An Interview with Dennis Ortwein

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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Produced by:

The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries
Director: Claytee D. White
Editors: Barbara Tabach and Gloria Homol
Transcribers: Kristin Hicks and Laurie Boetcher
Interviewers and Project Assistants: Barbara Tabach and Claytee D. White

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The transcript received minimal editing that includes 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. In several cases, photographic sources (housed separately) accompany the collection as slides or black and white photographs.

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.

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

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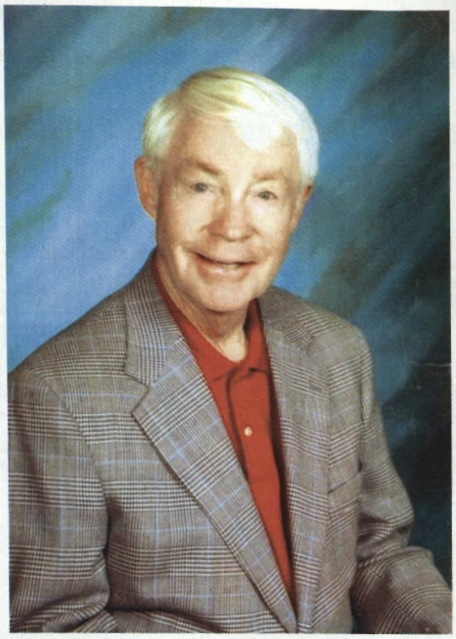

Preface

Dennis Ortwein arrived in Las Vegas in 1956. He shares many details about growing up in Montana, his parents and siblings, his education, and the moment in time when he was offered an opportunity to work in Las Vegas. He also lays out the path his singing career took, starting with school plays, duets with his sister, and high school quartets.

Once in Las Vegas, Dennis taught for a while, served as principal, and was involved in creating programs that helped integrate schools. He also talks about his church choir work, entertainment in early Las Vegas, above-ground testing at the Nevada Test Site, and anti-nuclear protests.

Dennis served as lab school and student teaching coordinator in Nigeria. He offers several anecdotes and stories about the time he and his family spent there. After retiring early (age 53), Dennis acted as consultant to the Esmeralda County school board, executive director for the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and wrote a book. He is currently enjoying his singing career by appearing at conventions, in musicals, and at weddings and memorials.

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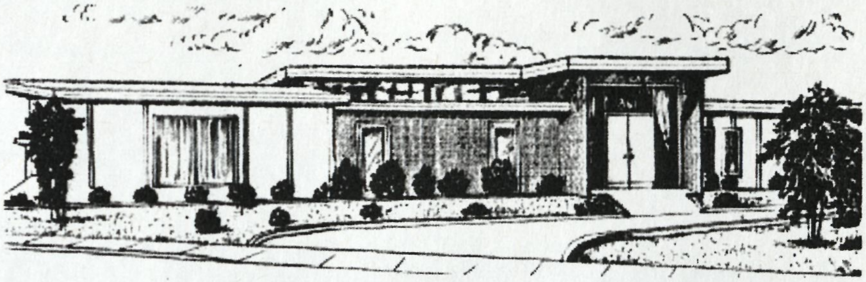

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Dennis Ortwein 5-06-09
Signature of Narrator Date

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This is Claytee White. And today is May 6th, 2009. And I'm here in Summerlin in the home of Dennis.

Dennis, would you please give me your last name, pronounce it the way it should be pronounced and spell it for me?

Yes. Dennis Ortwein, O-R-T-W-E-I-N.

Thank you so much. How are you doing today?

Just another lovely day in the neighborhood.

Isn't it wonderful?

It is. Except for the Moulin Rouge Hotel burning.

Yes. Go ahead and talk about that because you came here in 1956 and the hotel was built in 1955.

Yes.

So tell me a little about that.

