

An Interview with Roosevelt Toston

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project. Additional transcripts may be found under that series title.

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Preface

Roosevelt Toston describes his first 15 years in Epps, Louisiana, and his migration to Las Vegas to live with his brother after his father's death. He details his experience at Las Vegas High School and the first jobs he held at the Fremont Hotel and the Nevada Test Site. Roosevelt also recalls how the Westside and Las Vegas appeared in the late fifties and early sixties.

Attending Dana McKay's School of Business changed the course of Mr. Toston's life, and he used the skills he developed there at Bell Telephone of Nevada and in the military. A correspondence course in broadcasting led to jobs at TV stations 3 and 8, and ultimately to a position with the Convention Authority in the area of tourism marketing.

Roosevelt details the many aspects of his work with the Convention Authority, names people and organizations that helped further black participation in the Las Vegas tourism industry, and his transition from tourism marketing to bringing conventions to Las Vegas. He shares his informed opinions on room taxes, the global market, and the future of Las Vegas in a world market. He also gives suggestions on how black entrepreneurs might get involved in dealing with different aspects of the convention business.

Today Mr. Toston continues to deal with visitors to Las Vegas through his consulting business. He is involved with fundraising projects, exhibits honoring African-Americans in the gaming and hospitality industry, and golf tournaments in conjunction with conferences, among many other endeavors.

This is Claytee White. I'm interviewing Mr. Roosevelt Toston. It is July 11th, 2006. We're in his home in Las Vegas. How are you today?

I am wonderful. Thank you for asking.

Good. Tell me just a bit about your early life, where you grew up and your family life.

I grew up in a rural community in the northeast section of the state of Louisiana. The city's called Epps, E-p-p-s. It's about 40 miles from Monroe, Louisiana, which most people know about. And I am one of eight children by the marriage of Myrtle Lee and Sam Toston. There were four boys and four girls. My mother died when I was very young, maybe three years old. I was reared by my aunt who moved in and just helped my father with the rearing of the kids. It was a farming community. My father was a sharecropper. I helped out on the farm when I became of age, when I could do that sort of thing, picking cotton and baling hay and that kind of thing, cutting lawns when I got a little older. So I lived in rural Louisiana for the first 15 years of my life. I'll stop there and see if you have any more questions.

What kind of crops other than cotton?

It was mostly cotton, sweet potatoes, baling hay, that kind of thing, just the kind of things that you see on a farm. But, primarily, it was really cotton that we harvested. You know, there's all kinds of fruit that you pick, peaches and that kind of thing.

And you lived there until you were 15. And then what happened?

After the death of my father, who died when I was age 15, I was invited to move to Las Vegas to live with my brother who was four years older than I. He had made a bedside promise to my father. When my father was on his deathbed, he asked my brother, who had moved onto Las Vegas and had come back to visit him, to sort of keep an eye on me because he suspected that he wasn't going to be able to leave the hospital. So he made my brother promise that he would just sort of look out for me. And, of course, my brother was in denial and said, "Oh, you'll be out of this hospital in no time." So he said, "Listen, I'm serious. I want you to promise me that." And so he made the promise. And I was unaware until much later in life that such a promise was made.

All I know is that after my sophomore year -- I had turned 16, actually -- I got the invitation to come and live in Las Vegas, to come out and work during the summer and see if I liked it. And if it fit, then, you know, I could consider staying out, no obligation, no commitments or anything.

Just see what you think about it. I'll get you a job at one of the hotels and see how you feel about it.

So tell me how your brother got here.

I think traditionally in the Deep South and in small communities when one graduates from high school, one tends to leave and go to the bigger cities to find work and get away from some of the oppressive conditions that you find in the South. So he followed that tradition. He graduated from Magnolia High School in Pine Hill, Louisiana, an all-black school. And he moved out to Las Vegas to live with our uncle. He just showed up on his doorstep and he was here.

So how did the family begin to migrate to Las Vegas? Do you remember the first person and what happened, how that happened?

Well, in terms of my immediate family, I think my brother was the first to move to Las Vegas as a result of just finishing school. And he had this uncle here who found him a job and he worked in the hotel, I think, as a cook and all. So he was the first to come out. There were others who graduated and moved to Los Angeles, but he was the first to come to Las Vegas at the age, I think, of maybe 19 at the time. So that's how it happened.

Tell me what Las Vegas looked like to a young 16-year-old.

Well, I'll tell you my first impression. I came in at night. And, of course, I saw all the beautiful lights of Las Vegas and I said --

In which year?

This was 1959. And, you know, I came in at night and it was just beautiful. The lights just were so fascinating to me. And I thought, well, wow, this is going to be really great to be in a city like this. And I had heard something about Las Vegas and the excitement and all of that. So I really was impressed until the next morning. My brother lived in a room with a couple, a family, and he just had this one bedroom. It was at Harrison and F Street, I think. Anyway, I woke up that morning and stepped outside to see all of this desert, you know. And it was just so hot because I think it was in July that I came to Vegas. And I just could not believe how at ten o'clock in the morning or whatever that it was already approaching a hundred degrees and just searing heat. So I looked around at the barren desert here and I said, "Wow, what is all of this?" I didn't know about this side of Las Vegas. And so I was a little bit disappointed after that.

Did you continue high school?

Yes. I enrolled at Las Vegas High School. I guess it was the school year of September of '59 that I graduated from Las Vegas High School.

What was that first job that your brother helped you to get?

My first job was working at the Fremont Hotel as a dishwasher. Of course, it was during the summer, making a little money prior to going to school and buying some clothes and this kind of thing. It was actually a great job for me considering what I had been doing other summers, chopping cotton and that kind of thing, and I didn't have to be out in that hot sun. So I couldn't imagine, you know, making probably ten dollars an hour at that time and being able to work inside and just washing dishes. And you had your clean white apron. It's all starchy and everything. And then, you know, you get a chance to have a very nice meal during your one-hour dinner break and all. So it was just fantastic.

What kind of work did your brother do?

My brother at that time, I think, was maybe a cook's helper at the Fremont. I think he went on to become like a pantry helper and this kind of thing. But they fed such people as Wayne Newton. I guess Wayne Newton at the time starred at the Fremont. So he had a chance to, you know, maybe mix and mingle with them on some basis.

What kind of transportation? How did you get back and forth to work?

Well, if he wasn't working at the same time, my brother or one of my cousins would drop me off. Eventually, I learned to catch the bus and figure out the hours and just use the public transportation.

Now, how did you get to Las Vegas from Epps?

Well, you know, there's a tradition back in the Epps area there. There was this one guy. They called him Woodcar, but his name is Lemcar. Every summer after graduation, he would come out to Los Angeles and he would bring with him, I guess, as many people as he could get in his car for a small fee. That, I guess, afforded him to drive out and pay for his gas and whatever. And so that's how I came out. I think there were probably six of us in the car.

Now, you said his name was Woodcar?

Well, they called him Woodcar.

So are we saying W --

W-o-o-d, car, wood.

Okay. And there are two words?

One word. And for a long time, that's all I knew is Reverend Car. But, finally, I asked him one day, is that -- you know, Wood couldn't be his real name. And he said, "No, it's really Lem, L-e-m."

Okay. That's interesting.

So tell me about going to school here. If your background is like mine, you're coming from an all-black school in Epps. And now you're coming to Las Vegas in 1959. So you must be going to an integrated high school. What is the difference? How do you relate?

Well, soon after I arrived on campus and saw all these Caucasian people, you know, it was a little bit of an adjustment. I just found that I wasn't really the center of attraction. I really was just a minority within this majority. And it just didn't appear that I got any special attention like you would. And I don't think the teachers made any special effort to necessarily get to know me. So I was just one in the crowd. Then I quickly found out that when I was at an all-black school, people knew my family, the Tostons. We were a big family there. And so everyone knew everyone else. But there I was just sort of -- I felt like I was just a number. And I quickly found that all the different offices in high school were mostly held by white kids. And black kids mostly played sports. You could see us on the football field and playing other sports, but not really involved in, say, the student newspaper or the glee club or these different clubs. If I were home, I would be like a leader of the class. I'd be either the president or vice president. I didn't see that happening.

What was the percentage of black kids to white kids?

Are you speaking of in my class or just at the school?

Give me both, whatever you're clearest on.

I would think that my senior year -- actually, in my class I would say the percentage was -- if blacks made up 15 percent, I'd be surprised. Probably throughout the school blacks totaled no more than 15, 18 percent.

Did you go on, then, to hold any offices? Did you run for the student council or do any of that?

No, actually I didn't. I think as a newcomer to the school -- the first year would have been my junior year -- I'm trying to just get adjusted to this transition. So it would not have occurred to me to even think of running for anything.

Now, there was a group at one point here in a high school called the Rythmettes.

Yes.

Do you know anything about that group?

I sure do. And I think Las Vegas had a fabulous Rythmette team or whatever. But at the time when I first started, there were no African-Americans as a part of the Rythmettes. I think the Rythmettes probably were guided by a lady that was somewhat conservative. And not that I'm against different religions, but I think she was probably Mormon, as I heard, and I don't think she was that interested in integrating the Rythmettes. It seemed that maybe in my senior year, there was one African-American that managed to make the Rythmettes. I think she's a very fair-skinned African-American. So it wasn't that noticeable. But, you know, they were very good. But we just weren't a part of that group for the most part.

So what happened after finishing high school in Las Vegas? So you came in the tenth grade?

Eleventh grade, yes.

Eleventh grade. So you had two years.

Right.

And did you work during the summer between the 11th and 12th grade?

I sure did.

Did you go back to the Fremont?

I was at the Fremont. I think before my senior year was complete, I may have worked at the Algiers, I think, which is on the Strip, for a short time.

But after high school I really wasn't sure what I was going to do. When I lived back home and my father was alive, he made -- well, he wanted to see all his kids graduate, go to college and all. Well, anyway, my older brother Samuel, he managed to graduate from Southern University. My second oldest brother, Simon, graduated from Southern University. My sister Sweetie King graduated from Southern. So I'm sure had he lived and all that and if I had had the desire, I probably would have followed suit and maybe gone to some southern school and all of that.

But, anyway, after that I just wasn't sure what I wanted to do. So I started to think about going into the Air Force. I actually went down to the recruiting office and they interviewed me. I took the test. The test was sent off to Phoenix, I think, for evaluation. It was said at first that, you know, I think you did pretty good on the test. You look like you passed, but we have to have them check things out. So, anyway, I was getting excited about going in the Air Force. Finally, I got a reply back that I had missed passing the test by one or two points or something. And they said, you know, you can take this over in about six weeks or whatever. And I said, "No thank you, I don't want to do that."

