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An Interview with Byron Underhill

An Oral History Conducted by Joyce Moore

Oral History Research Center
The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project
University of Nevada Las Vegas
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Produced by:

The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries

Director and Editor: Claytee D. White

Interviewers and Project Assistants: Suzanne Becker, Nancy Hardy, Joyce Moore,
Andres Moses, Laura Plowman, Emily Powers, Dr. Dave Schwartz

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER OF UNLV
The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

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Byron Underhill
Signature of Narrator Date

1219 Strong
LAS VEGAS, NV

Address of narrator

Joyce Moore 11/20/03
Signature of interviewer Date

Library Special Collections
4505 Maryland Parkway, Box 457010, Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-7010
(702) 895-2222

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The manuscripts received editorial editing. These measures include the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project. Additional transcripts may be found under that series title.

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

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Byron Underhill

This is Joyce Marshall and it is March 20, 2002 and I am here in the home of Byron Underhill. I am going to be talking to him about his life in Las Vegas and we will start by asking him about his parents and how they ended up coming to Las Vegas.

Well, my dad and mother were in Morehouse, Missouri. He made wagon spokes back there. Then, he got a job with the Santa Fe Railroad. He moved to Needles [California] because the railroad came through there, but then a boiler glass exploded and put out one of his eyes and they fired him. That was something that happened quite often, I guess. Anyway, he went across the street and got a job with this fellow by the name of Stout who had Stout's Confectionary and he became the soda jerk. In time, the Coca Cola man came in with the fountain syrup and made mention to him that the franchise for bottled Coca Cola was available. It was available for the entire San Bernardino County of California as well as Mojave County in Arizona. Dad took on the franchise from Williams, Arizona to Barstow, California, and places in between like Oatman, Arizona. He started the Coca Cola plant in 1916 next to Stout's. As he progressed a bit and made a little money, he called Mother back in Morehouse. She came out and met him in Kingman [Arizona] and they were married in 1918 in the Kingman Hotel. It was owned by the Devine's. Andy Devine was their busboy. Then, in 1925, the franchise for the production of Coca Cola in bottles became available for the southern half the State of Nevada starting from Mina and Luning over to Pioche and south. There was not much population in that area, but it was a lot of territory and he had the whole thing. He sold the Needles plant in 1927 and moved to Las Vegas. The first plant was located at 125 North Main Street where the Las Vegas Club is now, across the street from Jim

Cashman's [Cadillac]. Next to that was the Troy Laundry on one side and the Morris' Battery Shop on the other.

Now, the franchise was the syrup? Did he sell the syrup and the gas?

No, he sold Coca Cola in bottles. He moved the machinery over from Needles, which was not much of a machine. Crown Cork loaned him the machine to start with. Crown Cork and Seal supplied crowns, which were used to cap beer bottles filled with Coca Cola.

So, he actually bottled it?

Yes. Actually, that actual machine was out in the Coca Cola Bottle display on the Strip as well as the 1934 picture of the new bottling plant at 424 North Main Street. In the Strip display the caption stated that it was a typical Coca Cola plant in 1922, but those trucks belie the fact because they are 1934's. That picture was taken where the Main Street Station is now. I'm standing next to the truck in front of the door. In 1929, dad got the first license in town for beer and all of those trucks that he had were at Becker Brewery and loaded with beer and the instant that they announced that it was legal, they were rolling. He had the first beer in Las Vegas. Then he took on a line of liquor with Underhill Brothers Beers, Wines and Liquors. He and his brother ran that until 1938 when they split up. In 1935 they built a four-lane bowling alley. The two of them built that bowling alley where the Golden Nugget is now. It was four lanes. Anyway, they had an argument and the two of them split and Uncle Clarence took over the bowling alley and my dad took over the bottling plant. It stayed that way.

Where were you born?

I was born in Needles [Nevada] in 1919. I think that dad was always mad at me because it ruined his first years of marriage.

Do you have sisters and brothers?

I had one brother. He had a boating accident in 1965 out on Lake Mojave and was killed. Nelson Landing. That is a very historic spot that dates back to the Indians who mined gold before 1492.

What do you remember about Las Vegas in those early days?

When we moved to Las Vegas, we had a little place on the corner of H Street and Wilson, which is where the freeway crosses Bonanza now. Then we moved up to the corner of A Street and Wilson. I don't know what year it was. It had to be about 1928 or 1929 because it was a bigger house than what we had to start with. I was looking through dad's books the other day before we put it out in the Hobbit hole [the name that the family gives to their storage facility]. My son has a Hobbit hole and he's got all the records in there. So, if you're looking for pictures and stuff, we have to talk to him. He's been putting them away.

Bozarth's store was on the corner on the opposite side of the street from us. Francis Bozarth and Bob Pearson lived in a little house right next to the railroad tracks on A Street and the three of us would take our bikes and our 22's and go out and travel around hunting in the swamp which started where Rancho is now and extended over to the round house where the Ice House used to be, then north along the railroad tracks and back to Bonanza. It was full of quail, rabbits, ducks and bullfrogs. In 1927, Mr. Lorenzi put in the largest artesian well, I think, in the world at the time. He built that swimming pool around it. I don't know whether it still exists or not. The swimming pool had that

big rock island in the middle, which was the well. It used to shoot a stream of water up 30 or 40 feet in the air. Then the water ran down and formed the Twin Lakes. He planted bass in them along with bullfrogs and pan fish. He put a fence down in the water to keep the fish in, but the bullfrogs went around it and they still exist down there below the Silver Bowl. Once in a while, they even make it down to the Lake Mead area in the Vegas Wash where they can be heard some evenings.

It was a good place to grow up. Good place for a boy, for sure.

In 1935, I got my drivers license and they were building Hoover Dam. I might mention that behind our house on A Street there was a little house facing the street right behind it. Buck Blaine, who was 'high-scaling' on Hoover Dam, lived there during the construction. He later became president of the Golden Nugget. He was one of my *Las Vegas Age* [newspaper] customers.

As a kid, you had a job delivering papers?

I delivered papers for Pop Squires at the *Las Vegas Age*. It didn't last very long, just in the summer because mother and dad couldn't get up that early to go out and get the papers before school.

Then, did you go to work for your dad in the plant?

I did. I went to work for him in 1934 when he built the plant at 424 North Main Street. (Points to picture) The picture was taken the day the plant opened and dad had a big barbeque out front. After that, I used to take my shotgun across the street, the Vegas Creek came down to the railroad off the swamp and the downtown camp was on the corner and I'd sit there and shoot a couple of ducks and take them home for supper. Guess what it is now? The California Club. Dad managed to get a 100 year lease on that

piece of property from the railroad and since he had beer, wine and liquor, they put the spur right in behind the plant for carload delivery. He got a 100-year lease at \$400.00 a year and that included the taxes. The railroad gave us the property about 1950 or 1951 because the taxes were so high that they couldn't afford to keep it.