Well, as we know, this was a Jim Crow town. I came down from Montana and was in a school with all white teachers and all white students. And if a black person ever came through town, they thought, well, they must be domestics working there, because they certainly wouldn't be able to buy a house. Somehow if a black person tried to buy a house, there was always some reason they got turned down.

But anyway, the Moulin Rouge hotel was built. And it was built to really serve the black population. But also when it got underway, it was probably almost a 50-50 of the population that went there. People had a wonderful time there. But it was only open for a short while. And I don't know the exact number of months.

May to November.

Joe Lewis was, of course, associated with it. And then when that didn't work, he later was I believe a greeter at Caesars Palace. But he was one of my heroes.

It was already closed when you got here. Had it reopened by the time that you arrived in '56?

I didn't ever go. I think it was open just shortly. I think I was so poor then I couldn't go anywhere.

Tell me about growing up in Montana. Where in Montana are you from?

Well, I grew up in a little town that was about 2,000 people -- now it's 1,000 -- near the geographical center of Montana called Harlowton, H-A-R-L-O-W-T-O-N. My parents were childhood -- well, high school sweethearts. My dad graduated a year ahead of my mother in high school and went to work for the flourmill. She was president of her senior class. She was really brilliant, the world's fastest typist I'm sure. And Dad became superintendent of the flour mill, but still didn't ever make $10,000 a year. But that just makes you take a look at what inflation is like. They had seven children. I'm the second oldest. My oldest sister -- do you want me to say who they are?

Yes, please.

Well, my oldest sister, Rosalie, is a nurse. She's married and living on a ranch in Judith Gap, Montana, where she had six children. Incidentally, the superintendent called my mother over and says I want to talk to you about your children's IQs. And my older sister had the highest IQ ever recorded in that town -- or in that school.

Well, of course, then I came next. But after me, a sister Noreen, who became a teacher with a master's. She's in Missoula, Montana. She married a Czech. That's okay.

And my brother Bob, the next one, is three years younger than me with the same birthday. He was an outstanding athlete. In fact, both he and I were all-conference running backs in high school, and I was the leading scorer on the basketball team for three successive years. But when it comes to football, why, he was easily the king of the family and could have played football almost anywhere. He went to a small college in Helena, Montana, which incidentally the last five or six years has won the NAIA National Championship in football. But he was an all-conference -- little all-American halfback -- and then went to medical school at Creighton. Now, the college is Carroll College in Helena, Montana.

As a kind of side issue on Bob, his football coach became quite a national figure. You may remember that back in the 60s, I believe, Raymond Hunthausen, the Catholic Archbishop of Seattle, ran into a number of issues with the Catholic Church and was having considerable dialogue with the Vatican. He was really a wonderful, wonderful man. But it's interesting that my brother's football coach was a priest in the diocese of Helena at the time. In fact, I just was reading a book about that issue and others called *People of God*.

Then the next was my brother Terrence or Terry, who is a playwright and professor. He went to Dartmouth. And, you know, a poor family with seven kids, how does somebody get to Dartmouth? Well, there was a man named Buck Jones who was a rancher there, and he had married a lady from Montana. Anyway, he came out to run this big ranch. And my brother Terry was such an outstanding student and a scholar and an athlete and so forth that Buck Jones said he'd like to propose him to go to Dartmouth. Of course, my family said no way could we pay for any of that. So Terry drove out to the ranch on a Saturday. And they went into Buck Jones' library. They looked at the volumes. They talked about books. They talked about all kinds of things. So Terry says, gee, it's going to be getting dark; when are we going to have the interview? Buck said we've been having it. So anyway, he had this top scholarship to Dartmouth. Of course, we always claimed that he had a little belt on the back of his -- you know how the Ivy League, you know, the little belt on the back of his pants? We always claimed that he must have now grown one on the back of his head because he never -- except for family reunions and so forth like that, he never really did return. And then he taught at Hanover High School, which is at Hanover, New Hampshire where Dartmouth is, for one year. And the dean of men went to Wabash College in Indiana to be the president and took Terry there to revive their theater and music program. It was interesting because a couple years ago, I just clicked on Wabash College and theater, and Terrence Ortwein had a whole raft of the musicals and plays and so forth that he directed. So he then went to the Choate Academy in Wallingford, Connecticut.