Instead I applied for a job at the Nevada Test Site. I'm not sure if it was EG&G or Reynolds Electric. Reynolds Electric, I think, was hiring all kinds of domestic workers, kitchen help and that kind of thing. So through the Culinary Union and Reynolds Electric I managed to get a job working at the Nevada Test Site. It required commuting about sixty-five miles up there and back, but it paid well. I worked at Mercury, Nevada, and I decided to stay up there because they had dormitories.

Tell me about that. That's what I was going to ask about. First, tell me about the transportation. How long did you do that? And then tell me what it was like in the dormitories. Put me there.

Right, right. Well, the transportation -- at first I was riding with other folks. You know, I didn't have a car at the time that would take me there. So I was riding with coworkers and was coming home. I tried coming home every night. But then that got to be somewhat of a drag. And I said, you know, I may as well stay here at some of the dormitories. And it turned out pretty good because they had movies up there you could go to and bowling alleys. And so there were things to do. I thought, well, if I could just come home on weekends, this might work out. Plus, I would be able to save some money by staying there. They also had gymnasiums and basketball. I really enjoyed basketball.

Although this may not fit, I have to go back for a second and say one of my biggest disappointments in high school was when I applied for the basketball team. I went out for it. And for two years in a row, I was the last one cut from the team. I was so disappointed because I knew that if I were back home that there was no question I would have been on the starting team.

Describe the team, the basketball team.

The basketball team at Las Vegas High? Okay. The basketball team certainly was integrated. As a matter of fact, my cousin, Otis Thompson, whom they call the "Big O," was the returning star of a team when I got there in '59, my junior year. He was a senior. And he was a big man on campus, you know. He was six-foot-two and played the center position. I remember he had a nice little hook shot and whatever. I commuted to school with him, and he's probably my favorite cousin. But, anyway, to walk around campus with Otis, the star of the basketball team, was somewhat of a treat.

What is Otis' last name?

Thompson.

Now, is he still around?

No. He died two years ago.

But that was a very proud moment when they started singing the old school fight song, "We're all from Las Vegas and very proud to be." I still remember the song. And they would march and run out. And Otis would be the star there. But I couldn't make the team.

That was my first lesson about politics because I couldn't figure out why is it that -- I wasn't a bad player -- but I found out that what they did was to allow certain football players, especially the star of the football team who wanted to gain another letter in addition to football, to come out for the basketball team. So the coach would take just maybe their starting five and then after that, he would fill out the rest of his roster with football players just to keep these guys happy. So I didn't play football. I didn't get a chance to play.

Tell me about the Test Site. What did you know about it when you got the job?

Well, I knew that one could make some pretty good money, for one.

Did you know what was happening at the Test Site?

Oh, I knew that there was the underground nuclear testing then. That was really the reason that people were able to get jobs up there. You know, the government spent a lot of money on these tests. So if one wanted to work, there was that opportunity. You know, it never occurred to me how dangerous it was and all because I figured if it was that dangerous, then the government would not allow it or whatever. So, anyway, that's all I knew about it is that it was a way of

making a nice piece of change and that's about it.

So how long did you work there?

I would say at the most two years. I worked at Mercury for a while. Then I was able to move out to Area 3 they called it. I worked out of a trailer along with a gentleman who is married to -- Louis Whitley, who was one of our regents at one time -- well, his wife is June Whitley, of course, the regent. But he and I worked together out of a trailer. Louis was a cook and I was a cashier and maybe dishwasher when we got time.

Now, you went there through the Culinary Union.

Yes.

How did that happen? Tell me about the application process and how you got into the union.

Well, it was pretty easy. I think actually I had experience with the union when I worked in the hotels during the summer and all. I think you sort of had to join the Culinary in order to get those kinds of jobs, even though my brother opened the door for me and made sure that I was hired. But you had to go through the Culinary. So after that, the Culinary apparently worked with Reynolds Electric and whatever. So that's how it happened.

Now, at first you were at Mercury. Then you went to an area. What is Mercury?

Well, Mercury was the headquarters for the whole operation. That was sort of the entry point and the home base, if you will. And from there, they had Area 51 and Area 3 where they did all this extensive testing. I know in the case of Area 3, they didn't really have a building. They just had a trailer out there for people to come and for the workers to eat. Then they'd go back out in the field. So it was sort of an outpost there.

Did you ever go to Area 51?

I never went to Area 51, just Area 3.

Now, did you experience any bomb tests while you were there?

Oh, yes. Yes, there were several tests. I'm not sure if on the day they were actually testing they kept us at Mercury for a while. But I don't remember being anywhere near the testing.

Now, all of these tests at that time were underground?

Right.

Did you ever hear about what the above-ground tests were like earlier in the 50s?

I can't say that I recall a lot about that. I really don't.

Tell me about when you were living here on the Westside. Tell me about church life.

Well, as it is now, there were several black churches and other churches. On just about every corner you'd find a church. There was one church in particular that a lot of us from Epps or around that area. I think that was on A Street at the time. And I'm trying to recall that church. It's around today. I'll probably think of it at some point. But it is relocated to Adams and the Washington area, I believe. True Love -- no, it wasn't True Love. It was another one. I'll think of it in a minute.

Okay, good. So a lot of people from Epps attended church there?

Oh, yes.

So Sunday mornings were just like being home?

Oh, yes. Yes. And I think there was a Reverend Cline that was the pastor of this church. He was one of those fire and brimstone kind of preachers like back home that would preach so hard that he's perspiring all over the place. It was a very lively experience. The choir, of course, was very exciting to listen to. And back home I guess some of the prayers were long, fervent prayers and all. And so that tradition sort of continued out here.

Tell me what entertainment was like here for a young man, a junior in high school.

Well, actually, there wasn't any since you couldn't get into the Strip hotels and that kind of thing. I think it was somewhat boring it seemed to me. The highlight seemed to be, for me, was attending Jefferson Recreation Center where I guess teenagers would go, especially on weekends, and listen to music by either a deejay or someone spinning some records. So Vegas wasn't that exciting for someone underage at that time being the gambling town, the adult town that it was. A lot of youngsters probably still complain about that today. There's not enough for us to do. And I think other than at Jefferson, there was also the Dula Recreation Center downtown where you could go and play ball and do some swimming and all of that, even though I wasn't much of a swimmer. I could stay at the YMCA at that time. And I enjoyed going to the Y. I was a member of the YMCA for so many years, over 20 something years.

Where was the Y located?

The Y was actually on Bonanza and Casino Center. It's across from -- I think there's a state building that sits on the corner. But Bonanza and Casino Center, I think, is where it was located. I really enjoyed the Y because it allowed me to -- they had a summer league basketball team. And so I was able to make the team and display my talents and all to show that I really was deserving of making the Vegas High team. And one of the bright spots for me playing with the YMCA's team is that we played the Las Vegas High School JV team. And I had this incredible night. I scored, I think, 27 points against the JV team. There was actually a little write-up in the Las Vegas Sun newspaper. And I kept that clipping for a long time and mailed it back home to my ex-principal.

Now, were Dula, Jefferson or the Y, any of those integrated?

In terms of their staff?

In terms of the kids who went there and the games you played there?

Yes. Well, I know the YMCA was integrated. Dula probably was. I think the Jefferson Center, being located in the black community, probably was all-black. I don't know if white kids --

And then what about the staffs of those places?

In terms of the Jefferson Center, of course that would have been an all-black staff. At the YMCA I can't recall any African-American on the staff. Dula may have had one African-American.

Did you know Jimmy Gay?

I certainly knew Jimmy Gay in terms of those particular facilities. I'm not sure if he worked at any of them. He wasn't there when I was around.

Who were your friends at this time?

After school?

Both. Junior, senior year and as a young man working at the Test Site, who were some of your friends?

Okay. Of course, my cousin Otis was probably my best friend. But others in Las Vegas included a fellow named Fred Witt, W-i-t-t. He was probably my closest non-relative friend. And we remained friends for quite a long time. It's sort of hard to think of a lot of people who were friends. But Fred and I often traveled to California together. We were real good friends. There's a fellow named Charles Smith, who for a while was a friend because he came out from Louisiana

and we were neighbors back then. So when I first came to Vegas, we had a chance to continue our friendship for a while.

Now, traveling back and forth to Los Angeles, was that something that young men did at that time?

Oh, yes.

(End side 1, tape 1.)

Yes, Los Angeles was where my other siblings lived, actually. I had my older sister Emma; my sister Mary, who's probably the third older sister; my sister Madeline, who is sort of my half-sister, my mother's child, but not my dad's. They lived in Los Angeles. I had two brothers, one half-brother named Surl that lived in Los Angeles and my brother Simon who had moved to Los Angeles. So I had a lot of family along with cousins.

Did you ever consider leaving here to go to Los Angeles?

No, I really didn't because I just thought L.A. was way too big for me. I don't like all this traffic and all.

Have you been there recently?

Oh, I seldom go to Los Angeles. I used to drive over with Fred and sometimes I'd go with my uncle who is a big Dodger fan. So we would go and catch some of the Dodger games. But I would go during the holidays and spend some time with my older sister who often cooked the family dinner on New Year's Eve and on New Year's Day. Another sister would cook dinner for Thanksgiving. I think my sister Mary did something. So they all had a special holiday that they would cook.

That's wonderful. So the family was close.

Yes.

You remained close. I'm sure your father would have loved that.

Yes.

Tell me about Jackson Street.

Well, Jackson Street, of course, was sort of a hub of activities for African-Americans. After a while I think they had the Carver House that was built there. And I think they later changed the name to The Cove, if I'm not mistaken. During that time they also had the Louisiana Club and the

Town Tavern. That was on Jackson Street. So it was a very lively street and the place to be. They also had Mom's Kitchen, which was on Jackson Street, and that was one of those fabulous restaurants in terms of the food. And Mom was just quite a great cook. Every now and then, you'd see some celebrities in there having their neck bones and ham hocks and all of that. And they had great barbeque places, I think. And the Hughes's had a liquor store, I think, on Jackson Street along with barbershops and that kind of thing. So it was really exciting.

Is that a place where, as you got older, age 21, you went for entertainment?

Oh, yes. Yes, those were the spots, you know. They had great entertainment at that time. I know there was one fellow named Jay Jay something that was a big featured singer. Cleo Jackson at that time was an outstanding performer. So, yes.

Did you see any of the well-known entertainers over there, as well?

You know, they weren't performing. I may have seen a few that were in there at the time, but none stands out at this moment.

After the Test Site -- and you said you were there for about two years?

Right.

So what happened at that point?

Well, I decided that this was too much commuting. I just could not continue to do that. It was just too much wear and tear on the body and all of that. And I knew that my future was limited there. I wasn't going anyplace. I wasn't going to be promoted. So even though the money was nice, I decided that I was going to leave the Test Site and find employment in Las Vegas and possibly start going to the university and go to school. I had to do something.