Where did the plant go from there?

Coca Cola Enterprises bought it in the early 1980s from Beatrice Foods who bought it from Coca Cola, Los Angeles. When my brother was killed in 1965, my father put the plant up for sale and sold it to the Coca Cola Bottling Company of Los Angeles. I stayed with them until 1980 and then I quit. Not long after that, the Main Street Station took over that property. They moved down on Mojave and became a warehouse. So far as I know, it's still a warehouse. I heard they were going to put a cannery there, but I don't know. I disassociated myself with them in 1980.

That was your main job?

Yes, for 50 years. I was production manager from 1934. I mixed the syrups and ran the equipment. When I came back from the war in 1945, my dad had bought the territory up around Ely and we built a plant in Ely, which I managed, and I learned how to run a Coca Cola plant. At that time, I didn't have much experience and my dad was always unhappy with everything I did, but nevertheless we tried.

Oh, that's just parents.

Then in 1950, but to go back a little bit, when Anna and I were married in 1943 my father formed a partnership with my brother and me, along with him and my mother as the Desert Coca Cola Bottling Company. So, when we came home from the service, my brother went in with my dad as a salesman and I became production manager for the

plants up north. We had a plant in Caliente, a plant in Ely and a plant in Tonopah. They were just little ones. I ran them from Ely. In 1950, I got a desperate call from dad. He said that he needed me down here immediately and I mean now. So, when I arrived the machinery was falling apart and he couldn't find any decent help to run the bottling plant. It was giving him all kinds of trouble and I had to tackle it. It took me about a year to get everything running smoothly again because I had to hand build bearings and parts and put them into the machinery. At the same time, the IRS came back on my dad and said because of the fact that my brother and I were not contributing to the business from 1943 through 1945, that the partnership was illegal for tax purposes. They started giving him all kinds of penalties. Dad fought it until 1958 and finally he had to give up. He never did tell me how he settled. Every time it came up before the court there in San Francisco, they'd get another postponement. Anyway, we got the plant running and it stayed there until the Main Street Station came along. We moved, in 1931, to the corner of Washington and the Boulevard [Las Vegas Boulevard] where the old original Stewart Ranch was. Mina [Stewart] and her daughter Helen were living in the main house and they had a little house next to it on the corner where Washington is now. She had some beautiful black fig trees in the front. I used to get ten-cents a lug to gather the figs for her. Across the street on the East side was the Wittwer Dairy. My brother and I milked cows for them by hand to get money for our Model T Ford roadster. They had quite a ranch then. There were big meadows below there with cattle on it and lots of walnut trees. The city sewer plant was on 15th Street and extended to below where Cashman Field is now and it discharged into a big meadow and drainage where it drained into the Vegas Wash. I killed my first wild goose where Cashman Field is now. The pig farm

was where Cashman Field is now. All over the hillside between our house and the Vegas Creek down below there was all kinds of surface water that made little ponds all the way down the side of the hill on both sides of the creek. Millions of bullfrogs and pollywogs were in those ponds and they laid thousands and thousands of eggs.

Did you eat them, the frogs?

I used to when I was a kid. I went down there on Friday night with my gunnysack and a flashlight dressed in my bathing suit to catch six bullfrogs. I sold three of them to Mr. Pappas who had the White Spot Café on 1st Street for twenty-five cents each. That was his weekend dinner and the others, my dad got for his dinner. That was my spending money, seventy-five cents. Then I went to the [*Las Vegas*] *Review Journal* [newspaper] and became their paperboy. Actually, I got my papers two for a nickel and sold them for a nickel a piece and my first territory was 1st and 2nd Streets, which included Block 16 [Red Light District].

It was?

Yes, it was. I knew all the girls down there and after we got the coke plant moved to 424 North Main and I grew up and went to work there, we had a cream soda drink that was the same color as whiskey and we sold them a lot of that soft drink, which the girls drank. When the guys bought the drink, they got the price of a whiskey drink for both.

Oh, because the girls didn't drink?

Correct. A few of those women married into the City of Las Vegas and became citizens of Las Vegas. It was not classed as a bad profession [prostitution] at that time. It wasn't until we got a bunch of do-gooders and the Army and politicians in here that all of it was put to a stop.

Did you go in the service first or did you get married first?

I went into the Army first. I joined in 1940 after I had an argument with my dad. We were unloading beer by hand out of the cars and I decided I was going to build myself a conveyor belt.

That was smart.

So, I got two-by-fours and I bought these rollers that screwed on to it and I made side boards and fixed it up and I was working on it and dad came out and started criticizing it and I said, "Dad, if you don't like it, you can do it yourself." I just went over and joined the army. I went to McCord Field, Washington, as a Private. I joined a B-18 Bomber Squadron. We were told that we had to read all of the tech orders that were up on the wall and become familiar with them. Well, I'd already been to Curtis Wright Technical Institute at the Grand Central Airport in Glendale, in California in 1937 for school and I was a fairly good mechanic. When we had time, we read those tech orders and I had more fun because those old Sergeants that had been in there for years and years, I'd ask them questions about the engine and they had no more idea than a man in the moon what the different parts were and how they were put together. First thing that they did was to put me onto a B-18 and one day I was in the tail section of the plane to look around and they had just written this airplane up as completed on inspection. I crawled up into the tail service and discovered that one of the rudder cables only had one strand holding it. The rest of it was all broken. I went back out and tapped the Lieutenant on the shoulder and said, sir, this ship is not ready for flying and he asked what I meant. I took him up there and showed him and I made Corporal right there and then.

That was a good thing. How long were you in the service?

