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ORAL INTERVIEW

of

RUTH SWEET

Edited by

Elizabeth Nelson Patrick
and
Rita O'Brien

Transcribed for the project
Black Experience in Southern Nevada
Donated Tapes Collection, James R. Dickinson Library
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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ABSTRACT

RUTH SWEET, 1934- .

Ruth Sweet is a Black woman who was born at Roach, Nevada. Her grandfather was a foreman for the Union Pacific Railroad, and the family lived at various sidings along the railroad and at his ranch at Las Vegas. Her father was Mexican and her mother Black.

Ms. Sweet attended kindergarten, elementary, and high school in Las Vegas. One year, 1946, was spent in Ontario, California, where she attended elementary school. She has attended night classes at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She reminisces about her first experience with racism when her high school senior class was refused service in a restaurant in Las Vegas because of her presence in the group. She says that Black children were discouraged from taking academic or business courses in school because there were no job opportunities for them in Las Vegas. She laments that many Black youths left Las Vegas for opportunity elsewhere.

Employed by the State of Nevada, Division of Health, Ms. Sweet discusses racism practiced by sanitarians. She has an interest in public affairs and is critical of the Planning Commission, lack of public transportation, and the scattering of public service buildings.

She tells of early discrimination in housing and how it contributed to the concentration of Blacks on the Westside. Ms. Sweet presently lives in a bi-racial neighborhood in Las Vegas.

Ms. Sweet comments that northern and southern Nevada are two very diverse economies, the cow counties of the north and the tourist-gambling oriented southern county of Clark. A rivalry has grown up between the two areas and Ms. Sweet remarks how that rivalry affects funding in southern Nevada.

She says opportunities have greatly improved for Black youths and they no longer have to serve in menial jobs alone. The Nevada Test Site, she points out, has brought about job opportunities in the building trades and crafts. Her son became a skilled ironworker.

Collector: Bennie Baucham, February 7, 1977

INTRODUCTION

Ruth Sweet is a native born Nevadan. With the exception of a brief stay in California, she has spent her life in Nevada.

She has attended public schools in Las Vegas and night classes at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Ms. Sweet is employed by the state of Nevada, Division of Health and she is very interested in public affairs. Her comments on public affairs and government are a reflection of her experience in state employment.

This interview, a class project in Nevada history, was done by Bennie Baucham at the home of Ms. Sweet on February 7, 1977.

Differences in the tape and transcription of the interview occur because the typed version has been edited for easier reading. Repetitions and false starts have been eliminated. In some instances, a word or phrase has been added for clarity or correction and enclosed in brackets. There are omissions in the transcript which occurred when the speaker turned from the microphone, was interrupted, or had a lapse of memory.

Ms. Sweet's interview is part of a series of interviews in the Donated Tapes Collection of the James R. Dickinson Library of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The transcription and editing of the interview have been supported in part by a grant to Dickinson Library administered by the U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare through the Nevada State Library; Project Director, Harold H. J. Erickson; Assistant Director, Anna Dean Kepper. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Office of Education and no official endorsement by the U.S. Office of Education should be inferred.

A copy of the transcript will be available at the West Las Vegas Branch of the Clark County Library District and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, New York. A bibliography of Black Experience in Southern Nevada will be distributed statewide.

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Elizabeth Nelson Patrick
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
1978

Sweet: My name is Ruth Sweet. I was born at Roach, Nevada, a section on the Union Pacific Railroad located fifty-seven miles south of Las Vegas, but I was raised in Las Vegas on our family ranch. My father was Mexican and my mother Black. I completed my education here in 1952. My elementary school, Fifth Street Elementary School, was located where the Federal Building is on Las Vegas Boulevard, South. It was called Fifth Street then, later changed to Las Vegas Boulevard. I went to grammar school there until 1946 and then I went away for one year to Ontario, California. There was a big difference noticeable my being from the little, desert, country town of Las Vegas which wasn't too populous--as well as there was no industry. It was just a small, western-type town. The main event each year was our Helldorado.

The big attraction then was four Strip hotels: the Sahara was called the Club Bingo at that time; there was the Flamingo; originally the New Frontier was called the Last Frontier; and the El Rancho Vegas which burned down.