So I left the Test Site and found a job working, I think, it was for the Department of Defense downtown. I worked at night vacuuming -- actually, polishing the floors. During the day, I went to Dana McKay's School of Business. There it was pretty exciting because I don't know how I got that referral or why I went there. But Dana McKay's School of Business teaches one how to, of course, take shorthand and type and all of that. And it turned out to be a great move for me. I was probably the only African-American male in the class. And maybe there was one other male period amongst all these ladies that were there. But I learned to type and take dictation and all.

After a period of time, I got my certificate from there. I was able to use that actually to get a

job working for Bell of Nevada Telephone Company. They hired me as a supply clerk because I was able to type and all. I could type up the orders and this kind of thing. I was the first African-American that they had working there. At that time it was located at Tropicana and Paradise. Now, they had Central Telephone that was quite different. But Bell of Nevada was a part of Ma Bell. They had an office in Reno. I think maybe those were the only telephone companies.

And you're really close to -- well, at that time it wasn't the university -- you were close to -- what was it? -- Southern Nevada? What is it called?

Yeah, Nevada Southern University.

Nevada Southern University, yes. Now, did it have any impact on you being that close?

Not at that time. You know, that was not significant to me at the time. It was just being able to, I guess, get this job out there. After I had worked there for a while, you know, they were drafting folks. And I thought, okay, they're going to get me; they're going to draft me into the military. So I decided after working there for a few years, that I would just volunteer for the draft.

So now, about what year are we talking about now?

I went into the military in 1964. I came out in 1966. So I could not have worked at the phone company that long before going into the military. But I knew I would have a job once I got back.

And was that the agreement; that you could come back?

Yeah, I think it was sort of federal policy or whatever that if they drafted you or whatever, then you could come back to your job.

Now, what did the Department of Defense -- what did that office do here in Las Vegas? Do you have any idea?

Well, I think they were all tied into the Test Site. I'm not sure if Department of Defense -- DOD is what they referred to it. Then there was Reynolds Electric. But they all were somehow involved with the Test Site.

Okay, I see. Now, at McKay, at the business school, did that improve your social life?

Not really. Not in terms of the ladies that were involved. After school, after class, we didn't associate with each other.

Okay, I see. Now, you went into the military just before Vietnam heated up?

Oh, yes. Yes. As a matter of fact, yes, it was before Vietnam heated up. And I was so grateful that I had volunteered for the draft and went in a few months earlier because at the end they were emptying out the barracks. I'm sure I would have gone because my whole barracks, everybody in the barracks was leaving to go to Vietnam. But they looked at my time left and said, you know, he's actually a short-timer to send him over. So I was able to come home.

That was great. While you were in the military during that two-year period of service, where did you go?

Well, I was stationed at Fort Ord for my basic training, Fort Ord, California. I stayed there for several months or a year, whatever basic training required. There was a case of meningitis that broke out there. So that sort of speeded up my time there and got us out.

But, anyway, after basic training, I was sent to Fort Ord -- not Fort Ord but Fort Jackson, South Carolina, which is located in Colombia, South Carolina. That's where I finished up my two years with the military.

So you didn't have to leave the country?

I didn't have to leave the country. In fact, they somewhat had made a mistake and were going to try to send me to Germany. And I thought, well, this would be neat to be able to go to Germany for these two years. And then I guess they discovered that, well, he's not a three-year man. So they rescinded that order and I wasn't able to leave. But I had a great experience in the army. My typing actually helped me to get a job while in basic training as a payroll clerk. So that kept me away from a lot of the marching and a lot of strenuous-type work. When I moved to Fort Jackson, I actually worked for a lieutenant colonel as one of the typists for him. That really was a big help to me. So I enjoyed that.

So the McKay Business School was the thing to do.

It was really a blessing for me.

Exactly.

It has helped. It helped me when I went to work in television. I was able to type up my news stories while everybody else was picking and pecking.

Yes. You're actually typing.

Yes.

Now, did you return to Ma Bell?

I did. I did. I returned to Ma Bell. They promoted me I think from just a supply clerk to something they call a chief transmission man. What it was mostly was working on circuits and repairing telegraph circuits. And I really didn't have an aptitude for that, but they showed me how to do these things, mostly stringing wires and testing circuits.

So are you climbing the poles?

Sort of, yes. But it really wasn't that interesting work to me. It required a lot of reading and technical kind of stuff. It just didn't interest me. One day there was a fellow that worked alongside me, a white gentleman. He somehow found out about a job working in Reno in the marketing department. He was allowed to make that move to Reno and work in marketing and PR and that kind of thing. I wanted to do something like that, so I said that I would like to apply. They didn't give me the time of day, you know. Well, no, we just don't have any more of those types of jobs left and, you know, you just don't have the background for that or whatever. I said, well, he didn't have the background, and you worked with him. So, no, we're sorry, but this is it. You have a nice job here. You've been here now about six years. You know, you're top of the pay scale, so just be happy.

So where were you living? At first I know you were on Harrison Street. Through the years, did you change locations?

I did because that was just a one-bedroom that my brother and I shared with the Henrys, Laura and Abo, Albert Henry. Anyway, we later needed more room and we moved in with a cousin of ours who had recently divorced. She had a three-bedroom house, so we moved down. I think it was on C Street, C and McMillan. We stayed with her for a while. When I started Vegas High, I think we were living at her place at the time. After that, I moved to Cunningham Street. I want to say 1228 Cunningham, still on the Westside. And my brother and I shared a back house there. I think the landlord was a fellow named Dave Henry.

But you had your own house now?

Well, we had sort of the little house in the back, you know, yeah, a small area there, maybe two bedrooms in back. So, yes, after that I think we may have moved to Lake Mead and got an apartment at Lake Mead.

And when you're saying "Lake Mead," you're talking about Lake Mead Street over on the Westside?

Yes, on the Westside. Right. There was Carrie Arms Apartments, as I remember.

Okay, good. Now, tell me how the Westside is changing during this period from when you were a junior in high school through 1964.

Well, there was some growth there as we talked about, like the Carver House being built. I think Bob Bailey's Sugar Hill Lounge had come onboard by that time. I'm trying to remember if there were -- at that time I think there were ranch markets, grocery stores and this kind of thing there.

And how was the city itself changing? You are traveling now all the way across the city to work, so what changes do you see in the city itself, physically and in attitudes?

Well, you know, the city, of course, started adding more buildings. I just saw that people -- it seemed to me -- well, let me point out one thing. I guess integration was sort of just beginning to come about. In fact, my girlfriend and I marched downtown. They had one demonstration, as I remember, and we participated in that.

But one thing happened after I graduated from high school. I do remember this. I was not an adult at that time -- I was probably 18 or 19 -- but I decided I was going to do something special and go out on the Strip and celebrate. Della Reese was appearing at the Flamingo along with Brook Benton, and that's where I went to celebrate my graduation. I stood in line there and I was a little bit afraid because I thought, you know, if this guy asks me for my ID, he's going to not allow me to attend the show. And, fortunately, he did not. I guess I looked like I was an adult or whatever. So he allowed me to go on in. And this was in '61. So I was able to go and see that show.

Now, in '61, blacks weren't going to the shows?

Well, I guess it must have been that we were going by then because, otherwise, if they had seen me, they would not have allowed me to come in. So I would definitely say that by then the Strip was integrated in terms of our being able to go.

Right. Las Vegas had the Helldorado parades. Tell me what you remember about them.

Well, I just remember it as being sort of a western day type of an event where everybody sort of dressed up in their western attire. I think they had the contests of growing the beards and all and

see who could grow their beard the longest and all. But in terms of African-Americans, I think that it was probably mostly Caucasians that maybe were actually in the parades. I don't remember back in those days that we did that much in the parades, but we attended it. It was a spectacle, you know.

I want to know about some of the social activities. What were weddings like in the black community?

Well, I can't say that I went to a lot of weddings at that time because I guess being from the South and just sort of getting here, a newcomer, I did not go to a lot of weddings. I actually went to a few. But one in particular was when my -- and you asked about my best friends back then and I forgot to mention that one of my real good friends -- and we're still friends today -- is a fellow named Willy Merle Steel, Willy Steel. We were in the same grade back home. We actually got baptized at the same time. He came out to Las Vegas and we maintained that friendship. I was the best man at his wedding. So that's one wedding I do recall.

Where was it?

It probably was at Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church. And this is the church I was talking about.

This is the church?

Yeah.

Now, what was that church like? Was it a large church, one of the big ones?

No, it was actually not. It was sort of a small church. I'm not even sure if they had air-conditioning at that time because I remember it being a little bit hot in there. They only had the windows open, you know. But it was a very spirited church. I felt quite comfortable at that church. I later went to visit at Second Baptist. And I thought at the time that maybe they were a little bit more "bushwau," whatever. And I just didn't feel as comfortable. You don't do that at this church, you know.

Yes. When you went to Willy's wedding, you remember this as a church wedding. Do you recall anything unusual or different?

Oh, I don't remember anything that much different other than maybe if you were in a church setting like that I think it's a little bit more spirited where the preacher talks about God and the

importance of consulting him about marriage and relying on him and the fact that there was a need to stay together. So that's about it.

In 1955, before you arrived, the Moulin Rouge opened here in Las Vegas, the first integrated nightclub. Was there any talk in the community about the Moulin Rouge in 1959?

In 1959, I know that people did talk about how things -- the entertainers from the Strip would come to the Moulin Rouge. And it was the place to be in terms of elegance. African-Americans were able to mix with some of the whites that came over. It was quite a showplace at that time. And also I guess it had a restaurant attached and all. I'm not sure. When did it close, let me ask you? I know it was only open for --

Six months.

Yeah, six months, right.

I mean it reopened again, but it was completely different.

Right.

Career-wise when you left Ma Bell, why did you decide to leave and where did you go?

Well, during the time when I returned from the military and went back to Ma Bell, I was looking through a magazine and I saw this ad that said -- and I think it was Career Academy of Famous Broadcasters. I thought that was interesting and I decided I would take this correspondence course. I applied and they said that they would send me tapes, blank tapes, and give me instructions and an instruction book. And they explained that I would practice these tapes and send in my work. They would critique it back in Milwaukee. At the end of the -- I think it was maybe a six-month period -- if I were good enough, I would receive a certificate and they would help me find employment. So I figured I'm working at Ma Bell. I've got a secure income and it's something that I can just try and see how it works out. So I did that.