What is the name of the academy?

Choate, C-H-O-A-T-E. That's one of those blueblood, high-falutin' finishing schools. Like when I came back from Nigeria, which I'll tell you about, I went up to his place and we were sitting on his back porch. At Choate, they give you a house if you're on the faculty, which is nice. So we were looking out on the athletic field, and there was a ladies' softball game going on. He said I don't mean to be a name-dropper, but the shortstop is Arthur Miller's granddaughter and the second baseman is Omar Sharif's daughter. So I told him he certainly was a name-dropper. But anyway, he was there for quite a few years. He'd be an interesting one for you to interview, by the way.

Did he ever live in Las Vegas?

No. Afraid not. We couldn't claim him. But he unfortunately came down with Parkinson's and he has Parkinson's now. He's struggling with it. It's a tough one.

So is he the baby?

No, no, no. No. There are seven. Okay. Then the next one, brother John, was just the most wonderful—if you ever met somebody that you say is truly a holy person, he was. But he had the greatest sense of humor. If there's anybody who should have been a priest, it should have been him. Anyway, John did a number of things. He taught school. He was a radio announcer in Helena. While he was teaching school, he'd go and put together the weather and news and sports and go back. He called me one day and said sit down, Dennis. He said this is important. So I sat down. He said this isn't probably going to ever happen again. And I said, well, what is it? He said we're both in double figures. Well, I was 55 and he was 44. He then got a call from the bishops—there are two bishops of the Catholic Church—bishop of Helena and bishop of Great Falls in Montana. Oh, he then had gone to work for Montana Power. He was the chief executive in eastern Montana, so he had this really, really good job. But he was so into the church and into what he felt the work of the church should be and all that; he was invited to apply for an opening as the executive director of the Montana—oh, gosh, I'm trying to think of what it was called—the Montana Catholic Conference, which is like the chairman or the executive director of the laity of the people. He was a liaison between the two dioceses and tried to keep the bishops off each other's backs. He did a lot of speaking and singing. And he was sort of the lead wedding and funeral singer in Helena, at which time I was in Las Vegas.

But, unfortunately, he died at the age of 48. My sister-in-law in Wisconsin, married to my brother who's a pediatrician, called me and said, well, Dennis, I have bad news. And I thought why is she calling me? She said John has died. Well, one of my best friends here was John Ahern. Have you seen Ahern Rental?

Yes.

Well, he was like my best friend here. Of course, he was up in years and he had been ill. And right away I thought that was the John. So finally I said John who? Your brother John. Aneurysm. So that was—at his wake and funeral in Helena there were about as many people outside as there were inside. Well, that's John.

Then when I was 16 years old I had been in the summer working on a ranch and I came home and we had a new gift, number seven, Lorree, L-O-R-R-E-E, named after my mother. So I was 16. So that was the spread of the seven. She was a lovely young girl. I was more like an uncle to her than a brother. Actually, she and John both went to Carroll College in Helena, as did my brother Bob as I mentioned and also my sister Rosalie, the nurse.

She's the oldest.

The oldest. Now, the one just younger than me, I'll have to say something about her. I will when I get to the singing part because she and I were quite a duo around central Montana.

Wonderful. Tell me more about—so before coming here were you growing up when you were singing as a teenager?