I joined in 1940 and got out in January 1946. After I went into the service they sent me to aircraft mechanic school and when I came back they had moved to Pendleton, Oregon, and I got there about November 1st of 1941 and they had me walking guard duty the night that they bombed Pearl Harbor. My squadron got the first submarine in WWII from Pendleton on the coast of the Columbia River. Then about a week after that we got our orders, the entire squadron was moved. I was promoted to crew chief and we were moved to South Carolina. Colonel [James H.] Doolittle came in and joined us. They had some modifications they wanted to do on the B-25's and I was the only person on the squadron that could weld stainless steel. I built the shields that they put on the exhaust tanks because they didn't want the blue flame off the engines to show. Of course, that was for a night mission. I built all the shields for all the B-25's that made that Doolittle Tokyo Raid. Then they shipped me to Meridian, Mississippi, and because I had a pilot's license at that time, I became an instrument trainer. I earned my pilot's license in 1938. I think I was the last person to ever get a flight off of Rockwell Field and a license. Do you know where Rockwell Field is? I had my airplane parked there. I bought myself an airplane in 1938, a little J2 Cub, 36 horsepower and it sat out there all the time and nobody bothered it. Bud Barrett, who was the Highway Commissioner, had his airplane out there and Ray Lundy had his airplane out there. We had three airplanes parked there. Anyway, one day I was out there flying around with it and I had already passed the ground school. They had what you call a Civilian Pilot's Training Program and there were 11 of us that signed up for it and only 10 passed the written and I was one of the 10. They had to have 10 in order to have the course, so I went through the course. I was out there flying one day and I had my hound dog with me and my shotgun and flew up to

Blue Diamond and landed in a wash up there and shot some quail and rabbits and returned to the field. Because that's 6,000 feet up there, I was pretty high when I came over the field and I put the airplane in a spin and brought it down about 2500 feet, leveled it out and spun it the other way down to about 2,000 feet above the ground and leveled out and came around and set it down and taxied up to the two holes I had dug in the ground to drop the wheels in. Then, I noticed a car was sitting there. As I got out this gentleman came up to me and said, "Are you Byron Underhill?" I told him I was and he says, "I'm Inspector Doakes from the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] and you can't fly your dog like that." I said that I'd been doing that for a year. Then he asked me if I could take him for a ride and I said that I didn't mind and so I reached over and lifted out my shotgun and the quail and he said, "Well, I'll be damned." I flew him around for a ride and he said that he knew that I could fly and he just sat down and wrote out my pilot's license.

Well, that was easy.

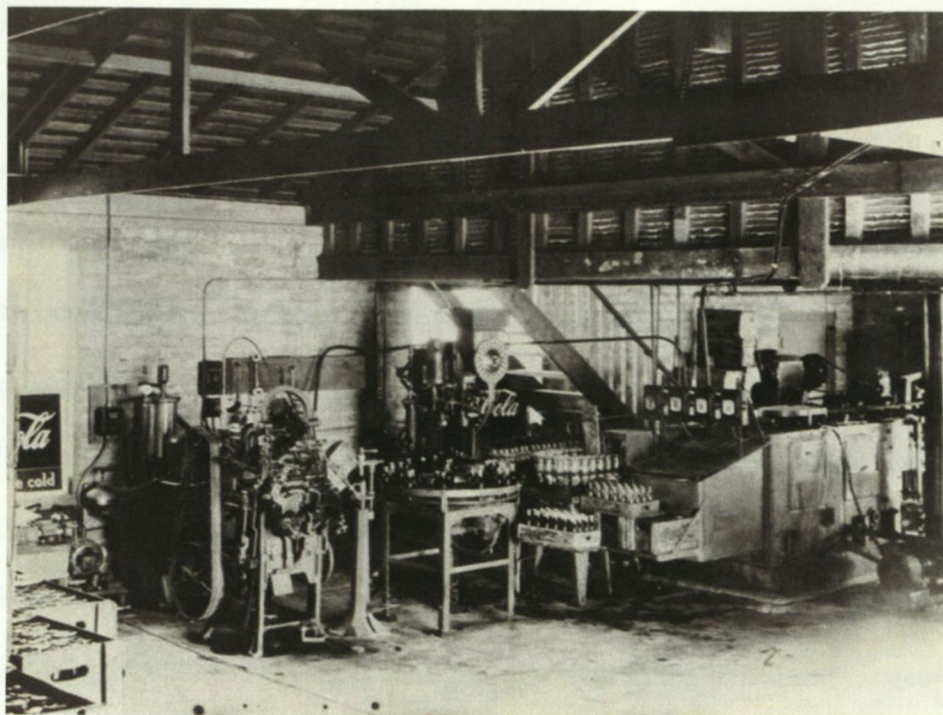
Anyway, I went into the service in 1940. I graduated from Aircraft Mechanic School in November of 1941 and reported to Pendleton, Oregon, on December 1st to the 301st Bombardment Squadron. Our squadron sank the first submarine of WWII on December 8th at the mouth of the Columbia River. The squadron was ordered to the east coast where Col. Doolittle joined the squadron. This is where the Tokyo Raiders were trained. There they split up the squadron and I went to Meridian, Mississippi. They had an observation squadron there and they also had a Link Trainer¹ with nobody to operate it. Since I had a pilot's license, they figured that I could run the Link Trainer and teach

¹ The RAF Link Trainer was used to instruct pilots in blind flying. It has a small cabin, large enough for one person to sit in, that is used to simulate blind flying.

instrument flying. I knew about as much about instrument flying as probably you do. . . .
Actually, it was really quite simple. The trainer, itself, had the basic aircraft instruments in it and you presented, to the pilot inside, a radio signal with an A & N. If the signal was solid, you were on course and if you were on the A side, you were on one side and if you were on the N side you were on the other side and you had to correct your course to get to solid sound. That's what I was doing when the commander of the observation squadron came in and I asked him about getting to be a pilot. I was promoted to Sergeant and he put me in for pilot and I transferred to the outfit and had just gotten to flying when an order came through that Sergeant B.D. Underhill will report to Big Springs, Texas, for glider pilot training. So, I went to Big Springs, Texas and went through the basic glider program. From Big Springs, we went to Lubbock, Texas; down to some little place there and out of Albuquerque and finally I wound up all the way back at George Air Force Base down near Victorville, California. That's where I received my glider pilot rating. Right after I got that, they shipped me to Louisville, Kentucky.

Is that where you met your wife?

Yes. I was going out to the field on my motorcycle when a glider pilot came by and said, By, I got a double date here. Would you like to come along? So, I said okay and parked my cycle and took off. That night, August 14, 1943, was when I met Pauline. That was Anna's sister. Anna was with the other person. We took the River Queen Paddle Wheeler up the Ohio River and then came back and had dinner at one of the hotels. He pulled me aside and said he wasn't getting anywhere with the lady and told me he'd see me later. So, he left me with both of them. Pauline said she saw I was taken by her sister



The first Coca Cola plant in Nevada, located on 125 North Main Street.