It seemed that as time went on, as I was getting closer to my graduation, my critiques went from fairly good to not so good. Maybe this is not the field for you. So I thought, well, I paid my \$500 and this is not working out now. And I thought, I'm getting better. To me I was getting better. I was practicing the mouth exercises that they told me to do. Anyway, they finally said, well, you know, it's not going to work. We don't think you have the potential for this, so goodbye and good luck.

So do you think it was because they didn't want to try to help you find a job?

I'm not sure whether this was some kind of racket or what because one of the guys involved was a renowned broadcaster, John Cameron Swasey, who a lot of people will remember was selling watches on television. So with his name being attached to this career academy, a famous broadcaster, I had to believe that they were reputable. But I wasn't sure if I wasn't that good or if for some reason they didn't want to live up to some commitments that I thought they were making. So in either case, I was disappointed that I wasn't going to be able to go from the telephone company into a career in broadcasting.

As it turned out, while I'm still here at Ma Bell -- this is several months later -- I got a call from an ex-girlfriend who knew I was taking this correspondence course. So she said, "Roosevelt, I just noticed an ad in the Las Vegas Voice newspaper where Channel 3 is asking for applicants to come and they would train you to be a broadcaster, slash, reporter. And I know that you were interested in that field. So maybe you want to give them a call."

And so I thought, okay, I haven't seen it, but I will call over there. I called and reached the news director. This is maybe Thursday. And he said, "Well, we're going to close it out on Friday," the next day, "So you just got in, in time. If you can be over here by 6:30, knock on the back door and we'll let you in so that we'll be able to talk with you to see. We've interviewed several people." So I went over. I was just sort of excited, you know, what this could mean.

Where were they located?

They were located on Boulder Highway. At that time it was KORK TV and they were at Desert Inn and Boulder Highway. So I went over and knocked. And a fellow named John Howell was the news director. He invited me in. After a little bit of a chat, he wanted to know why I was interested in this field and whatever. And I explained about the correspondence course and all and that I was getting a little bored with what I was doing and all. He asked me why, since the pay was so much different and so much lower than what I was actually making, would I want to leave that good-paying job for something in broadcasting? At the time I'm not married so I can break a plate and not worry about it, that kind of thing.

And so, anyway, he said, "Well, in broadcasting you have to be able to write and, of course, we want to check out your writing. And we understand that you have no experience. We will work

with you on that. But just to get an idea of whether or not you have a flare for writing, we're going to take some wire stories here from Associated Press and have you rewrite this copy because we can't read it as is. Every other station in town has the same thing and we don't want to sound like them. So let's see how you are at rewriting." So I spent a little time rewriting. He said, "After this we'll have you go in the studio and we'll put up a camera and just see how you look on camera. We're not going to worry about how you sound or whatever. Don't worry about being nervous."

So, anyway, he came back and looked at my writing. And he said, "You know, you seem to have a flare for writing, not that great, but there's maybe something there." And he said, "Let's go in the studio and have you on camera. Don't worry about it. Do an audition tape." So I went in and I was just so nervous, you know, swallowing and everything. I thought I was going to die. So he said, "Okay, well, I'll tell you what. It was a little bumpy there, but I'll tell you what we're going to do. We've interviewed several people and there are a couple of people we're looking at. But I will let you know in about a week who we decide to go with and whatever." So he got my information. And I figured, okay, nothing ventured, nothing gained. I may not hear from these people again.

So I went back to my job. Finally, I told some folks at work at the Bell phone company what I had done and they thought I was crazy for even trying to go. They said, you know, these jobs don't pay that much. What do they pay? And why would you leave a job that pays this to go over there to something that's not sturdy? They could fire you at the drop of a hat. There's no union. There's nothing to protect you.

So, anyway, about a week later I got a call from this Mr. Howell. He said, "Roosevelt, John Howell here. You know, we've looked at all of the tapes." And he said, "We've decided that you are probably our best candidate. So if you are still interested, and I don't know why you'd want to do this, but if you're still interested, we'd love to have you come over and work with us." And I said, "Oh, yeah?"

So now I really have to make a decision. And I thought, you know, this was after they turned me down in the marketing and I can't go to marketing in Reno and I'm going to be stuck here working with older people at the phone company for the rest of my life. And I said, I am going to

give my resignation here and --

(End side 2, tape 1.)

Once I came back, I told the people at the phone company that I was leaving. They wanted to know, well, why? I said, "I'm going to television. They want me to come over. I'm going to be a trainee at Channel 3." And they were just surprised that I would leave this secure job to try working in television. They pointed out how risky that was for me. I said, "You know, I understand all of that, but I'm not married, I don't have a lot of obligations at this point. If I fail at it, hopefully you'll hire me back here at the job." And so, anyway, I said, "You know, I wanted to get into marketing. You guys had a chance to promote me and you didn't allow me to do that. So I'm going to try something else." And so they said, "Okay, if that's what you want." So they bid me farewell and I went over to Channel 3.

After being introduced to the all-white staff there, Mr. Howell, a very nice gentleman, a very liberal kind of guy, gray-haired fellow, small in stature and everything, he was telling me that what they wanted to do was give African-Americans a chance to break into this field. I suspect that the FCC had requirements at that time that they try to show either some diversity or show that they were responsive to the community and involvement and all -- so they needed an African-American, I think, especially considering that the owner of KORK also owned the Las Vegas Review-Journal and also owned the radio station by the same name, KORK. So they needed to show something. So that's why they made this gesture, I think.

He said, "Well, we're going to work with you about maybe six months before you would actually be on the air doing anything. So we will be training you, on-the-job training. And we're going to send you to Kodak School," because at that time reporters were required to learn how to shoot film. And, actually, that was a part of my job -- reporter cameraman. So I went to California. I think it was Hollywood, California, where Kodak had a school that trained one to shoot news film. There's a special thing you have to know about shooting news film. You don't want to be panning and this kind of thing. I went to that school and got a certificate from there, and then started going around with some of the other reporters, one in particular. He was the reporter and I was his cameraman. So that's how we started.

As it turned out, I was actually on the air in probably six weeks instead of six months.

How? Why?

Well, I didn't feel that I was ready at all. I think the pressure was on them to get a black face out there. So I was sort of rushed. And I can't say that I was really -- well, I wasn't trained to be a reporter. So I expected that I was going to need every bit of these six months to even get a feel for this. I had no idea what their training was going to be like. So the one guy I went out with, a fellow named Dave Ogorn --

How do you spell that last name?

I want to say it's O-g-o-r-n, something like that. He had a degree, I think, from the University of Pittsburgh in broadcasting and whatever. So Dave would tell me how unfair he thought that was to me that they would be trying to experiment like this because he had a four-year degree in broadcasting. And to think that this would work, you know, it just was asinine to him. So I had to be disappointed after a while. You know, you can never really just pick this up. I've been trained. So I said, "Dave, they told me about this. I am just going for it."

So finally after a while, they decided, okay. The news director at the time wrote out a set of questions. They used to send me out to cover a news conference and they would write the questions that they wanted me to ask the person who was the interviewee. So the first interview I had and the first exposure I think on television was the father of the atom bomb, a fellow named Dr. Edward Teller. Here I am. There's actually a photographer around covering this big event. And I actually have a clipping here somewhere where -- mostly my rear -- I had a microphone in this guy's face asking him my three questions. Dr. Teller, how would you explain such and such? So I'd bring the camera and my phone back and forth. And so that's how I got introduced to television on the air.

After that Mr. Howell would have me -- we were filming at the time and everything I did was sort of on film so we could look at it and edit it and whatever. So we went through that. I never did anything live in my two and a half years at KORK. It was always on film. I say that, but yet it seemed that maybe -- well, no. That was really it. I never did anything live while there.

I did a couple of things that were really sort of exciting to me and I will always remember them. At that time they were doing documentaries and they would air them during prime time. So John Howell and I actually did two documentaries. One was called "Does the Dream Come in

Black?" This was shortly after the death of Martin Luther King. John went around and had interviews with folks from the university and the community to find out if conditions for African-Americans had really changed since Dr. King's. And we actually had like maybe a three-part series, like 7:30 to 8 o'clock. "Does the Dream Come in Black?" So I had a chance to interview a lot of these people. And we would sit there at the desk and sort of talk about this thing back and forth. It was great. So we did that two different times.

The other time was we did something called "Is Life Cheap in the Black Community?" And that, again, was like a three-part series because a lot of shootings had occurred and blacks were killed, black-on-black crime. It seemed that the perpetrators were people who received light sentences. So this liberal guy, John Howell, he wanted to explore that. "Is Life Cheap in the Black Community?" Are the criminals getting away with all of this? Are they getting the time that they deserve? If they were shooting white people, would they get longer sentences? That kind of thing.

So I was proud of the fact that we did those two prime-time documentaries and I was sitting at the desk with John. I really felt like my career was going to a new level.

So going back now, what was the pay difference? Did you have to take less pay to leave Ma Bell?

Yeah. Yeah. I don't know exactly what the salary was, but I knew I was at the top of the pay scale at Bell of Nevada. Let's just say if I were making 12,000 a year at Ma Bell, I probably was making 7,000 at the television station.

So it was a significant cut?

A significant cut, yes.

So where are those documentaries now? If I wanted to see them, would I be able to?

You know, unfortunately, you could not because the station burned down. It burned to the ground. One of my biggest regrets is that I wasn't able to save any of my earlier works because Channel 3 burned down along with everything in it. So I have things from Channel 8, but nothing from 3.

So you were at Channel 3 for how long?

About two and a half years.

Did you feel that you had become a good newsperson by the time you left there in three year?

Oh, I think so. It's a part of my family background and all that you just don't give up. And I felt like I'm a Taurus, one of those, so I'm stubborn. I'm going to make this work. So what I would do is I would sort of tape people when I saw black people particularly on the air, black reporters from CBS News and all. I remember one guy named Gordon Graham who had a great voice. I would tape record him and sort of pattern my style after this fellow. I would go home, stand before the mirror, and try to read some copy in the voice and tone that he had, the pacing and everything. I felt that I was really progressing.

But I think at first African-Americans had to be a little disappointed in my reporting when I was on the air because, like I said, I was rushed to get on the air. I was not a very sharp individual at the time. Even though no one really sort of admitted it, my white boss would never admit it, I seem to have heard rumors that some people may have called in and said, "Boy, he's not ready, get him off the air," because I used to make some mistakes on the air. Like I would say the word "ax." You know, instead of "ask," I would say, "ax."

How did you correct that?

Well, someone finally told me. They would look at the work and they would say, you know, I know you're from the South and all that and that's how they do it, but you're supposed to say ass, like a donkey, you know, a donkey is an ass. So ass-k, you know. So that was pointed out to me. And I think one time I actually said something about "womb" instead of "wound" or something like that. I said it like a woman's womb or something. So a few times that would happen.