Well, when I was in the first grade we had a Christmas play. Now, just probably almost everybody—except they don't do them anymore; but you probably were in one too called Christmas Around the World or something. So you have the Christmas program, the Christmas carols. This is Christmas Around the World. The little Dutch girls get up and go clippity-clop around in their wooden shoes. And the little Mexican boys do kind of a Christmas version of "La Cucaracha" and have their little beaded hats. I was a little Chinese boy. And our mothers dyed our hair -- dyed some silk stockings and slanted our eyes and took some flower sacks and made our kimonos or whatever. And we sang a song, three of us. It was a trio. I don't think we were in harmony. It's a short song, if I can --

Oh, yes, go ahead, please.

It would probably be politically incorrect today. But then we didn't know any better. "Runny downy cellular. Catchy lots of mice. Makey chop suey. Vely, vely nice."

Ooh, my god. Oh.

That was the whole song.

Who wrote that?

Well, whoever wrote that play.

Wow.

So somehow the little Chinese boys thought, well, gee, we're probably going to be a big hit. But somehow we were never called upon again to perform. Surprise, surprise.

But four years later, time for Christmas Around the World again. It was a time of great turmoil in the world. It was just a little bit after Pearl Harbor. Many of the boys from the National Guard had gone over to fight in the war in the South Pacific. And I had two uncles that were lost in the war, one brother of my dad and one of my mother. So this kind of kicked off my singing career. It was the same kind of thing -- all the usual different countries did their little thing. At the very end a little fairy godmother came up and she tapped this little red-headed fourth grader on the shoulder with her wand. And he went up to the edge of the stage, looking down at those bright lights, stage lights for the first time and sang a brand-new song, "I'll Be Home for Christmas." You know, I'm sorry. Every time I tell this story I can't help it because it was—but I was a boy soprano and it really soared. So there's a prolonged standing ovation. And I thought, you know, I kind of like this a lot.

After that, I was called upon to sing a great deal. But, you know, in a small town if you're pretty good at several things, you don't have to be a world-beater at anything. You can be pretty good at singing and pretty good at athletics and pretty good at this and that and you're going to be doing it all. But it turns out to be a wonderful education. In high school, of course, I did quite a bit of singing in the groups and was also a soloist.

My sister Noreen, one year younger than me, had all the personality in the world and she just could—beautiful soprano. We sang duets quite often. And we would try to dress to fit certain circumstances. And if I can relate one episode…

Please.

We were invited to sing for the Saturday night banquet of the state Moose Lodge convention in the hometown. We thought, well, hey, this is a big deal, so she borrowed a dress from her boyfriend's mother that was turn of the century. It was a beautiful velvet black dress. And she had this dark raven hair and beautiful blue eyes. And I was dressed in a little cutaway coat and vest. And I had a derby. And we did several songs from Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy, vintage. Have you ever heard of them?

Uh-huh. Nelson Eddy, yes.

Well, he's a great baritone. Like "The Indian Love Call" and—I can't think of the others. But anyway, all these people at the convention were in the bar before coming into the dinner. They were pretty well oiled by the time they came in. And we got up there and did our songs. We had a very good accompanist, Mrs. Taylor, one of the schoolteachers, playing for us. And we were playing off of each other and doing this lovely harmony. And pretty soon we realized we were just singing to each other because they couldn't have cared less. You know, they were on a big toot. So afterwards, we said, well, that didn't go so well, did it? No. Well, then we should have just sung things like "Roll out the barrel, we'll have a barrel of fun," and had them all join in.

Yes.

So at that time I kind of struck upon something, a little formula that if you're ever going to sing or speak, first you need to analyze your audience: Who's going to be there? What's happening in the world at that time? How to introduce it?

So after that I could usually figure out what I ought to do at a given time. But Noreen and I both—also I was in a quartet. I can say now that I think that—I'd be surprised if they ever had a quartet like that in that town.

So describe it to me.

Well, you know the lead. I'm a freshman. I'm about a five-foot-eight-inch freshman, bright red hair. And here are three seniors. The top voice is the tenor or tenor number one. Do you ever sing?

No.

Okay. But you know what it is?

Yes.