Byron Underhill in aircraft mechanic school.

you're not fixing to get married, then you better not see me again. It turned out that they lived in Glasgow, Kentucky. That's 110 miles from Louisville and they had come in to sell some pictures that Pauline had painted. So, I made a date with her for two weeks from then. When I got the weekend off, I took my motorcycle and rode to Glasgow where we decided we were going to go through the Mammoth Caves. We took the all-day tour through the Mammoth Cave. That was 20 miles away and I made it in 30 minutes on my motorcycle. When we came out of the Cave, I didn't have any more money, so she took me up and fixed me some fried chicken. I made the date for two weeks later when I could get off again. I had to go back to the base. Two weeks later I drove to Glasgow in a Ford "60" that I bought. We were sitting in it and I was getting ready to head back to the base and I had a set of miniature pilot wings that I gave her and said, now, I want you to know that this means something. I have never handed these out to anybody before. She said, like getting married or something? I said, you know, that's a good idea. What do you think? She said, I like it, so, on October 3, 1943, we were married. We had just two dates.

Well, it worked.

Yes, it did, 47 years.

That's great. So, you were stationed there in Kentucky and you got married. Was she then able to travel with you?

I was transferred to Camp McCall in South Carolina. They gave me two weeks travel time. In the mean time, Mother and Dad came back. Dad had to get back to business and Mother stayed with us. So, we drove to Las Vegas and my wife stayed with my mom and dad for the duration.

What kind of car did you buy?

A little Ford "60." That was sort of a little Ford at that time. My wife stayed with them in their home at 332 South 6th Street. Anyway, to go back in time, dad bought the old Harley Harmon house at 332 South 6th Street, which had 11 rooms to it. That's where my brother and I were living until we went into the service. Anna lived with my parents while I was overseas. She was pregnant after the first month. I was overseas in Europe when she had our daughter. That's the one who inspired the Lions [Lions Club project for burn victims mentioned later on in interview]. Her clothes caught fire in 1951 and we lost her. The first TV had come out and they had a magician in there playing with the fire, running his hand through the flame. She tried to duplicate it with one match. When it burned down to her fingers, she wrapped it in her dress instead of throwing it down and stepping on it. Those things happen and you can't change them.

So, Anna was here and you were over seas? How much longer did you stay in the service, how many more years?

I was stuck in it. I couldn't get out.

I was finally discharged in January of 1946.

Absolutely, because of the war.

I got out in January of 1946.

Then you came home?

Yes, and I went right directly to Ely to set up that Coca Cola plant.

Did the whole family live up there?

Just Anna and I and my family.

So, you had your daughter and who came next? I know you have a son.

I have two sons. Ed came along in 1948 and then we moved down here to Las Vegas in 1950. My daughter, Susie was born in 1950 and Gary came along in 1954. With the family growing, we bought this piece of property on Strong Street. We paid \$6,000.00 for the lot and borrowed \$17,000.00 to build this house.

Now you have three children?

Yes, I have the three children.

That's wonderful. So, you've been here. This has been it. This is your family home.

Yes, when we built this house in 1954 it was on the edge of town. You could see the mountains. There was almost no development to the west. Mother and dad had the place on Ashby, which was a ranch style home at that time with horses and animals. The rest of the prairie out there was deserted.

Now, I know that you are part of the Lio's Club. Tell me how that evolved. How did you get involved with them?

I joined the Ely Lions Club in 1946. I transferred to Las Vegas in 1950 to the Downtown Club. The '49er Lions Club was formed in 1951 and I became a charter member of that club. They kept wanting me to be the president and go through the responsibility of it and I said I couldn't do so because I was in such pain with this back deal. Well, in '64, they finally talked me into going ahead. The policy of the club was that we had to present two projects during our tenure in office. The goals we set were part of the presidency. I suggested to them that we take on the project of putting up the little shacks in the Spring Mountain hills for the Boy Scouts when they had the Scout camp up there. It was located above Indian Springs. We put some of our money into those tent houses. Then, I came up with a thought that why don't we start a burn center. I let the club think

about it and we had Dr. Batdorf [John] and Dr. Cammackm [Kirk] both in the club. They thought it was a really great idea, so the club accepted it as a proposed project. Then, I went to the inter-club council, which I had helped to form. It consisted of the presidents of each club in town. The council met once a month. I proposed the burn center to them and they took it back to their clubs. They all thought it was a great idea, so we joined together and started the burn center [at the University Medical Center of Southern Nevada]. We got the first beds for it in 1968. We had two beds that were \$1500.00 each and we were on our way.

How did you go about raising money for a project like that?

Well, we did a lot of different things. My club, the 49ers, had a fundraiser once a year. We had a barbeque. We had it in different places, but most of them, in the later years, were up at Jerry Berry's place on West Oakey. We had our tickets at \$10.00 each. There were two of us that always had a contest for the most sales. Bruce Morris that has the souvenir shop across from the Sahara. That whole center was his and he and I competed as to who sold the most tickets. Both of us sold about 500 tickets apiece and we put the barbeque on. We would raise somewhere between \$6,000.00 and \$10,000.00 each year on it.

Did you have other clubs that were doing like projects?

Yes. All the clubs had projects.

I just transcribed an interview from a Rotarian and I think he mentioned something about it. So, the Rotary Club must have also been out there.

Once it got started, why, it became basically a community project, but it's still called the Lion's Burn [Care] Center.

Absolutely, you were the ones who initiated it.

And it is still dedicated to my daughter. There is a plaque on the wall.

From the time you initiated it until you got it built, how long did it take?

The first beds were in 1968.

So, four years? That's a very short time to accomplish that.

Well, Dr. Cammack and Dr. Batdorf did a real good job supporting us also.

What other kinds of projects did you do in the Lion's Club?

We had broom sales. We had light bulb sales. We had the white cane sales and right now one of our projects is that we are running some of the concessions at the Thomas and Mack Center. They bring in about, on some of those events, \$300.00 to \$400.00 a night. So, that builds up our funds. We have other projects besides the Burn Center. The main project of the Lion's nationally is sight conservation. That program goes on continually. The children are referred to the Lion's Club by the school nurses. They are examined and checked for their ability to pay. If they are unable to pay, they are referred to a qualified volunteer eye specialist and fitted with proper glasses. We've had some people come in and just because Susie over there got a pair of glasses, I want a pair too. You know how that goes.

I have a daughter who has been diabetic since she was six and when she had her first child, she got proliferative retinopathy, which is an eye disease that makes you go blind.

If it were not for the Lion's club, she would not have sight today. So, I will forever be thankful to the Lion's Club. At the time, she had to go to San Francisco for the laser.

I am a life member of that organization and we continue funding every year for each patient that we send to the eye foundation.

It's a wonderful project and I am very thankful to them. Let's back up a little bit and talk about school. You went to school here?