But I was so nervous. I actually ended up one time going to a hypnotist to try to get over this nervousness. I'm just imagining all these people out there looking at me. I wanted to be smooth, so I went to a hypnotist. Anyway, it turned out to be a waste of money.

But still, you were trying to do things to get better. When you hear children talking today -- and I don't even have to put any race on it anymore -- how do you feel about that and what can we do to help?

When they're talking about -- just the way --

Just the way they speak, the way they pronounce words, the way they use the grammar.

Yeah, yeah. Well, it's something that you immediately feel badly about, that somehow or another they're not being taught at home or wherever. And I guess some of them get caught up in this identity thing. They're trying to relate to their peers and whatever. And I see it in my own family with my son.

Yes, right. So what is this hip-hop mentality going to do for the 20-year-old black students today?

Well, I don't think it's really helping them in terms of being able to compete in the marketplace given the competition, the global competition, that we have now. I think it delays their progress if they don't get it in terms of how to dress and the baggy pants and all. They're just not going to be hired in terms of the majority of society looking at that. That sends the wrong message and it's definitely a liability in terms of that.

We read all kinds of articles about the hip-hop generation; what they're missing out on, that they're not going to have the kind of careers that they should have, that they have talent to have. What can be done to change that?

I was listening to something the other day, a speaker who said that a few years ago the difference between a high school graduate and a college graduate was maybe 25 percent in salary and all of that. He said that today it's more like 85 percent, which was astonishing to me that the gap had grown to that proportion. If we somehow could get the message across that economically speaking, in terms of trying to support your family, especially with high gas prices and inflation, that you're getting further and further behind -- if we could somehow get that point across about the disparity in salary and the education, maybe that would make some difference. I don't know.

Before we talk about your next move in the industry, I want to ask you about some people who are in this industry. Tell me about Bob Bailey.

Well, Bob Bailey was one who had an influence on me in terms of a career in television. I had an opportunity to watch Bob when he had his show on Channel 8 I believe it was. It was a variety show. I was really impressed with how glib he was and how entertaining he was and the people he had interaction with on the show. He was a star. And I thought, boy, if I could do something like that, that would be fantastic. And just knowing about Bob's many different ventures in the community -- he was sort of a renaissance man, a real estate broker. He held different jobs here

for the state. I think he was with the Equal Rights Commission at one time. Bob was just out there doing everything. He was involved with the NAACP -- a role model, no question about that.

In fact, after I had an opportunity to be on television, I always would think about the Bob Baileys out there. What must they think of me as I try to have a career in this field when he was so prominent in terms of this community? You know, I didn't want to embarrass myself nor icons like the Baileys who were well educated and all. At the time I think I had a high school education and a little bit of college when I got into this career. But Bob was someone I looked up to for his business acumen, just a great guy. I was hoping just to meet him and talk with him and try to learn from him. And I did later talk with him. He helped me particularly in making a decision about my career at the Convention Visitors Authority.

Alice Key, did you know Alice Key?

Well, I knew of Alice Key. I know she was on the show with Bob Bailey, but I had not really had an opportunity to mix and mingle with her until much later in life. Obviously, she was a very articulate lady. Coming from the South with a rural background and all that, I could only imagine being where these people were -- in the company of these well educated, articulate people from the cities of New York and Detroit and all of that. I just never imagined myself being on the same level with those individuals. They were just someone to look up to and admire.

Now, do you go to the Convention Authority after Channel 3?

After Channel 8. I left Channel 3 to go to Channel 8.

Tell me about the transition from 3 to 8. How did that happen?

Well, what happened is after I had worked at Channel 3 for about two and a half years -- I would say from '70 to '72 or whatever -- I had the misfortune of experiencing a change of news directors from the guy who hired me to his replacement. A fellow named Fred Lewis replaced John Howell. Fred did not see in me what John Howell apparently saw. So this is when I thought I had it together and people were telling me in the community, "Man, we see the change." And I could see the pride in the community of having a black reporter. A lot of times they wouldn't know my name, but when they just saw me in a grocery store or at the bank or somewhere, they would say, "There's the black reporter." It was a sense of pride there.

So, anyway, I remember one Friday just before Easter in '72 that the news director, Fred Lewis,

said, "I want to see you before you go home today. I'd like to see you for a few minutes." So I said, "Oh, okay." I had this great idea for an Easter story. At the time we had a Bell & Howell camera and we often carried it in a car. So if I saw something newsworthy, I might just film it and write a little story and this kind of thing. And John Howell would allow me to use that and whatever.

But, anyway, I had this idea for a story. So I was telling Fred all during that day. I said, "You know, I want to go and cover this story and here's an idea." And he kept sort of putting me off. So, finally, he told me that Friday, "Roosevelt, let's go outside and talk." And he said, "You know, Rose, I know you've been here for a while and all, but it's just not working out. You've given it your best shot, but I just don't see you as a news reporter. I think we're going to have to let you go." I said, "Let me go? Go where?" I said, "We never talked about my work." He never expressed once that he was dissatisfied with my work and put me on probation or gave me a chance to do better. I said, "Let me go? What is all this about?" I said, "Fred, that's very unfair. I've really grown as a reporter." So he just didn't buy that. He didn't see it. And I said, "Well, man, I've got to tell somebody about this, NAACP. This is so unfair." So, anyway, he told me that he already talked to the general manager and if I did something like that to cause embarrassment that I probably would be blackballed in the industry and this kind of thing. So it's like there are no options for you.

So, anyway, obviously I was disappointed. But he had a plan already. I guess he had Ray Willis waiting in the wings to take my job. He had brought Ray through the station at one time. I remember seeing this guy, but I thought he was there working for Kodak to change out the film and the chemicals that go in the film and all because they had a black guy doing that at one time. I thought this is his replacement, perhaps. So he had sneaked Ray in, I guess, just to see the lay of the land and all. And Ray came from Arkansas, Ft. Smith, Arkansas. So he was out there waiting in the wings. I was let go that Friday and I think Ray may have been on the air that Monday.

So, anyway, after I left there, I was out of work for probably six months. I had my audition tapes. Had I been given some warning, I would have had a chance to get things together.

What kind of severance pay?

It was very insignificant. If anything, I may have just gotten my last check and that was it because

this is a low-paying job to begin with. So they weren't going to give you a big package or anything. It was just goodbye and just abruptly like that.

I went and talked to Helen Anderson's husband, Jim Anderson. He was the president or an officer of the NAACP at the time and one I could really talk to. And I told him what had happened. He thought about, well, maybe we could picket the station and demonstrate and all this. He said, "You'd have to think about that because you could get blackballed. They may not hire you anywhere else if you act too strongly about it. And then the next week when they had Ray on the air, we can't say that this is racist and this kind of thing."

So, anyway, that's what happened. But I was out of work six months. I sent my audition tape to various places around the country; to Houston; to Fresno, California; to Denver. My best opportunity seemed to have been at the time, immediately after I was let go -- I saw an ad in the Washington paper. It was actually Brimington, Washington, where this guy was looking for a reporter cameraman situation. So I applied. The gentleman seemed a little bit impressed with my work. He wanted to talk to my former boss, so I gave him the name of John Howell, who still worked there. He had been replaced as news director and was pushed into community affairs by this Fred Lewis. He had taken the job. That's another story. John hired him as a co-anchor and eventually Fred moved John out of the job. So John was community affairs. So I gave him John's name as one he could talk to. Ultimately, they talked to Fred Lewis. And Fred Lewis was not very kind and complimentary. So I lost that job, that opportunity.

But as things happen, right here in town, I thought Channel 8 maybe would give me an opportunity because they didn't have any blacks and neither did Channel 13. Channel 8 had a guy named Rueben Culpepper who was a black cameraman, certainly not a very polished person at that time. Every now and then they would give Rueben something to read trying to pretend that they had a black. It was worse than anything I could have ever done on the air. Bob Stodall at the time was director over there. I talked to Bob. I thought Bob was a rather liberal kind of guy because he was out there with me during the Clark County Welfare Rights Movement, Ruby Duncan and all that. Bob was a long-haired, hippie-type guy, "right on" kind of thing. And I thought, well, he's just a liberal cat that certainly knew my work and would give me a shot. And Bob surprised me by saying, "Well, we already have a black reporter." I said, "Who?" And he

said, "Rueben Culpepper." And I said, "Oh, come on, Bob. Rueben's a cameraman and you know he's not very good." But, anyway, Bob didn't give me that chance.

So Murray Westgate -- I had left a tape at Channel 13. And I didn't really know Murray that well at all. I had seen him on the air. So I left the tape over there. After I put these tapes out everywhere else, they would say, well, we're going to call you; can we hold onto your tape a little bit longer? This kind of thing. Some of them probably still have the tape today. They weren't in any hurry to say no and send you your tape back, but they were keeping me on a string.

So, anyway, I got a call from Murray Westgate one day. He said, "Roosevelt, this is Murray. Are you working yet?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Well, I'm thinking of leaving Channel 13 to go to Channel 8 because Stodall wants to go to law school or something. He can't do both newscasts, so I'm going to go over there as news director." He said, "If you're not working at the time -- it's just going to be about three weeks down the road. So if you're not working and you're interested, I'd love to take you over with me to Channel 8." And I said, "Murray, that's great. I'd really appreciate it. I'm surprised because we don't know each other and all." And he said, "Well, I've looked at your tape and I see some real potential." And he said, "If you come over with me, I'll give you more money than you made at Channel 3 and eventually I'd like for you to become an anchorman. I see that in your future and I'd like to give you that opportunity." I said, "That's just great."

So nothing came up. I went to Denver and they were going to offer me something, but it was for even less money than Las Vegas. A big market like Denver? And they talked about the beautiful weather. I can't go to the bank with that, you know.

So, anyway, Murray hired me at Channel 8. And he said, "I want you to become an anchorman at 11 o'clock. I'm going to work with you. I know you don't have any live experience, on-the-air experience. So I'm going to bring you at six o'clock and have you report on a story that you're covering that day and sort of get you relaxed in front of the camera and this kind of thing." So I said, "Well, man, that'll be great." He said, "I have a community affairs show that I want to have you host."

So he did everything that he promised to do. He gave me more money, the community affairs show, brought me on at six o'clock to get me ready, and eventually had me co-anchor the 11

o'clock news with Bob Stodall. And weekends I was the sole anchor for Channel 8 News. And this was from '73 to -- I eventually left there in '75 from Channel 8. But Murray, unfortunately, didn't last over six months.

(End side 1, tape 2.)

So in that six-month period, he actually delivered on everything that he had promised that he would do. I was really in my glory, so to speak, co-anchoring with Stodall, the man who wouldn't hire me.