We didn't have good roads. We only had a two lane highway from here to Los Angeles. Where I lived, the asphalt ended at what is now known as Desert Inn Road

and the Strip. Then we went on a unpaved road maintained by the county to our home. We lived two and one half miles from what was known then as the Strip (laughter) in the middle of the desert. We had no electricity. We had a dynamo, kerosene lamps, and gas lamps for night light; and in the daytime we just used the sun. We had artesian wells. Most of my chores were done in the early morning before school and in the evenings after school. We had chickens, cows, horses, and pigs. It was considered a ranch, but it's not like a ranch--I later found out what a ranch was like, there was no greenery other than the effort of trying to grow alfalfa and maintain enough to support the little livestock that we had.

At that time, we were paid to go to school, because there was no bus system for the school children. If our parents provided transportation, they were paid thirty-five cents per day per student. During the warm weather we walked, and in the winter months we were brought in to school and picked up after school; it was a nice little hour, or hour and a half walk. Our school hours were from 9:00 to 4:30, and that gave us ample time during the summer months and the spring months to get home.

In 1950 I was in the tenth grade in the Las Vegas High School which is still located at Ninth and Bridger

Streets. Going back before 1950, I can only say that there wasn't too many Blacks in Las Vegas. In fact, when I started kindergarten up through the sixth grade, I was the only Black in my class. There was no noticeable feeling of any difference between me being any different color than the other children because of no prejudices or any outward color conscious was mentioned.

Then in 1944 when the war ended --well, before that, I imagine, 1942 to 1945--the Blacks began to migrate from the southern states out here when Titanium Magnesium which is located in Henderson, was operable, for war and defense [work]. Then the Black population was growing. It was situated on what we now know as West Las Vegas.

Up to the fourth grade was all they had in that environment. I never attended that school because I wasn't raised or lived in that environment. They had no decent roads or walkable paths for the children to get from the Westside to the school on what is now Las Vegas Boulevard South. If the weather rained, the cars weren't even movable to travel, because the roads were not paved. They were oil-covered roads.

Then they built the underpass which was only usable whenever there was no bad weather. Because once it rained--just like it does now--it floods and you couldn't get out. So they opened up what is now Washington overpass so there could be in and out conveniences when the weather was

bad, but the roads were just one of the natural resources

bad; but the roads were just one of the natural resources of the area and wasn't maintained with asphalt. They would become stuck and they couldn't get in and out. So, Black children didn't venture out from over in the Westside to school.

There was a demand that they put a school over there because they had to have their education which finally came about. So in my fifth grade, I began to have more Black children in the classes. I began to feel the difference of color consciousness. There was a learning factor also because these children, I found out, had to share their time with working in the fields, picking cotton, etc. back in their home states and not attending school the whole nine months. But I didn't miss any schooling and they did, so I had lot of girls and boys in my class that were two and three years older than I was in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.

Then when we got to high school, there still came another problem. Because of the athletic situation, we didn't have altogether integrated teams. The push for integration of athletics, for the children--it just wasn't there. This was just when the sports were being integrated. The segregation problems--they didn't want to accept it was there, or they hit it. The war held down a

lot of things to where they were conscious of the war and not the racial problems until after World War II.

Then we were conscious that we weren't given our rights as far as back in the early fifties when I was in high school. My first encounter of a racial situation was in my senior year which was 1952 in the senior class. This was with the city, after being raised here, I never thought of being turned away from going anyplace to eat. And gambling wasn't something that my family took part in, because we were raised around it. Parents would play a slot machine in a grocery store, but other than that, they didn't go into the clubs.

In my senior year we had a class breakfast at one of our well-established drug stores that was two blocks from the high school. The arrangements had been made previously, like a month or more, for the use of their dining area for our whole class. Then when we got there, and I was the only Black in the class, they were turned away because of me. That's when I really felt that the problem of the racial situation wasn't going to be accepted any longer.

You felt it in high school when you went to your counselor. When I was in high school, they always put

you into an environment like home economics or a menial job . They didn't want you to exert yourself or to go into fields of typing or any academic environment. They felt the jobs weren't for the Blacks, especially if you were going to stay here in Las Vegas. There were no such thing as clerk-typists and secretaries and clerks and things back in the fifties.