Yes. The first school I went to was the Las Vegas Grammar School, which was a two-story building where the Federal Building is now. They had a schoolteacher named Mr. Victor and I'll never forget him. The Tisdale's were running the sewer plant at that time and his son Jack Tisdale and I were in the same room at the time. Mr. Victor was writing on the blackboard and I won't say who, but a spit wad hit the blackboard right under his chalk and he kept trying to find out who it was and he knew it had to be Jack or me. He bumped our heads together for I don't remember how long trying to get somebody to talk, but nobody would talk. Matt Kelley was the janitor at that time and he had a band that he taught down in the boiler room. I got interested in going into that and I played the bass horn. I played the bass horn all the way up until I went into the service. I was terribly unhappy when I found out that Mr. Beam, who had Beam Lumber Company there next store to the Coke Plant, told me in about 1935 that he had a bass horn that he'd sell me. I went over and bought it and paid \$40.00 for it and I played that all the way through high school. I discovered that it belonged to someone who played in the Tonopah Fireman's Band and it was solid silver from the mother lode. After I was through playing, I donated it to the Las Vegas High School music department. It disappeared. We formed the Las Vegas City Band. Then, there was the Elks' Helderado Band that we kind of teamed up with and we led the first Helderado. In fact, we had one band that was also the Eagle's Band. Whenever they went to Carson City for a party or a convention, we went as part of that band. Anyway, it was all volunteer. Allie Lawson was one of the trumpeters and Jack Hanson of Hanson's Apparel was another trumpeter.

Chic Fetcher who owned the Railroad Pass, at that time, was our drummer. I really don't remember who the other people were. There was one gal who lives out in Boulder City who played the french horn. Anyway, we were the Las Vegas City Band for many years. We used to go over to the bandstand and sit there in front of the railroad depot and give concerts on Sundays. Whenever that disappeared, we gave concerts on a bandstand where the parking lot to the courthouse is on 2nd Street until they tore that down.

So, you didn't get paid for that. You just did that for fun.

There was never any money involved.

You went to school on 5th Street and did you go all the way through high school there?

Well, I went to high school on 8th Street. We were living right in between. That's one reason that mom and dad bought the house where it was. I graduated from Las Vegas High and Maude Frazier and K. O. Knudson were the supervisors. I graduated in 1937 and from there I went back down to the Coke plant. I actually became a full production manager at that time because that's all there was, just one person for the job. I used to go down to A. M. Lewis to pick up 100 pounds of sugar and put it on my shoulder and carry it back down to the plant which was just a block and make up my syrup and fix the beverages.

Tell me a little more about Helderado. You said you marched in the first parade. That must have been a big thing for you.

There was a gentleman who had one arm that belonged to the Elks. When they formed the Elks Helderado organization, they wanted to have a band. Our band all volunteered, so we became the Elks' Helderado Band and we led the parade. We did that for a couple of years before it changed. At that time, I think the first Helderado band and group was

held down there at 6th and Fremont Streets where the old J. C. Penney's was. I got such a kick out of it. After we got through leading the parade, we were down there with our horns and there was a gentleman there with a clarinet, we called him Wee Willie and I can't remember anything else about him, and Jack with his bass drums and myself with my base horn. We went into the Elks compound which was there on that corner and we were standing there watching the girls on Block 16 shake their beaded skirts and one of the beads came off and hit Wee Willie in the eye. He had one horrible time for a few minutes.

The parades were very long then, also. I remember that the hotels used to have very lavish floats.

Yes, the later years because the Strip didn't exist until later. I have a tape in here of the parade. I don't know for sure which one it was. It had to be 1952 or 1953. I built a boat, a 20-foot boat and it was on a trailer and we put that in the parade. I'm trying to remember who it was. I think it was my brother's daughter that stood on top of the boat with a pair of reins like she was riding a horse.

After you and your wife came back here, did she work?

My wife was a homemaker all the time.

Did she belong to any clubs or organizations?

The only thing she really got involved in was volunteering with the Rainbow Ladies at the hospital. She participated with me in the Elks and in the Lions projects.

Did the Lions have an auxiliary like the Elks?

No. They do now, but they didn't at the time.

What schools did your children go to? Did they go to Las Vegas High School?

No. They went to Clark and Western High Schools. One son was born in 1948 and the daughter in 1950 and my youngest son in 1954.

I wanted to ask you a little bit about the Black community because where you lived was very close to what is now the Westside.

Really and truly, this part was not black. Bonanza was the separating point. Kermit Booker was the pastor over there in the 1960s and I was Red Rock District chairman of the boy scouts at that time. And the chairman had all the boy scouts west of the railroad tracks. Of course, I was still production manager of the Coca Cola plant and the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] came over and talked to me one day about the fact that I had so many employees over here and you only have one person of color and we want equal treatment. I said, well, you picked the appropriate time to come over. I told them that I was the district chairman of the Boy Scouts and Kermit Booker and I have been trying to organize some Boy Scout troupes on the Westside and every time I send a truck over there, I have to put a guard on it because your kids go out and steal products off the trucks and even your grown-ups. I couldn't leave a truck unguarded over there or the merchandise gets stolen all the time. Now, I said, if you come up with some names of people who we can put on committees for Boy Scouts troops and they are successful at it, I'll see what I can do because that means that they want to be better people who are interested in the community. They said that they thought that was great. I had only one person apply. I put him on and a few months later, I caught him stealing and I had to fire him. So, that was the end of that.

Did you ever get Boy Scouts over there?

Yes, we had some troops over there, but they were all sponsored by different clubs here in town. They were the ones who had to be the committee members. There weren't any black people on them.

How about other minorities? Were there other minorities such as Chinese?

I don't remember any of them. I know they were here. I just didn't know them. There were some Chinese restaurants that I can remember a little bit of, but I don't remember their names. On the corner of 1st Street was Gene Ward's Grocery Store on one side and a drug store on the other side and next to that was the White Spot Café. There was a little club on the corner, the Las Vegas Club, and right next to it was Sears & Roebuck and there was an alley going in between them. I have a saw in my shop that I bought in 1936, a table saw, that I'm still using.

Isn't that something? Now, besides the Lions, was there any other organizations that you belonged to or did you pretty much concentrate on the one?

I am a life member of the Elks and I'm a 32nd degree in the Mason's, but basically, the Lions is the one that I have really supported.

They do some wonderful work.

The Elks and the Masons both have eye foundations for which I am life-members of. Of course, I don't do as much any more, but my main focus has always been the Lions. In 1954 or 1955, I became the representative from our club for building the Blind Center [Blind Center of Nevada]. We actually built the building where the fire station is now on 1st Street. I helped lay bricks on that and then the city came along and tore it down and moved them out to where they are now. The Lions helped to build that building and I was the representative from the Lions 49ers Club for many years to that Blind Center. I

was the go-between that carried the messages to the Lions Club about what they needed down there. I got the roof promoted on the building and I got the concrete work around the building and the drainage done and new doors on the building. This was all done by volunteer Lions.