What was it like working with Stodall?

Well, it was interesting. We didn't really have any great falling out or anything because he was going to law school maybe during the day and co-anchoring at night. So our ratings at that time -- actually, for the first time Channel 8 beat Channel 3 at 11 o'clock. You know, they look at all these things. And I think they had the Johnny Carson Show at 11:30. And people would tune into Channel 3's news. So it was a natural lead-in for them. But for the first time, people changed their viewing habits or whatever and the ratings showed that Channel 8 beat Channel 3. So I knew that I wasn't hurting the station. I must have been helping. I was always a snappy dresser and this kind of thing. So black folks I'm sure were tuning in to see this anchor. And on weekends here I am doing the news by myself. And I could see such a bright future here. I'm going to eventually leave and go to New York, to big places, you know; that was my dream.

I remember doing this community affairs show. And I had such black icons as Moon Mullen, I guess, who was maybe a judge at the time, Justice Robert Reid who was a black justice of the peace, very sharp, somewhat controversial guy. He was on my community affairs show. So I had these kinds of people talking about real issues instead of some fire station opening or some garden growing and this kind of stuff that some of the other shows had, you know, hard-hitting issues. It wasn't on that long, but friends of mine were saying that that was the best show that we've seen.

But, anyway, as luck would have it, Murray gets terminated. I have the misfortune of having Fred Lewis, the man who fired me from Channel 3, being let go quietly at Channel 3 because Fred was a reformed alcoholic. I mean he came to Channel 3 as an alcoholic trying to get his life back together. He had this great news background or experience and had a great voice. But he came there as a hobo with a beard all over the place and coveralls and he worked as a cameraman. But,

anyway, when he had the opportunity to work at Channel 3 -- somebody left at 11 o'clock. And, anyway, he auditioned, showed off his great talent, and they hired him as the 11 o'clock anchor. He eventually was so good that they decided to have him co-anchor with John Howell at six. And then, eventually, he was too strong and they moved John out altogether. So that's how he got his job.

But, anyway, his alcoholism I was told sort of cropped up again and he was let go at Channel 3. But because of his talent, Channel 8 hired Fred Lewis after they let Murray go. So he calls me up and says, "Roosevelt, I wanted you to know that I am coming over to Channel 8 as news director and I just want to tell you that I've had a chance to watch you on the air and maybe I was mistaken about you and all of that. So there's not going to be a problem with us working together and this kind of thing." So I said, "What choice do I have, right? Unless I leave, you know, I've got to try to work with you."

So, anyway, he came over. Fred had this habit of choosing one person from the staff that he would latch onto and ride that person until they either quit or were fired.

He would ride that person in a negative way?

Yeah, in a negative way. And that seemed to have been his M.O. So he turned to several people and they quit. I could name you names. Eventually, things were getting much worse between us. He sort of turned his sights on me after picking on several people.

One day we were riding past the Convention Authority and one of my coworkers, a guy named Gary Morris who happened to be from Arkansas said, "Roosevelt, they have this opening at the Convention Authority. They're looking for a tourism marketing man. You may want to look into that and apply for that job because you know how Fred is and you've already been fired by him. So if I were you..."

And I said, "You know, Gary, you're right, maybe I should check this out, but I have no idea what a tourism marketing man does." He said, "Well, it's just a glorified PR thing. You do a little public speaking. You can do that." So I said, "Okay, I'll check into that." So, anyway, I applied for that job.

You asked me about Otis Harris.

Yes.

So what happened during that time -- this was maybe in July of 1975 that I heard about this job and I applied for it. I didn't know whether I would get it or not and I still had a job and I was worried. So, finally, I got a call from the Convention Authority. They said they wanted to talk to me about the job a little bit further and they were seriously considering my application. I said, oh, okay.

Things were heating up even more at Channel 8 with Fred Lewis and whatever. And so, finally, I got word that -- well, anyway, Fred and I had had a terrible day. I think I ended up cutting -- I was with a guy and we cut this cord to the first camcorder that Channel 8 had. They had this new technology, new piece of camera equipment and we were trying it out for the first time. And I went out with a guy, the sports director, and we were out covering this story for him. And somehow a cord got caught in the door and got severed. So we were trying to decide who was going to take the blame and receive the wrath of Fred Lewis.

But, anyway, on the worst day, he just chewed me out. And it seemed that maybe the very next day the chair of the Convention Visitors Authority, Bob Broadbent, who also was a county commissioner and a very powerful man -- we were covering Bob Broadbent on a story one time, my fellow reporter, the same one telling me about the job, Gary Morris. We were out covering a story. So Mr. Broadbent said, "Roosevelt, could you let Gary load the car? I want to talk to you a few minutes." So I said, "Oh, yeah, okay." What could he want with me? Then he said, "You know, I'm the chairman of the Convention Authority Board and I know you applied for the job."

What happened is that Otis Harris had held this job or a similar job, although his title was actually assistant tourism manager. They had let him go I think maybe in April of '75, and I guess the reason that they gave him was that they were downsizing. So, anyway, Otis apparently kept his eye on the paper and he saw that this job that fit the description of what he had been doing had cropped up again with a different name. So he insisted on getting his old job. "If you were downsizing, now you're hiring again and I want first crack at this job." So, anyway, he had decided to file a lawsuit for discrimination against the Authority. "I want that job back." So I think that helped me certainly to get the job.

So Bob Broadbent, to continue that story, said, "You know, you're the best person for the job, we think. So here's our dilemma. Otis Harris and his group, they're talking about bringing in

Dr. Ralph Abernathy to picket the convention center. So if we offer you the job prior to the demonstration, people will say that you're trying to prevent them from demonstrating and negate all of that. But if the demonstration takes place and we hire you after that, then they're going to say we did it because of the demonstration. So I need to know from you which would you prefer, to be hired before or after?" And I had just gone through a terrible time with Fred Lewis. So I said, "I want the job as soon as possible."

Now, I think I also talked to Bob Bailey right around that time and I said, "Bob, I feel awful about this because it appears that somehow I'm an Uncle Tom and I don't want to go into a situation like that. I don't know Otis that well, but..."

And did you think about Ray Willis?

Oh, well, Ray Willis was still doing his thing at Channel --

I know. Did you think about that situation?

I didn't really think about that at that time, no. No, because Ray Willis and I had sort of made our peace. At first Ray was bragging about the fact that he had taken Roosevelt Toston's job. He was telling everybody he could find and even joked with me about it. You didn't even know I had come and you thought I was a chemical guy, but I was really the -- you know. So he found out after a while that I had lived here for all this time. I had a lot of friends. So those very people that you were telling about me, they would come back and tell me that this guy's over here...And it made him look small. So, eventually, he got tired of that and just became good friends.

So, anyway, that was the deal. I said, "I don't like the way this makes me look, but yet I don't want to stay at Channel 8. I know how Fred Lewis can be and this job pays more." So Bob Bailey was the one who said, "Well, look, Roosevelt, I would without a doubt take the job because if you don't take it, they're going to give it to some white person. So take the job."

And so it was mostly because of Bob's words and my feelings about that. That was what I needed. So I went ahead and said, "Yeah, I accept the job." And it made headline news in the Las Vegas Sun that weekend. I still have those clippings from that.

Before we go into that job, are there training programs today in broadcasting for young people?

No. I was asked recently to give a speech at the Nevada State College. That was one of the

questions that came up. And I had a chance to check with Channel 3 and Channel 8. At Channel 8 I did a real in-depth interview, and I asked them how they go about selecting their reporters. And I think really both stations sort of told me that -- I think Channel 3 said, well, we usually require like a minimum of five years experience from our reporters now. And Channel 8 said three to five years experience is what they look for and they recruit at college campuses and they bring their people in. But for them to be like an anchor or something like that, I mean there's no way. You couldn't do this today, what I did. They just wouldn't even look at you.

Would you ever think about doing something like that, some kind of a community program where you're training people in broadcasting? I think that happened on the Westside years and years ago.

Well, actually, I was a part of a training program at one time. I think Bob Bailey had this course at EOB or something and he invited me to come and speak. So we sort of did something like that. I don't know if --

Would that work today?

I think it could. I think it really would help. They could bring in some current people today to give an idea of what's going on. But I think that for people who are interested in that field, it would certainly help for them to know how it works from someone inside. I could certainly share with them some of my experiences. But these station VPs have really pointed out what they're looking for because one of the questions that I asked the manager of Channel 3 recently at a Caucus for African-Americans -- he was there -- anyway, I threw this question out and I still wonder: Why don't we see African-American male anchor people? And Ray Willis and I have talked about this and others. Since Ray left, I don't think we -- in terms of males -- we don't see black anchor people.

So why don't we do something about it?

Well, that's the thing. I think the community has to be concerned about it. And if the community is quiet about that sort of thing, passive, nothing will change.

This gentleman said, "You know, we just can't find that person." He said, "What happens" -- and Channel 8 mostly said the same thing -- "If there is a qualified black anchor person out there, the market is so much in demand for this type of individual that a small market like Las Vegas just

could not compete with the bigger markets. They would grab this person in a heartbeat and take them away to Miami or Los Angeles to bigger markets because this is still considered a small market." Las Vegas is maybe the 48th largest market. So number six, San Francisco, would grab that person. So these people are in demand I'm told.

I said, "Well, why can't you just train somebody? There are educated people coming out of college every year. I'm sure they wouldn't mind being in Las Vegas and get their training here. You could bring them up through the ranks like me." They didn't have to start where I started because there are schools of journalism that recruit those people and make them their own. But I didn't get a correct answer on that. They just sort of slid over that. "Yes, you know, well, we have other blacks here in the marketing department or doing other things. We have our quota of African-Americans working behind the scenes. And we have female reporters." I said, "Well, that's true." And, yes, we're so proud to have this person. I said, "What about the black male, though? What's the story?"

But, you know, when I raised that question at this meeting, no one really followed up that much on it. But one guy from Nevada State College, he said, "Boy, that's just great. I want you to come and speak to my class." And I spoke to his class and they seemed impressed. He said, "Well, I want you back again when we have a larger audience." But the community is not that concerned about it. And I wish they were concerned. They could really make a difference if they spoke out.

Listening to you talk about working with men, men working together, there seems to be something here, something beyond race, something beyond -- it just seems that men work well together. You have a disagreement. You get over it. You go on. How do you train young men in that kind of behavior?

As opposed to if you have a disagreement, get out and shoot somebody? A lot of that, of course, the obvious answer is the home training that these young men should be getting. That's really the key. I know that there are outside influences. But the biggest thing is what they get at home. That's going to make quite a difference.