And his name was Phil Smart. He came from a family of 13 from a ranch and he was the youngest son. Well, he went into the service and came back after several years to finish high school, which turned out to be a little bit of a problem. We sort of had to protect our music teacher who was about his age and had just come out of college, a very cute little thing. But anyway, that's another thing. Her name was Ms. Matilla. He had the most gorgeous soaring tenor voice. You know, you've heard The Three Tenors.

Oh, yes.

But here this is a Montana ranch kid, never had a music lesson. And, of course, he could bring it down to that soft pianissimo and still be in the upper register. So that was Phil Smart. And then Frank Robertson was the baritone. He was not a solo singer or anything, but he could do very well on the harmony. But the one that you usually don't have, like these 3,000-student schools in Las Vegas, would be hard to come up with the kind of a bass he was, just a wonderful bass. And then I was the lead. Mostly I sang the melody and they did the harmony. But we were invited to go and sing in other towns. And it was a wonderful, wonderful experience. Of course, they all graduated and then there I was. After that there was always a quartet, but it was never quite the same.

Give me your parents' names.

My father's name was Orton Orvis Ortwein. That's O-R-T-O-N, O-R-V-I-S, and Ortwein. And, in fact, my first name is really Orton. I go by Dennis. But the reason I guess that I'm called Dennis today—that was my middle name; after my very lovely, vivacious Irish grandmother, Anna Loretta Dennis. And my mother was Lorree May Story, like tell a story.

Now, earlier you were about to say something about your IQs. The school --

About what?

Your sister's IQ.

Oh, yeah.

Okay. And you were about to tell a story, but you stopped. The school had called your mother. But you never finished that.

Well, she called. I mean the superintendent called her over. And in those days, you know, the IQ was sort of like it was—nobody's supposed to know what their IQ is and not know what any other one's IQ is. And, of course, we're talking about a written test. It wasn't done by a psychologist. Anyway, they gave the test. My mother said the superintendent called her over. He says, I want to talk to you about your kids' IQs. And she thought to herself y'all must be a bunch of idiots. It turned out it wasn't quite like that. But anyway, she did have the highest IQ that had been recorded at that time. And I guess the rest of us weren't too bad. At any rate, all of the seven went on and did very well in college and did relatively well in life as well.

Now, where did you attend college?

Well, in this book there's a letter inviting me to play football at the University of Montana. I got into a car wreck after high school and got pretty well broken up. And I would have gotten broken up in college football, anyway, except I would have preferred that. So I went to University of Montana briefly. And on the way back home for a little vacation there were a couple of veterans who had gone back to college. They lived in my hometown. I guess there were six of us in the car. We came up over a hill and there was a farmer's truck across on a two-lane road. And we went down and skidded right down into it. And I was in the death seat, you know, the third person. Here's the driver and then the middle seat. The front seat passenger. I was so, well, cut up, broken nose. My nose was almost a half circle. They put a white sheet over me on the side of the road, called my parents. It was just out of—going from Missoula to Helena to Harlowton, my hometown, there's a little town called Townsend. And so this would have been about eight miles out of Townsend, Montana. Luckily they had a hospital. And so I was taken to that hospital. I was there for I guess over a month. Fractured skull and so forth. Nose really almost off.

So they must have had a great plastic surgeon.

Well, it's interesting the way things happen because that wasn't my only wreck that year. But when I came back home it was interesting that—well, going back to the hospital now, so I was not—I really was not all with it mentally. So hopefully I got better. The doctor would come in—well, I had a radio. I'd find a ballgame on the radio. I'd think, well, gee, we ought to be able to go to the game. I'd say call the doctor. He'd say, look, you can't go now, but I'm sure we'll get it on sometime. And I'd say fine and listen to the game on the radio. But then I'd also want to sing. And they'd say, now, you can't sing because we have all these people and people are sleeping and so forth. So I would go down—I'd get up at night and I'd go down to a restroom and I'd go in there and sit on the toilet and sing. Well, of course, then they would—and I'd hold onto the knob and put my feet against—I'd be on the toilet and put my feet against the wall. And I'd hold onto that. Even then I was pretty strong. So finally when they'd get it pulled open, there'd be about four people pulling to explain to me, no, you can't sing; sing tomorrow. Well, then, of course, I guess I'd go back and go to bed.