I had a very good friend by the name of Mildred Mann who ran a ceramic program down there at the Blind Center. Did you know her?

Yes. I thought that was a good program. I don't know why they quit it.

Well, Mildred passed away and they couldn't find anybody to move in and do it. She dedicated her life to that work.

The funny part about it is that most of the people down there all have the 'gimmies.' I know that I get pretty discouraged with them, but I also get discouraged with the people in the community. I happened, after dad sold the plant, to become just an employee and I had to figure out some way to be back in the business. So, my wife and I bought a set of apartments by the Showboat Hotel and started out managing them. We built it up to 100 apartments. That's when I quit the Coca Cola business.

Where were the apartments?

The Clifford Arms Apartments are right on Clifford Street behind the Showboat Hotel and the Clarkdale Apartments are right across the street. Anyway, gentlemen here in town had those apartments and they didn't want to fool with them any more and put them up for sale and I bought them for \$10,000.00 down. They threw in two lots next door to them that backed up on the street behind them to the north. I bought them in 1968 and by 1975, I had it paid down to where I only owed about \$30,000.00. The Coca Cola Bottling Company of Los Angeles was taken over by Beatrice Food Company in a hostile

takeover, you know what I mean, and I had no choice because my stock was worth about \$22.00 a share at that time so I had to take cash for it on the first of December. I had huge capital gains to pay, so my wife and I decided to invest the money. About that time a set of apartments on Naples called the Casa Napoli Apartments came up for sale and I talked to a dealer and they said the Clarkdale's wanted my apartments and they offered \$250,000.00 for them. So, I made a trade so that the \$250,000.00 was paid into the Casa Napoli Apartments and that way I didn't have to come up with cash. That was fine and then I got the write-off for the entire year on that one particular deal. It was about January or February the Naples Arms Apartments down the street became available, so we bought those and then the Recess Apartments became available and we bought them. That gave me 100 apartments. I forgot, the Sherwood Apartments became available on Sherwood Street right off the parking lot of the Sahara Hotel and I bought those. Nowhere did I put up any money on them. With my stock, they just became collateral transactions. That way I had a set of apartments for each one of my family and one for myself. So, I put the kids in charge of one set of apartments each and I kept one set for myself. I did that until my wife died and we were able to form a limited partnership with the kids and gave each one 33 1/3% of the apartments.

(End of tape 1 side 2)

So, you still have the apartments?

I don't own them; the kids own them. We got lucky on the Recess Apartments, though. That was the little 15 unit one down the street on Naples. The airport made an offer on them. They made the partnership an offer of \$20,000 a unit for the 15 units and the kids

said, no, they would bring in better income than that and we think it ought to be more, so they turned it down. About two weeks later, one of the tenants went haywire and went around and kicked in all the doors on the apartments and set the building on fire. That pretty well damaged the building. I was talking to the kids and I said that was going to be a pain on you to try to make all the repairs on it. Let's see if the airport will stand by their offer. I called the airport and they stood by the offer. So, they bought them and the insurance company paid \$35,000 in damages to the building, so we had that on top of the sales price. You know, my mother and dad, back in 1945 wanted to move the bottling plant from where it was on Main Street. They bought that entire block bound by Oakey and Main and the [Las Vegas] Boulevard, except for the Denny's, which used to be the Roundup Drive-In. He did that in 1946 and paid \$4500.00 for it. He gave the city the street right-of-ways for Oakey if they would put in all the facilities, which they did.

Then he leased part of it to a gentleman by the name of Silverman in 1952 for 50 years at \$500.00 a month plus inflation with Silverman responsible for all expenses. He built the Market, White Cross Drugs, a service station and Smutzer's Garden Center were on the rest of the property. He set that up in a trust at the bank and that trust expired as of the first of this year. So, the children have that entire block of rentals coming in. My three children and my brother's child have the income and own that piece of property.

I'm interested in what life was like here. You were here in the 30's and there was no air conditioning.

Swamp coolers. We all had swamp coolers. I can remember my dad down in Needles in about 1925. They had two houses. Do you know when you go into Needles, where that wooden trellis underpass is on the railroad? O.k., when you turn in there, his were the

first two houses on the east side of the street. Mom used to take my brother and I down to the edge of the Colorado River and fix a bent pin for a fishhook and I used to catch catfish. Anyway, dad fixed up a frame over the kitchen window and then he covered the outside of it with burlap and put a pan of water on top and the burlap would carry the cool air down and that was called a 'desert cooler.' We had a fan in the window and that's where mother kept the butter and stuff for refrigeration.

I was wondering about food. You didn't have the facilities to keep a lot of fresh food.

No.

At that time, when you were growing up, were they still growing a lot of vegetables around here? Did they still have a lot of the farms?

When we first moved here in 1927, the Hefner's, where Rancho and Charleston meet there was the Hefner ranch. It extended all the way south past where Oakey is now. They used to grow all kinds of vegetables in there and the Tomiaysu's, they were Japanese, and they provided all types of fruits and vegetables from where Sunset Park area is now. Of course, during the war they took all the Tomiaysu's and put them in a concentration camp and made no allowances for them to take care of their land and they foreclosed on them and took the property away from them.

That was a very sad thing.

It was. They still didn't get properly paid and the son was in the service all of that time, too. To me, it's just as terrible as putting the income tax on me and my brother because we were in the service and not able to stay home and take care of the business. I think that is crazy. I resent every penny I have to pay them. I took a lump sum in 1984 from the Coca Cola business and I had left it in the hands of the Nevada First National Bank.

The Lambs had it, you know. That was in their trust department. They invested into that Lemon Realty bit for \$50,000 and I lost the whole thing because Lemon declared bankruptcy. They assured me that they had the first trust deeds all the time and I found out that they didn't have anything but a promise and it was terrible. I took it over myself and with my own investments I was able to survive.

Sometimes you are better off doing it yourself. You brought up something else I wanted to ask you about also. The Lamb's have really been an institution here, their whole family, for years and years. Were you familiar with them?

The only basic dealing I had with them is that one of the Lambs's had the syrup for Coca Cola and they used their leverage as much as they could with all the hotels and other outlets to keep our Coca Cola out of it. We had gotten a premix which meant putting the bottled Coca Cola into five gallon containers for under the bar usage. The Lamb's used every influence they could to keep us out.

Oh, because they had the fountain type syrup?