I remember, even though my father passed away when I was young, some of the teachings that he had about respect for your elders and respect for yourself, I guess birds of a feather flock together and this kind of thing. If you see someone who has a negative influence, you stay away

from that individual, establish your own identity, be proud of yourself and who you are and not to embarrass your family. That was so important. But young people today, to try to -- that peer pressure that they seem to be under and they cave into; it's going to have to be something that takes place in the home.

And, also, when I was growing up, we talked about church and the influence that the church has and sending your kids to church, have them go to church and be involved. I think the spiritual aspect really plays a part. But it's very difficult to see how you can change them now.

So tell me about the Convention Authority and what that was like, what that work was like and what it entailed.

Well, I found out that it required that we do a lot of travel, one, in promoting Las Vegas. I came in with the title tourism-marketing manager. I was dealing a lot with travel agents at the time. It required us to go on the road to the top cities that send people to Las Vegas. We would check with the airlines and find out their top markets for Las Vegas. They gave us the top 20 cities; Dallas, Houston, all of Milwaukee and all those people. So my job was to go in and throw a lot of cocktail parties in the evenings -- the Convention Authority would pay for this -- at one of the top hotels.

Parties for whom?

For travel agents because travel agents at the time had a significant influence on vacation destinations for the general consumer. I think a lot of people use travel agents. Where do we go? So our message was to travel agents around the country, the top-producing travel agents. They have so many choices, Mexico and Hawaii and all of those places. We wanted to get the Las Vegas story out, so we would wine and dine these people, treat them to a nice reception at a top hotel in their city. We went to them. We would usually be accompanied by the hotel salespeople. So the Convention Authority is picking up the tab. We show a nice video on Las Vegas and all the things to do and see here.

So is that still done today?

That's done to a large extent today, yes. They're doing a lot more, but that's still important today even though a lot of people are going on line and booking their flights and all of this and travel agents don't have the influence that they once had. But still presentations are being made.

So what was that like? How did you feel about this kind of work, not in front of the camera anymore?

Well, it was different because one might assume that if you were on the air that you'd feel comfortable talking to a live audience, but that's a whole different ball game, standing there. And I had always been somewhat of a shy person. That's why I couldn't fathom just being in television and being on the air and having all these thousands of people looking at me. I was certainly nervous for a time. But now you have a live audience. You've got to stand there.

But at first I went out. There was no training for this particular thing. Nobody trains you at these jobs it seems. So it's mostly on-the-job training. So what I would do is I would take a tape recorder and I'd go out with some of the more experienced people and I would see what they covered in their presentation. And I would take that home and write it out on cards and I would practice it so when it became my time to do this -- and that came rather quickly. After a time or two, okay, you're on. You do this. So I was sort of under the gun, so to speak, because now you have all of these hotel people going with you. If you do anything wrong, if you mess up, the word's going to get back to the office in a hurry. God, it was terrible. He made us look bad.

So thanks to my practicing and all of that and my broadcast delivery and all, things went over pretty well compared to someone who didn't have my background, my training. So I think one of the guys I traveled with, he was very, very -- well, his background was different. Let's say he used to drive a boat or something at Lake Mead for people, tourists. And he was very unpolished. So he was out giving presentations. When it came my time, there was quite a difference between our delivery and everything. So people would be quite complimentary. After a while, they said, "Roosevelt gives the best presentations of anybody at the Convention Authority." And I would throw in my personality once I learned to relax a little, adlibbing and all of that. So it went over very well.

Well, this sounds like a fun job.

Well, it was. The thing about it after a while, though, was that it was an awful lot of travel. I guess over half the year I was on the road. I had gotten married and had a new son here and all. So I was away from home quite a bit. It was mostly just two people that were doing all this traveling. We had a small staff. The two of us would often travel together and we would have to

take all these brochures with us. So we're packing stuff. We weren't allowed at that time to hire skycaps to do a lot of the heavy lifting. So we'd take the boxes and put them into the rented car and this kind of thing. So it became not glamorous, as it would appear. We set up displays and we had these big, heavy metal displays that you had to set up in these trade shows and tear down and take out. But the travel was so brutal.

So I did that for about six and a half years. I said, you know, I am getting so tired. And my wife would sometime complain to me, "Well, Daddy's got to go again. He's leaving us." So I said, oh, my God. I thought about quitting, so I talked to Channel 3 about an advertising job that they had. The guy was going to offer me the job. He said, "It's so different. If you want it, but be sure because that seems like a nice job, a lot of benefits and all this." So I finally talked to my wife about it. And she said, "It really is a good job and it's a lot of security and it takes an act of God to get you fired from this job. You really have to mess up. So don't worry about us. We'll be fine." So that's it.

But I was able to finally move from the convention -- I mean the tourism side. I was communications manager for about a year and a half and I was a spokesperson for the Convention Authority. At the time they didn't want to hire anybody full time to do that. And this was during the big energy crisis that they had. And Atlantic City was sort of coming on line and they were getting a lot of -- Vegas was getting negative publicity. So they needed someone to get the good news out about Vegas. They saw my background and said, "Let's have him do tourism and write stories about Vegas." So that's how I transitioned from the one side to the other. And I eventually wanted to get into the convention side where I could measure what I do by how many conventions we'd get to come in.

Now, that sounds interesting, the convention side. How does that work? Tell me about the business of bringing a convention to Las Vegas.

Well, at the time what happened was that the executive director of the Convention Authority, a fellow named Frank Sane, who once headed the Chicago Convention Visitors Bureau, had hired an African-American guy and put him in charge of most of the African-American market in Chicago. He saw that this was a benefit to Chicago to have someone concentrate on this market, so his thinking was that we could put Roosevelt over here and have him work in this field bringing

black groups.

Well, there was some resistance actually to having me come from the tourism side to the convention side. A fellow over there felt that you had to be a certain type of individual, have certain experience working in hotels and with the conventions. So he didn't want me over there. But the executive director said, you know...So they had sort of a tug-of-war. And there were all kinds of politics with board members to sort of keep me from coming over.

But, anyway, he said, "Well, if Roosevelt comes over here and it looks like I'm going to lose this battle, then he has to learn how to do everything. I'm just not going to have him concentrate on just a black market."

Okay. This is good.

Yes. It was great for me. I was one of those unique individuals because across the country in various cities blacks worked just with black groups, but I had never worked with just black groups until maybe my last -- and it wasn't even black then -- when they created the diversity department at the Convention Authority, I worked there maybe six months and then I retired. But most of my career I worked with the majority groups, including blacks.

But, anyway, the difference is that you are selling the city for meetings and conventions. The convention center is not where our full energies were focused, on bringing people to fill the convention center. The primary responsibility was to still bring people to Las Vegas to utilize the hotel meeting and convention space because they all had some space, some bigger than others, but we wanted them to fill the hotels first and foremost because that's where we got the room taxes.

So I worked with all kinds of groups. The NAACP is one that we were trying to get amongst the black groups, but there were newer black groups. I also worked with like the National Electrical Contractors Association. I ended up at one time handling the COMDEX Convention -- that was one of my accounts -- and a group called IDEA and just a lot of majority groups. At one time I was in charge of the Midwest market for the Convention Authority in about 22 --

(End side 2, tape 2.)

You were talking about selling Las Vegas. And before we go on, is Las Vegas an easy place to sell?

It is certainly easier than Pontiac, Illinois or something, some of those smaller cities, yes. A lot of

groups want to come to Las Vegas. But I was surprised to find that there was some resistance to coming to a place like Las Vegas. A lot of people are surprised by that because they think, well, who wouldn't want to come here? Your job has to be easy. Everybody knows about Vegas and all of that. But by the same token, in terms of some of the conventions, maybe we were too much of a fun city. Some groups looked at us and said, you know, our people will not attend meetings if it's in Las Vegas. They're going to be at the gaming tables. They're going to be out all night. So we can't bring our people to a place like that.

So what is your response to that kind of a comment?

Well, we tell them, of course, when you're in a city that's 24 hours, no one is going to be able to stay in a casino 24 hours and gamble. So you've got the best of both worlds by having it here. It's a city that's going to attract more people than other places. If you're having it in Little Rock, Arkansas, your attendance is not going to be as high. We can prove that attendance in Las Vegas for conventions is -- you know, at the time we were saying 10 to 15 percent higher than you would find at any other destination.

Is that true?

It is true. It is true. And there are all kinds of testimonials out there. We have these groups talking about, boy, when we thought about going to Las Vegas at first we were apprehensive because we didn't think our people would go to meetings, but we found it was just the opposite. I mean they would come and maybe gamble for a little while, lose their money and they were looking for a place to go to get away from the casino. And still they wanted to be on their best behavior. They wanted to show their people that they really were in meetings in Vegas. And we had a great time.

And I think just the repeat business came here. We said 68 percent of our convention business is repeat business. So if people found that they didn't have the attendance at meetings that they expected, they would not continue to come back here if they were like that. So it speaks for itself.

Wonderful. Tell me about bringing something to Las Vegas like the furniture business.

Right now we have built this huge -- I guess it's going to be more than one building downtown. And we have now taken the furniture industry away from the rest of the country. How does Las Vegas do something like that?

Well, you know the thing is, is that still I think the bottom line, whether it's a furniture business or the sporting equipment -- I remember some show they used to call The Super Show that was always in Atlanta. And there were some shows that were always in Chicago. What happens is that you look at facilities for one. The idea is for shows like the furniture show to bring as many exhibitors as they can to make money. So they found that attendance in Vegas is higher. The facilities in Vegas are larger. The access to the city becomes easier to fly in from all over the world. You can get in and out of Vegas. So all of those things really appeal to convention decision makers. You've got the great shows and the attractions. People can do things. They can build in some cases a convention, bring the whole family. So that's how it sells.

Yeah, look at the MGM Grand, you've got all of that. You've got Mandalay Bay with all their great facilities. So all of that means you can bring more people. You can have a larger show and you can just do more.

And when the Convention Authority is bringing people in, you're bringing people in not just to the convention center but to everybody?

Right. Primarily to fill the hotels because that is what the Convention Authority was founded for, to be the focal point for meetings and conventions and to bring people to the city. So once you fill the hotel rooms, there's more revenue for the Convention Authority to continue to do its job. So you want those hotels filled first. The Convention Center is only there because the conventions are too large to be in hotels. If you can be accommodated in the hotel, that would cut down on the expense of bussing to the center and all of that. So that's why it makes sense that it meets in the hotel if at all possible. It's not competing against the hotels.

Okay. That's interesting.

Yeah, because they pay the room taxes to keep the Convention Authority going.

Tell me about the room taxes. How did that come about? How has it increased? Tell me about it.