All you could work at was a maid out on the Strip or in the kitchen or in somebody's private home or in the hospital as a--not even a nurse's aide. Guess you were considered the help that kept the floors clean. There just weren't any jobs open. Banking--you could just hang it up; there was nothing like that, you know. So when I went into the field of clerical work and banking and everything like that, I kept being told over and over again by my counselor, "Well, why don't you go into something where you can find a job? You're just going to waste your time. If you don't have the money to go to college, you can't get away from Las Vegas and get a job when you get through spending all your time in school." Between that and the science field, I figured I was going to make my way, one way or another.

After then, the hotels began to build up. We felt that more where we lived, because our artesian wells quit

flowing because hotels and motels that opened up on the Strip; they had swimming pools. That was the thing to get you there, the nice swimming pool and low rates. Back in the early fifties, my mother and my aunts had worked as maids and the most they were getting was \$5.50 a day for an eight-hour day. When I started working in 1953, I was only getting \$7.50 to \$9.50 a day and we had to put in a whole hard day's work. That was the only work we could find.

The living conditions began to improve on the Westside. I had a classmate that went to school with me to 1951. She came back to Las Vegas after she got out of college in 1956 or 1957--I'm not sure which year--and she got married. Her and her husband were working for the Clark County School District because both of them were school teachers. They got their degrees in Louisiana and were well qualified for their positions. When they got back here and they started working, they got their money together, and they went--we were segregated in housing at that time--to where you could purchase land or a home here in Las Vegas. But no one had felt it, (segregation) because everybody just stayed in one area. When they got back here and got to working

and saved their money, they were going to try to buy a home. The home I'm living in now was one of the homes that was being built and a few others in the Huntridge area. They applied for these homes and they were kindly told that they just couldn't move in. They ended up buying in our first established homes on the Westside of Las Vegas which is called Regal Estates. I remember it; it's by the Kit Carson School.

When she told me that, it hurt, you know, to think that here she'd gone off and got a good education and they were back here working in the school system and everything. Yet, they were denied the right to select a place to live. They had to still live on the other side of the tracks.

Well, this didn't bother our living conditions; my grandfather had bought land and built a home and ranch in 1929, the first time he came through Las Vegas. Then from the time I was big enough to know anything, in 1936-37, that's where I lived. It's off of Valley View and Desert Inn Road by Channel 13, TV. We didn't understand how the problems of living conditions was.

My brother got married in 1962 and he couldn't buy a home anywhere but in West Las Vegas. He bought in North Las Vegas in Beth Circle. I don't know really when the home environment opened up to where you could buy a home anywhere in Las Vegas, because I didn't worry about buying a home until 1972.

In the meantime, the Strip was steady growing and the only jobs you could get on the Strip, if you were Black, was a menial job. There were no dealers and there were no cocktail waitresses or anything out in the public eye until the Martin Luther King movement. I began to notice then a lot of things. My children brought in a lot of situations that I didn't understand because I didn't have them.

They were raised with an open mind. I had them in both environments of school to see, to prove, mainly, to some of the elderly relatives of mine; they told me that the only way they could progress was to put them in an all-White school. I told them it's the child, not the environment. You can get anything out of a book. So to satisfy my parents, I put them in a all-White school where there were maybe twelve or fifteen [Black] kids to 700 to 800 Whites. They didn't do no better than when I had them in Madison School. So, it's just like I said; it's you, and you get out whatever you want in school. You can go to private school where your parents are paying for it, but if you don't utilize your ability, you're not going to get anything out of it. There are such things as grading situations where they have a standard and things like that. I have experienced that. I feel

that will always be because of people behind the grading system.

It's not the individual himself, it's the system that keeps all these problems going. These sit-ins, walk-ins, and demonstrations that we've had here in Las Vegas were needed, but they were not done in a profitable way for the Blacks because we still haven't helped our Black environment. We still don't have Black businesses. We still don't have Black-orientated jobs to where the Black is number one in it, like banks and things that I have heard of. I haven't traveled, but I have heard that there are Black-owned banks.

We have a grocery store over there, but it's not Black owned; it's Black run--a chain. I don't know it for a fact, but there have been things said that anything that don't sell in another store of this chain, just send it over to the Black environment; I don't care for that. Now that I work in the state, in a health agency, I know that this can go on. I have inside reference to things that have happened to where a lot of things are not held up to standard in the Black environment like they do in the other environments.