Yes. I joined the Clark County Search and Rescue with my airplane in 1970. My brother and I in 1960 bought an airplane together, a Cessna 180. I sold it three years ago. My hearing got to the point where the controllers were talking so fast and the traffic was so heavy, I couldn't keep up with it. If I'd been out in the boon docks someplace, well, I probably would still be flying. I moved my airplane from McCarran [International Airport] to North Las Vegas [Airport] and it brought back memories because when I went in to the service, I sold my first airplane to Bud Barrett in 1940. In 1941, he used it as the first trainer at North Las Vegas Airport. I moved out there with my airplane about 1970.

When my brother passed away, his wife gave me his share, so I had the airplane to myself.

Tell me more about the Search and Rescue. How did you get involved in that?

I had a couple of friends of mine who were in it and they said, Byron, you've got the right kind of airplane, why don't you join it? I made out the application and they invited me to come in. Where I got acquainted with them in the first place was through the production manager of the Coke plant. The Coke cans, in this hot weather, get so hot sometimes on the truck that they bulge out. So, we'd separate those and then sell them for \$1.00 a case or donate them to different organizations. They used to come in there regularly and I'd give them the Coke cans for their different parties and so on. One day, Mr. Rogge [probably Ray Rogge] came in and asked me if I'd be interested and I said, heck, yes. If there was an advantage to it, it was that I could write my airplane off because I didn't have any other way to write it off. By being in the air squadron of the Search and Rescue, all my gas and oil and traveling expenses and tie-downs were deductible.

Was this a county organization?

Yes. It was run by the county.

You went and looked for people who were lost or hurt?

Yes. In the length of time that I was with them, I only made two actual rescues. One was the kid's that got lost on Gold Butte near Lake Mead when they drove down into an area that was too steep for them to come back out of with a two-wheel drive. I located those kids. Then, we had a gentleman by the name of Dale Grade that went out on his motorcycle, up behind Nellis, up on Sheep Mountain Range and had an accident. He was

out there all by himself. He had taken some sandwiches and water with him, but when he didn't come back, his family put out a search on him. When he was thrown, he broke a leg and then tried to ride his bike out with one leg and fell again and was pinned under the motorcycle. He laid there for two days, but he did have a little bit of food and water. I was fortunate enough to locate him and call in the helicopter to bring him in. I received the Eagle Eye Award. In 1984, the sheriff had purchased the helicopters and they were doing their best to eliminate us, all the Search and Rescue. We had the Jeep posse and we all worked together. I had this leg that was giving me so much trouble and they said they wanted us to go out and do walking searches. I told them that I just couldn't walk and they let me go from the squadron. I didn't like that very much. I didn't get any backing from the Sheriff's Department over it and that made me feel kind of bad because Don Wellington was the Search and Rescue Director and he flew quite a bit with me and he said I was the only pilot in the whole bunch that he liked to fly with. He stood right there and didn't even put in a good word for me. They said they figured I was going to get out anyway because I didn't want to do the walking.

Yes, and you were a pilot, not an infantryman. *What was their purpose?*

That's what I told them. They had the helicopters then anyway and they took over.

They probably felt that the helicopters were more mobile. *They could build a landing strip.*

They could do a better job of searching because they could stop and look around and so on. No question about it, they were more practical. My last search was for the scenic airplane that went down off of Temple Bar. I was only four miles from it, flying in a snowstorm and looking when it was found. That's the only other search that I got close on.

So, you used your plane for the Search and Rescue and did you, also, just fly for fun?

I attended some of the Coca Cola conventions and things of that sort, my brother and I did. It was cheaper than flying on the airlines and a lot more convenient.

What kind of plane did you say it was?

A Cessna 180.

I'm assuming that it had one propeller. As you can tell, I don't know a lot about planes.

Well, you know, I have a phobia about these commercial airplanes because they are all operated by hydraulic systems and when I get in them and I watch all those flaps extending out on those wings and I see all of those hoses under there and being mechanically inclined in the first place, I think if just one of those hoses pops and losses the hydraulic system, then you have nothing to fly the airplane by except the engines.

That doesn't fit me too well and I don't like helicopters at all. When I look at those and see all of the moving parts and the intricate connections they have to have in order to fly. I see how often they manage to have accidents.

How about the gliders that you learned to fly? What was their purpose?

Actually, I went into Normandy on D+9 with a glider and a bulldozer in it and landed it on the side of the cliffs and dropped the bulldozer off so they could build a landing strip. Then, they came in with other gliders and brought in metal plates so you could have a metal runway to land on. Then, on the Battle of the Bulge, the gliders went in there with supplies, ammunition and food for the guys fighting. Of course, the main glider program that we had, besides Normandy, was in Southern France. They flew over from Africa with gliders. They flew over our Navy and our Navy shot about half of the gliders down.

Our own gliders?

Yes. Well, look at the B17's coming in and trying to land on Pearl Harbor day. They didn't have any guns or ammunition or a thing on them and they were out of gas and they are trying to land on the field and we were shooting our own B17's because they became trigger-happy. You don't know what people can do. They don't use common sense on so many things.

So, when you came back to town you bought your Cessna because you had sold your other plane?

I got back here in January 1946. I had 30 days of leave for each year accumulated. So, I had five months of leave time. My wife and I were somewhere around Oklahoma City, going back to visit her folks when the Japanese were bombed and surrendered.

Do you think that is was necessary to bomb them?

Yes. I think it saved lives all the way around.

There has been a lot of controversy about that over the years.

When I stop to think what the Japanese did to our people and prisoners and what they did to our nurses that they captured, I have no sympathy what so ever.

I think it's a different feeling for people like you who actually lived through it as opposed to people who were born after the war was over.

You know, when we built the house right here, over there where the park is on Oakey, there was an artesian well and pond. We used to go over there and catch crawdads.

I have talked to so many people that have grown up here and it was just a wonderful place. I didn't get here until 1952 and it was a good place for me to grow up. It was a small town.

Something that a lot of people don't know is the fact that until the Union Pacific Railroad came in, that there was steamer service up the Colorado River to where the Virgin River meets the Colorado River, all the way from San Francisco. Those paddle wheelers would come up the Colorado River when the river was high enough and go all the way to the Virgin River and pick up the produce grown by the Mormons up the valley. The Mormons would come down with their vegetables and supplies. The steamer would spread them all the way down to Needles and below. They were all military outposts in those days. When they put the railroad in, then that took the business away from the steamers because it was much faster and cheaper.

I didn't know that steamers came down here.

One of the old steamers is sitting just below where Nelson Landing used to be. There is another one down there across from Needles. The old boilers were still sitting there when the lake backed up. I used to know Pop Emery, who was one of the pilots who ran the steamers. His son Merle was the one who built the museum in Nelson.

How about the city of St. Thomas? Did you know anybody who lived there?