Well, then I went back home and I was—of course, my brother and sisters were either off to college—well, no, there was only one off to college at that time. All the rest were in school. So they'd get up and go to school. It got to where I would want to sleep till noon. My mother said, look, you can't just—life needs to go on. So, of course, everybody was waiting on me. And I thought, oh, gee, this is okay. Then she would have ladies come in to play bridge in the afternoon. I could bake pretty well, so she would give me assignments for doing things in the house and for serving the ladies. I thought, well, this shouldn't go on forever either. So I'd go downtown. And people had seen me. My younger sister, just younger than me that I sang with, Noreen, she'd be kind of taking me along. So they had heard that I had done some kind of crazy things and they didn't know whether they could talk to me or not. Then I'd go ahead and act kind of goofy on purpose.

Anyway, then the first time I went out of town my sister Rosalie had gone from Helena to Billings. She was in Carroll College in nurses' training, but then she was in practice, whatever, like practice teachers, practice nursing. She was still a student nurse in Billings. So we went back to get her for her birthday. My birthday is on January 28th. Hers is January 20th. So she is a year and eight days older than me. On the way back the three of us are in my dad's only car. And there's an S-curve. And it's January in Montana. And it's an S-curve. And we could see lights coming around the corner. I'm in the same seat as in the previous wreck. My sister Noreen, of course, is driving. Nurse sister Rosalie is in the middle. And as we go around here comes a big truck and she tries to correct. And it slips down and we hit the truck. So here I am. They had very minor—well, no. Noreen had a broken rib, the driver. Didn't have seat belts in those days. So I got thrown into the windshield again. But guess what? If you take your hand –take your hand right there. Feel that up there. See that, how that sits over the nose?

Yes. Oh, yes.

But this part right in here, the pliable part was like, as I mentioned before, sticking way out. And it almost straightened my nose. So they had been waiting to make sure that everything was okay on the fractured skull and so forth before they were going to re-break the nose. From that time on, I've gone through life bearing sort of a crooked nose, but it hasn't hurt me too much.

No. You probably see it as crooked more than anyone else.

Well, I haven't thought about it for quite awhile. So anyway, what happened then, of course, I'm laid up again for a while.

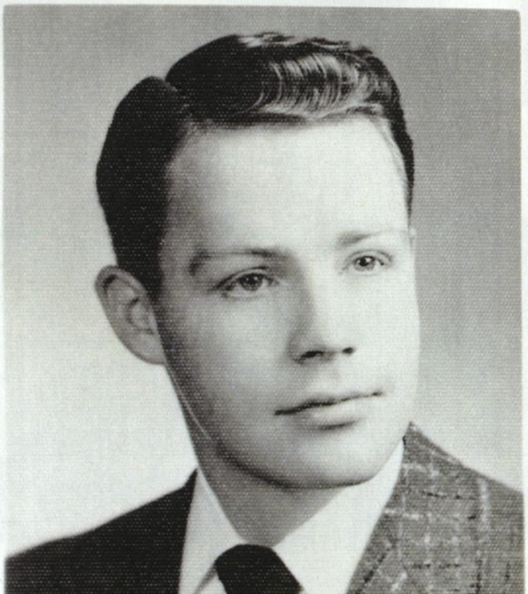
So then my younger sister Noreen was going to go to Billings to Eastern Montana College, which is only like 90 miles from home. Missoula is like 250 the other way to the west, and this was to the east, south, southeast Montana. So I thought, well, I'll go there for maybe a year or two. But, of course, when I went there I got involved again in singing, got involved in student politics and was class representative of the student legislature. Also, we didn't have anybody paying for our college. Noreen worked in the hospital, St. Vincent's Hospital in Billings, which

From the Family Album

Dennis and Betty Ortwein with their sons Mark, Matt and Jeff.