We have sanitarians that go around and inspect different establishments for cleanliness et cetera. Well, they don't like to go into the Black community because they are Caucasians. They'll just drive through the outlying area and they have a general run-down of what should be done in this establishment. Instead of going in, checking it out and making sure it's up to standards, or giving some kindly advice--not going in there with a superior attitude that says, "I'm who I am and you either come up to this or that, or else"--they'll sit out in the car and mark it as to what they want to feel it's marked. As long as it's a "C" rating, they figured that's good enough. This has been told to me by many of the White sanitarians because they just aren't used to the Black business concerns. Now they have employed Black sanitarians and put them mainly in the Black environment to check out the establishments. They figure they can get along with their people. This is a bad attitude of any city--especially a western environment like Las Vegas.

We shouldn't have that feeling.

When I was coming up, they always said that the Strip was owned by the Mafia and you wonder, "what do they mean by the Mafia?" All I ever think about is like Al

Capone. If we have gambling laws and gambling rules and we have a commissioner for every phase of the government governing the city, how can we go around and say such things as that? Then when you start working in these environments --like I said, I worked for the State--you hear things. You say, "Wow, this is true; these things are going on." Until you get in these facets of our government, you don't really realize these things are happening. This is bad, but there's nothing you can do for it.

You learn to stay in your sector of work and not look into the other environment, which is wrong; we're all keeping our jobs due to the population of the city. They pay their taxes on groceries. They go out and have a nice entertainment on the Strip--buy gasoline--you buy alcoholic beverages et cetera. This is what pays our salary as State employment, but yet we can't say anything no more than tell our legislators what we don't like or how we feel about things.

I was in about the eighth grade when I began to hear the words, "this is a Mormon town." It took me a long time to understand that a Mormon town meant a religion. In Las Vegas or the State of Nevada it is a hard-core Mormon town.

We have prejudice between the southern part of Nevada and the northern part of Nevada. It's always been that. All through school we had this feeling--almost like we were two states in one.

The northern part of the state is made up of cow and cattle counties. They don't want heavy taxation because they don't have the revenue coming in like the Clark County. We've always had that stigma between the southern part of the Nevada and the northern part of Nevada. We've always had to fight for our share of the revenue coming into the state.

Now that I work in this environment, I understand it. I feel it more because when it comes down to making budgets, like in my Department of Health, they budget for one piece of money and then we get only a portion of that money. It doesn't matter if we do the higher percentage of the work. We still only get a set part.

The same with the university. It took a long time before we finally could convince them that we needed a branch university down here. We need educations for our children down in this area. The Blacks just didn't go up to the Reno campus because there was no living facilities up there. There was no identity for the Blacks. There

was a hardship for the Blacks that left Las Vegas if they wanted to even think to go to Reno. I don't know how it is now, because most of them begin to look for southern California or back to their home in southern states because a majority of them migrated out here from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas. Instead of trying to stay in Nevada, we lost a lot of our youth that graduated in the fifties and sixties because we didn't have a college or college attitude down here.

They said, "Well, you can't have it because you have too much gambling; you have a twenty-four hour city." But education can be had anywhere. There were people that wished that we could--I went back to school in 1965 to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas--and there was people that worked like I did that brought about the demands and the needs for night class. There are people that work on the Strip that could go to classes at the university if they had them, say from 2:00 in the morning until 8:00. We could have a twenty-four hour school system here if we could get some of our Regents and legislators to see this.

But it seems that they don't want to do these things, because they don't want to lose that identity from the north. They want the northern area to still be recognized

as a important part of Nevada. We always had this stigma and will continue, until we can get stronger legislators from down here to go up there and speak for the southern part of Nevada.

In general, Las Vegas has grown too fast for the population for the transient population. We grew before our streets were properly constructed to make a better network for transportation. We out-grew our public transportation system. If anyone ever tries to catch a bus and go across town, it take you a half hour. You have to plan two hours before you have to be wherever you got to go. Yet the city cannot afford to buy the transportation system. Private-owned people have the transportation. This is another bad thing that Las Vegas has not come up with for the population that we have and for the people that can't afford more than one car--and there's a need for more than one car--that is a transportation system. We should have better communications for the elderly, because when you get up in age you can't drive; and we don't have these facilities.