Yes and no. I knew them, but I can't really remember them. We used to drive to St. Thomas back in the 1920s. I can remember dad taking the Coca Cola truck. We'd load it up with about four or five hundred pounds of ice on the back and the gang from the plant would go over to Gold Butte for three or four days at a time. We had to ford the river at St. Thomas. You'd drive across. You'd have to get a lot of speed going before you got in the river bottom and kept the throttle down until you got to the other side. Otherwise, you'd get stuck in the mud.

They must have gotten flooded out occasionally.

That happened. I know that there have been some fantastic floods that have come down through there. I don't know if you know this or not, but there is a complete train that's missing between Caliente and Glendale.

A train?

Yes, a whole train. The floods came down and took the tracks and the train and completely buried it. They have never found it.

I know that former residents of St. Thomas used to go out when the lake would get real low and they could see the tops of some of the houses.

Well, you can do that now. In fact, St. Thomas is right on the surface of the Lake and it's supposed to drop another 16 feet. That's what they say, anyway. I don't know what we're going to do. I can't launch my boat out there any more. Hemmingway is the only place that I know of right now where you can launch a boat. It's all gravel and mud.

So, that's something you did for recreation, then, you had a boat? Did you spend time on the lake when your kids were small?

Nearly every weekend. My family grew up on Lake Mead. They learned to water ski and they swam and we fished.

(End of side one, tape 2)

In the early days with the kids, in the 50s, we'd take little jigs and they'd see a crappie in the rocks and they'd drop the jig down in front of it and catch it. You can see that now the crappie are almost extinct out there. The striped bass have taken over the whole lake. They are very voracious and they are depleting the lake all the way around. Then with the lake being so low, plus the fact that they built Lake Powell, the nutrients that used to come into Lake Mead are now being used up in Lake Powell and are not coming down.

When I grew up and I've done this as far back as even when I had a twenty-footer, I'd load it up with bread and scraps. Denny's and other places used to save me their scraps and I'd take it and drop it off at the points, into the rocks. That's where the crawdads and small fish were and they would have something to eat. It would make more nutrients in the lake. I advocated that for years and the park service would even help me at times to unload my boat. I'd take, maybe, 300 or 400 pounds out at a time and dump it into the back of the bays in the shallow water so the plankton would have food and the plankton, of course, is the mainstay of all life in the water. Now that they've built the dams, they've blocked the rivers to keep the salmon from going back up to the upper ends where they spawn and in doing that the salmon die which is mother nature's way of recycling the nutrients back to the forest and the forests are all starting to die from lack of nutrients. Man makes a change and doesn't realize what he is doing. I've used the example that you can go down to the river and take a plank and bury it in the bank at an angle so that the water hits it. It changes the water's angle and makes the river change over time. It moves the mud and the sand to a different place. There is a way of doing that to everything.

So, you spent a lot of time with your family out at the lake, how about the mountains?

How about Mount Charleston, was there anything up there?

Well, they had a little lodge up there in the 1950s. You know the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corp] workers under Roosevelt [President Franklin Delano Roosevelt] were the ones that put the road in to Kyle Canyon in the 1930s. You know where the dip is, where you go down into the wash on the road? There are now horse corrals as you leave the flats. I've seen the snow over the top of the hood on my old Model T Ford. I

haven't seen that kind of snow in years. But, that would be as far as you could possibly get up the road. They built Charleston Lodge up there. They had two of them up there and both of them have burned down over periods of time, not the one that's up on top of the hill now, but down below. We used to go up there for dinner and they had a pond out to the side that would have probably been about the size of this house or a little larger, maybe 2500 square feet or something like that, that we could go ice skating on. I meant to mention the fact that Mr. Lorenzi, in 1935, donated 12 of his bass from out in his lakes to the Las Vegas Sportsman's Association and they had an artesian well and a pond just to the northwest of where the Municipal Golf Course building is now. The pond covered about an acre and a half and the Las Vegas Sportsman's Association put gravel in there and leveled it out and made a bed for the bass. They put them in there in October to spawn in the spring and then replanted them in Lake Mead. That winter the temperature got down to 10 degrees above zero and froze that pond deep enough so that my brother and I could go ice-skating on the pond. It didn't go near the well because the well came out at 70 degrees, so the bass survived all right.

We don't have weather like that any more.

I think that the weather is a natural cycle. I've seen Fremont Street running with a foot of water. Of course, in those days, the underpass, under the railroad tracks, carried all the water from the Westside and my Coca Cola plant used to get flooded regularly, even after they put in the freeway. When I was in the Search and Rescue, I'd get up there with my mega horn in the truck on the top of the freeway and tell the gang at the plant which way the water was flowing and where to get the barriers up to try to keep the water from going through the plant. I got a kick out of it because the city police officers came up and said

that I couldn't park there and they were trying to give me a ticket. I'd have to get on the Search and Rescue horn and tell Inspector Walter Butts, who was the sheriff at the time, that Search and Rescue was trying to direct traffic down below on the flood and these characters are trying to run me off. He'd send them on their way. You know where Carl's Jr. is now by Desert Lane and Charleston? Anna and I bought our first home, in 1950, there. We were the second house from the corner on Charleston from Desert Lane. The state made a plan for the Charleston underpass and I went to them and I told them that they had these floods coming down the street and you're putting all the drains in the very bottom. You should put the drains vertically instead of in the bottom. Put them up the sides in there so when the water comes down there, you can get to it and scrape the top off and get the drainage going out of it a heck of a lot faster than when it plugs up on the bottom. They wouldn't listen. They never did. And, when the water came down Charleston, the first thing it did was pick up an old mattress and papers and stuff on the front end of it and it formed a plug. Then they'd get the fire engines over there to pump it out, which was terribly hard on the fire engines because it was sandy water. It tore up their pumps and equipment. It was crazy. As Vegas built up on the west side of the tracks, they only put a 42 inch drain underneath there for the water to go under it and there was so much water flow down Charleston, it filled the underpass and now the water comes up through the drains and fills the underpass rather than going the other way. They may be able to change that with the new drain they just put in. They sure spent a lot of money that was wasted. One thing that might be interesting is the fact that when Vegas Grammar School burned down on 5th Street, the two-story building was on one end of the property and then they built the new one on the other end of the block where

the federal building is now, they pulled every piece of equipment out that they had. My brother was a volunteer in the fire department and they had all the fire engines down there including the old T Model that I ran, which was retired, fighting the fire. I was still in high school at the time. I was probably about 16 or somewhere around there.

The town grew too fast. People were never ready for the growth and everybody always thought we're going to taper off, we're going to die, it's going to run out and it never did.

It has to come to a head one of these days and I think water will be the limitation.

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