Seven Ortwein siblings with their spouses.

Harlowton, Montana



The Ortwein Family

Orton Orvis
March 15, 1910

Lorree Mae Story
June 13,1911

Rosalie Ann
January 20, 1932

Orton Dennis
January 28, 1933

Noreen Adeline
April 22, 1934

Robert Keith
January 28, 1936

Terrance Arthur
October 29, 1940

John Lawrence
June 14, 1944

Lorree Kathleen
July 25, 1947

The Ortwein Family were all graduates of Harlowton High School (Montana)

Dennis Ortwein (front row, third from the left) ~ 1948 photo

was just a couple blocks from the college, as secretary to the nun in charge of the nursing, whatever the title is called. And I worked there in the hospital as an orderly. So if you spend several years as an orderly, you could probably write a book, too. But anyway, the nuns were very good to me. I had a little room where I could go and study. At night oftentimes things were quiet. But I did everything. I did catheterization and back rubs and fed the people and so forth.

So how were you trained?

Pardon me?

How were you trained?

To do that?

Yes.

Well, to be an orderly I think I showed up in white pants and white shirt. Then I had—it turned out that another fellow, who was actually student body president, was an orderly there. So I was like his assistant for a little while. We would go around and do these things, and, of course, the nurses would help you.

I had very, very white skin. I'm about as close to being an albino as you can and very red hair. So it was easy for me to be embarrassed. The nurses, of course, liked to tell stories that would turn me red. But while I was—one day I'm sure I turned red—I went into the room and there was a lady in bed. I said, ma'am—you used to have those little porcelain bowls. Of course, you'd have the washcloth and towel and soap.

Oh, you're talking about the bowl with the pitcher?

Yeah. So I said, Ma'am, would you like to wash up for dinner? And she said, yes. So I turned around. You know, she had this little hospital gown on, she turned around and she was just stark naked. I said just your hands and face, ma'am.

But it turned out to be a really good job. Then I saved money working for my dad in the flourmill. I went in the summer. When people went on vacation, I would go and work in those jobs, and it turned out to be a good job for those times. Now, going back in high school in the summertime I worked on the ranches. And, of course, that --

What kinds of ranches were in your area?

Well, there were several dairy farms. But they were really ranches. There were several people who maybe they would milk, oh, 30 to 50 cows. They would also have some cattle of their own and maybe some pigs and some sheep, so most of them were multiple. Then north of my little hometown there's like big wheat country. Those people, of course, grew wheat, but they usually also had some livestock.

Now, after finishing school how did you come to Las Vegas?

Well, I had been—one of the groups I was active in was a student education association or the Future Teachers of America for colleges. And I was the state president of that. I was the president at the college and then I was elected from the colleges to be the president of the state. I went to the National Education Association convention that's held in Chicago with a small group of students, just the officers from the various states. I took my ukulele. Then there was a fellow from Texas who was kind of a song-and-dance man. So we would go around and sing for these state groups. No. Actually, first we sang for a big program that they had. So then several of them would invite us to come. But the one that really wanted us to come and perform and join in with us was the group of teachers from Nevada. Actually, there were also administrators. But in those days the National Education Association had a teacher arm and an administrative arm and then support service arm. But they were all within the same, under the same umbrella and they would negotiate contracts for everybody. Well, later on when I got down here, the teachers kicked the administrators out and each of these groups was totally separate. They have separate insurance and separate this and that, which, of course, you know because you're in some of that yourself.