Well, when the Convention Center was built back in 1955, there was legislation. The Nevada Legislature decided that they needed something like the convention center to promote the convention-tourism business. In that legislation they said that this facility would be funded by a room tax. Let the tourists and conventioners who come here pay for the center. So that's how the

taxes started. And I think it was called back in that time The Fair and Recreation Board. Some of the money from the room taxes would go toward recreation and other things. Chambers of Commerce would get a piece of the money and this kind of thing.

But, primarily, at the time it was like six percent room tax. It has probably gone up to at least nine percent. They keep raising that. Some of that money is now actually used for education, the Clark County School District, instead of going just to the Convention Authority and to these different entities. I think at one time \$12 million went to help the school district out. It was supposed to have been a one-time thing, but now that's built-in.

When we say a room tax, how much money are we talking about a year?

Ooh, that is a huge amount of money. I could get that figure for you. But it's in the millions, maybe 30, \$40 million or more. When you look at the 37 million people that came to Las Vegas last year -- it's probably 40 million or something like that now -- so 40 million visitors and a 9 percent room tax for each visitor. So the bulk of the Convention Authority money comes from room taxes.

So do you think the room rates in Las Vegas are comparable with the rest of the country?

I think it's still a good buy when you look at it overall. I think certainly the room rates have gone up. It's not like it used to be where they would practically give away the rooms to get people to come out. But now that everyone recognizes -- some of the corporations come in and they operate in San Francisco and New York and all. And they're saying we don't have to give away rooms now. People want to come here. Supply and demand. So we can get these kinds of rates.

But you still can get a deal in Vegas by coming midweek as opposed to weekend and at certain times of year. So people go on Internet and they get a cut rate. Travel wholesalers and all, they have blocks of rooms at these various hotels. So you go through them. So it's still a good buy. There are still people out there, however, who remember when rooms were inexpensive in Vegas so they can't get used to the 200-plus rates.

Now, as we talk about the business of running Las Vegas, at one time this city was run by families. Then Howard Hughes came along, they say, and he began to bring a corporate mentality into this city. Can you talk about what you have learned and what you have heard about the difference?

Well, I think back when the families -- and some people might even say the Mafia --

That's the family I meant.

-- that kind of family, too.

That's the family I meant.

Yeah, okay, that family, okay. Well, of course, back then the idea was to have people spend their money in the casinos. Who knows what happened with some of the profits from that? But the emphasis was on the casino business. So you brought in entertainment and all of that just to get people in the casinos. You weren't interested in charging a cover charge and that kind of thing. It's just to have people come from great distances to this little island in the desert, to get them here to gamble. And they would give them the free drinks and all of that.

So as the town evolved over the years, a record number of people started coming in and corporations decided there's a lot of money to be made in these cities. So we don't need to do the things that we once did. We can charge for these things now and people still will support it. So we'll start pouring a lot of money into these glamorous facilities and these theme properties and all that.

And then we have the international market out there. We bring in so many people from overseas. Japan is probably one of our top international markets and the UK and Seoul, South Korea. So there's more global marketing now. The Convention Authority, for example, has either representation or offices all over the world.

So they have learned to market this city in such a way that the supply -- the demand for the city has grown so much that there's no need to give this away anymore. And with all the fabulous restaurants that were in other cities like Commander's Palace, they're coming here. They want this location.

People tell me that it was better when the Mob ran the city. What is your comment to that?

Well, I think when they say "better," they're talking about it was less expensive and --

Less crime.

Yeah, less crime. You're right, because you didn't want anything to detract from the gambling. You wanted this to be considered a safe city. So if something was done incorrectly, it was not unheard of to take you out in the desert and whack you or whatever because they didn't want any

bad publicity coming to this city. With the corporations now, it's a whole different ball game and with the growth that has taken place.

When you look at Las Vegas from your vantage point -- and you've done a lot of things here -- where do you see the power now in this city? Who has the power? Is it government? The county? The city? The casino industry? Who holds the power?

Well, it seems that when you look at the mergers that have taken place, you know, the big conglomerates, the big corporations like the Kirk Kerkorian group, Steve Wynn, Bill Boyd with the Boyd Gaming properties, it seems that the corporations sort of hold the key to this city. They have a great deal of influence. Of course, the Sands Expo group with the Venetian people, with Sheldon Adelson and all those people...

What is your attitude about gambling now that it's spreading all over the country?

Well, certainly gambling is acceptable. It has really changed over the years. There were some cities that didn't want gambling and what came with it. They thought crime is going to increase. I guess morally speaking it's just the wrong thing to have in their cities. Our kids are exposed to that.

But there is so much money they found that gambling provides for a higher standard of life and helps fund education and so many other positive things come from gambling that they've decided they can't afford not to get involved in it. So I think at one time there were maybe only two states that didn't have some form of gaming.

I think it's Utah and Hawaii.

Yeah.

What do you see as the future of this city?

The future of this city? Well, you still see more and more expansion. Certainly, gaming is going to continue to be the lifeblood of this community. Obviously, people worry about the water situation that's happening here. There's a concern with the crime and all of that. But it seems that there's an unwillingness to have a moratorium on the growth that is taking place here. So I just see a continuation of this city getting more and more like L.A., I guess, in terms of the expansion. I don't see any stopping. I guess the long-range plan is just to continue out the Strip building hotels. Obviously, the high-rise buildings that you see going up now, people are moving into those in a

big way. So it certainly is a city that's going to continue to grow and be successful, I think.

My last question: When you look back over the years from 1959 to today, what are the major changes that you've seen?

The major changes since 19 -- I think I've seen African-Americans particularly, even though there hasn't been as much progress as we would like, I see African-Americans getting opportunities in this city that we've never had before. For African-Americans, there is more participation that we have, for one. I see in terms of African-Americans being involved in gaming. There are a few that are -- we have presidents at various hotels -- we have one president and we've had others who have held very impressive positions within the hotel industry, general managers. There's an African-American on the Gaming Control Board I believe at one time. So it seems that we are getting involved with the diversity programs that you see at the various properties to give African-Americans a chance to bid on contracts and all. So that's one of the huge changes out there.

Well, I really appreciate this. Now, as you sit here and think about what you have just talked about, are there other things that you would like to add before we turn the tape off?

Not that I can think of at the moment, but...

Okay. Well, I really appreciate this. Thank you so much.

Oh, you're welcome. My pleasure.

And one of the things that I would love to see happen, even though I pointed out that African-Americans are getting more involved in the gaming industry and benefiting job-wise, I think in terms of running their own businesses or having something to offer to take advantage of this lucrative industry that we have, there are just far too few African-Americans in a position to do that.

For example, I formed my consulting company after I left the Convention and Visitors Authority -- it's called The Toston Group -- mainly because when I was at the Authority, I would have African-Americans in particular that would ask: Are there black businesses out there that we can deal with when we come to town? Who do we go to for transportation? Is there a black bus company? Do we have black limos out there? How can we let our people get some of the profits of our conventions? Who do we deal with?

And I just don't think that -- other than maybe a few restaurants that are black-owned -- that we are really getting our share of this market. Even in the hotel sales departments, you can sort of count on one hand how many African-American salespeople that they have representing the various properties out here. They are missing. We still have a long way to go.

So I formed this company that is dealing with meeting planning and event planning, that kind of thing. I think there should be more exposure given to companies that maybe are like mine. And I thought because of my name recognition and all that I would offer them an alternative to dealing with the established destination management companies out there. So I think if African-Americans can do that and get the exposure that they need -- and there are probably things that should be listed in the Convention and Visitors Authority on their Web site in some way amongst the convention services that are provided. So we need to somehow take advantage of that.

We at one time had a black fellow who owned a bus company and he did very well. We had someone who had a limousine service. I know both these guys are millionaires a few times over. But that has seemed to have disappeared. We don't have those people anymore. If a black person wanted to start a business here and be successful, what should that business be?

What are some of the examples?

Well, I think we've sort of talked about how transportation certainly is something that people are going to always require. If we could get that back, for one. If someone could come up with theme parties, you know, destination management companies that could provide theme parties for conventions that come in. Sometimes they bring their spouses. And while you're in a convention, while one spouse is in a convention meeting, the other spouse is looking for something to do. The majority of companies around town have been making a very nice living by providing these extra things for the spouses to do, whether it's a trip to Hoover Dam or having some nice venue for dinner afterwards or whatever. So that would seem to be -- destination management, transportation -- what else do people really tie into when they come here? We talked about some of the fine restaurants and getting people to those restaurants. We're noted for our soul food restaurants. But maybe there could be other choices of foods. Shopping, entertainment -- and there's gaming and all that. But things that people want to take advantage of -- there's not a nice

African-American owned nightclub that I know about that will appeal to a cross section of people. If you could have a business where a black person owned this nice restaurant that could draw from the Strip and whatever, that would be successful, I think. But we're just not getting, so far as I'm concerned, our fair share of that market.

Are we positioned to get our fair share?

Well, I guess when you say "are we positioned," do we have those things in place? I think on a smaller scale, we have some of those things, but we don't know how to market ourselves. And because we're not getting enough business that we can enlarge our facilities, it's something done on a much smaller scale.

When I was at the Convention Authority, I used to come up with a list of African-American restaurants and things that people could go to if they wanted to get away from the Strip. And there were always some people who are asking what else is there to do that we can do with our people? And I used to present a list of black conventions that were coming in. I had a separate list that I provided. And every now and then I would get a call from someone who was really sharp like Allen Balloon Company -- I can't think of his last name -- but, anyway, a black-owned balloon company. And he would call me and ask me for that list of black conventions that are coming in. And he would use that list to send his material to if you need something. I don't think enough of that was done. I'm surprised more people didn't call. And I tried to get the word out, you know, to the new Town Tavern or to the Moulin Rouge at the time. And some people either didn't have the marketing budget or didn't feel like --

That's right.

But I think if there's some way of forming a relationship with someone at the Convention Authority, maybe the African-American woman that works out there who replaced me, try to get to know that person. So when conventions are about to come in and they're bringing them out to see the hotels, hopefully you can meet that person, the meeting planner, before they come in and show them what you've got.

Who is that person at the convention center that took your position?

Her name is Mya Lake Reyes. I know that her job responsibility is much different than mine was. But she still is the one person in terms of black conventions that they know about out there. She's

a member of the National Coalition of Black Meeting Planners, as I still am. I'm a member of that. So there are a number of -- they're working on NAACP, the Urban League. They're looking at them coming in. If you want to find out what conventions are booked, they give you a list of all the meetings and conventions, but you may not recognize them as being black. I don't think she has this list that I used to have just broken out into what black conventions there are amongst that big group. But if she's open to that, she would be one to try to form a relationship with and see what you can do, how you can get some of that business.

Well, I appreciate this information. This is a great interview. Thank you so much.

All right. Thank you.

(End side 1, tape 3.)