanny's. That was the Players Club. It sat back from the highway quite a ways and the super clubs in there. (Inaudible). The El Cortez was out there, and the Sal Sagev in downtown. I can't identify any other—and the Horseshoe. I think there was the Eldorado Club. (Inaudible) been there a long time. But that was about the...at the end of our town, that was the end of the paving. (Inaudible.) Motels, there were motels out that way. (Inaudible.) If you didn't come in from that highway, you come from Los Angeles (inaudible). There were motels. (Inaudible). There was a big club on the corner where East Charleston joins Boulder Highway. (Inaudible.) We used to go to Mount Charleston. We'd go to Mount Charleston if someone would save up, had enough gas. A whole gang would all pile in the car and go up there.

(Inaudible?)

Oh, yes. They had a restaurant and they some cabins. It was many picnics in those days. Get together a whole gang and go up there and picnic. And we used to go occasionally to dinner at one of the hotels where they had big-name entertainment.

How about Lake Mead?

I never hardly ever went out to the lake. My husband and I, neither one were fishermen and it was a long drive. Until they had the marina, it was really in the rough. So we hardly went to the lake. The only time we went up to Lake Mead in later years when we used to be able to get plenty of gasoline. I think I made enough trips out there on the dam I could say (inaudible) the

guided tour when they take you down, I could say it almost as well as they could because everybody that came here had to go see the dam. No, it's worth seeing, but not anymore. I don't want to make another trip unless I have to. But I have people that I've given my car, sent them with my blessing. It was about the middle of July, anyway, and I released it. I made many a trip out there. They came to town...and everybody came to—well, of course, it's fun, I guess. Something that develops...you have friends that you never had before. When you move to Las Vegas, all of a sudden people would come to Las Vegas (inaudible). So it seemed like I was running a hotel half the time. I finally got rid of that. I got rid of the bedroom furniture.

And then the Frontier opened. First there was a few hotels and later...it took a long while to get the DI open. But they had some good entertainment around here.

Who were the entertainers?

Oh, Sophie Tucker, (Louie Louis), (inaudible) even then. No, I can't right off hand. But all of the big ones played here. It became a kind of a rest for them because they had all kinds of recreation and they were getting good salaries and it was a change from the New York and Chicago super clubs. So they were happy to come here. It was gay in those days after the war. It was wonderful. Everybody knew everybody.

What do you think of the town as it's growing?

Well, I still feel like Las Vegas has grown...it's outgrown me, I believe, because I miss it. (Inaudible.) Attitudes that we had. Too many people that I know anymore. There are so many casinos and we're around our computers and the people (inaudible). Of course, people that I know have retired, practically, by now. (Inaudible) university in hotel administration and they even have a course in gambling, which thirty, thirty-five years ago was unheard of. But it's a wonderful town. I love it. (Inaudible.) I intend to spend my remaining years here even with the

winds and the—

And the flash floods.

And the flash floods and the blasts that shake you up, but not much. (Inaudible.) I hope this has been of some help to you and I hope you find an interest in here.

Okay, thank you.

You're welcome.

[End of recorded interview]