Another thing that was poorly planned for the size of our town was the convenience of our public facilities such as our State Welfare buildings, our Old Age Assistance

buildings, rehabilitation centers, or unemployment offices. They were not planned. It took many people showing the need for these branches that they finally opened them up. Then they are so scattered over Las Vegas on heavy, busy streets and there's no bus system to get the people there. We should try to plan that.

We had some kind of way to talk to our Planning Commissioners and things like that. These are some of the things that should have been planned, but then you have the stigma of the value of property. When you want to make a street, it makes you feel bad when it comes out into the paper. You hear it in the grapevine of your job that "so and so" had part ownership in that land. All of a sudden someone gets angry, and it blows out and becomes a big thing in the paper that we're going to make the turnpike of the freeway on that piece of land, but "so and so", who's on the Planning Commission--Planning Board--is part owner in that property that the road's going to go through. These things are known way ahead of time.

Some of the ways the city has grown make you wonder why. It might be two or three years after the homes are built and the people are moved in; then it comes out why it went that way. Yet there was no planning for the water. This

is another thing I've seen the need of, our water system. It was a big scandal back in the sixties that came out about our water system; we had pipelines brought in from the lake. At that time the size of the pipe that's in there now--I don't know the dimensions of it--it was said for the money, why not put a bigger pipe in so that as the population of the city grows, we'll have the pipe system there to accommodate the population. But they didn't want to go for that. Now we have the need for it. This is one of the things. They were hoping the city was going to grow, because it had just doubled and tripled since the fifties; they knew this. They've seen this and yet they didn't want to plan ahead.

We have a very bad drainage system from the Red Rock area coming down through the town. There were natural water ways that the years of erosion and water draining out of the mountains had. But people wanting to plan, and not thinking of the natural ways that were already here for the water to drain, building to it, would go and construct homes and they'd block off the natural way.

When we do have bad rain seasons and the water floods through, it has to jump over that natural water system way that it had made, the gullies, rivers and the drainage that comes out of the mountain. It jumped over into a

street. The street's not planned for drainage because Las Vegas never floods; it never rains too much here. The little drainage that is built for run-off from the yards and whatever flushing of the fire hydrants necessary to keep the fire plugs clean and pressure in certain areas of your city--it's a normal little drain plug--the drainage system that we have, and it's overflowed with debris. It plugs up and then we have a flooding situation.

People that are dollar hungry and not conscious of their fellow man here in Las Vegas will go and build a housing division where the land is lower than the flood water level. It's a know fact; if you've been born and raised or been around Las Vegas for some time, that it is a low area and water will stand there. They have trucks bring in loads of dirt and built the area up about a foot and a half or two. Then they put your house there and sell you a home. You don't know it's a flooded area or a dry lake area and when it rained the water would settle there. So when the water comes flooding down through the area, you have a house that's got four to five inches of water in it.

These are things that I've seen happen in Las Vegas that didn't need to be. We have intelligent people in

the Planning Department of the City of Las Vegas that could have planned better, but they didn't. They say, "Well, Las Vegas is growing faster than we can plan for." I don't believe that's true, because we have too many vacant lots.

Why have I stayed here all these years? Well, it's kind of hard to pull up roots and leave a city that you know. I only left Las Vegas once in my life and that was for ten months going to school; I was only twelve years old. The town was a little larger than Las Vegas--Ontario, California. It was not at an impressive age; I wasn't old enough to understand it, but this was the place to go to, a big city. But I didn't like Los Angeles because I wasn't used to big buildings. I'm just a little, as they say, country-western environment person.

Las Vegas has had a lot of good things for me and for my family. It was a good place to raise children without worrying, because so many people knew me; they could help me because I was a divorcee raising five children. The school system was good. It was progressing. The opportunities for them to get out of Las Vegas, if they wanted to, on grants or other scholarships et cetera were better than when I was going to school. The businesses

were picking up to where the children had better opportunities. They didn't have to just stay as a maid or porter. They could go into the bookkeeping and accounting department; they opened up dealing for the young adults.

The Test Site was another big reason for staying here. It opened up a lot of jobs for young adults to make big money and also get a trade: electricians, ironworkers, heavy-equipment operators, carpenter, truck driver. My son took up being a ironworker; he was a ironworker's apprentice. He learned the whole background of welding on high towers and different things like that. The wages are good because of the unions, even though we are a right-to-work-state.

Collector: Bennie Baucham
Date: February 7, 1977

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