Anyway, I went back to school. Of course, it was getting time to get a job. Well, most people in those days always wanted to stay close to home. Now, my mother was an absolutely wonderful, brilliant woman who hardly ever got out of that town. Every time she could, she did. But she didn't want her—when she was senior class president, she sometimes couldn't go to a high school game because she didn't have a dime. Her dad ran a pool hall and he didn't think any of that stuff as important. Her mother was a seamstress. So my mother started—by the time she was in the sixth grade, she did the cooking and she did the house cleaning and everything; had two brothers and a dad who did little to nothing. They sat and talked or—

Watched TV.

—listened to the radio or whatever. There wasn't any television in those days.

Anyway, because I had been an athlete and I got an award for being the outstanding vocalist in the college, I was getting offers to come to these little towns. So I could see myself being the basketball coach and maybe having a chorus and marry the last standing waitress and start raising little Montanans. So one interview intrigued me. There was Portland and there was Seattle and so forth—but Clark County, Nevada. So I signed up for that interview. Now, have you been here long enough to know there's a Brinley School, J. Harold Brinley? Well, it's a middle school.

Okay. I know that there are a lot of schools here.

Yeah. Well, he was the personnel guy. So I went in for an interview. He had my papers and had my recommendations and he had a map. Now, this map was not exactly to scale, but it was really neat. In fact, it's what they still ought to use. It showed Las Vegas and North Las Vegas and Boulder City and so forth. But then, gee, it's only a little ways to Salt Lake City. It's only a little ways to Phoenix, Santa Fe, Acapulco, Los Angeles. He said, now, you can go snow skiing in the morning and water skiing in the afternoon, you know, Lee Canyon and Hoover Dam, Boulder Dam. And, you know, you have some of the best food in the world for a buck and see some of the best entertainment in the world in the same lounge. And that's true, you could and I did.

So my folks had never given me any money to go to college and they bought me a car. It was a gray Chevy, two-door. I can't remember the name of it. But in August of '56 I came putt-putting over the hill. It was just starting to turn dark. The lights were just going on on the Strip and all. I thought, my gosh -- you know, people will say, oh, there wasn't anybody here or there. Well, I would say that not only to me, a little red-headed boy from Montana, but people who came from almost everywhere, Las Vegas was still, even then, even though there were only about six hotels, it still was something very special when those lights went on at night. Of course, when I was here they were just—just after I got here they started building the Stardust and Tropicana. The old El Rancho was a big one. It was across from where the Sahara is now and it was really kind of a neat place. That and the Sahara both were real hangouts for the locals. And so was the Silver Slipper, which you've probably heard of. It was really a local hangout. They used to have fights upstairs. They had a big fight hall upstairs. That's where a lot of these fighters got started, you know, a couple times a month. It was very inexpensive. I think a foot long hot dog was 50 cents or something like that.

And did you go to chuck wagons?

Pardon?

The chuck wagons, did they have those at the time?

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. That's what they called the buffets were the chuck wagons. But at the fights they just had the --

Yes.

That was something I—well, anyway, I came down here and I got an apartment on Sunrise Avenue. Sunrise Avenue is still there. You know where Sunrise School is?

Is it near Sunrise Hospital?

No. Sunrise, it's just east of Eastern and just north of Charleston, anyway, it angles off. It's kind of one of the drug capitals of this area now of the county, but at that time those apartments were all brand-new. So a lot of people who would move in town would move there. Some of them were people working in casinos, everything from singers to cocktail waitresses and dealers to box men and teachers. One of the ladies there that lived across from me was the manager of—what is that? -- Veronica's Secret. Is that it?

Victoria's Secret.

Victoria. Victoria's Secret, yeah. [Note: narrator likely referring to Frederick's of Hollywood lingerie stores of the era. Victoria's Secret opened in San Francisco in the early 1970s.]

Are you talking about in '56?

Well, it was just a little bit after that.

They had Victoria's Secret at that time?

Well, when I was down in those apartments, it was in the 50s.

Wow. Okay.

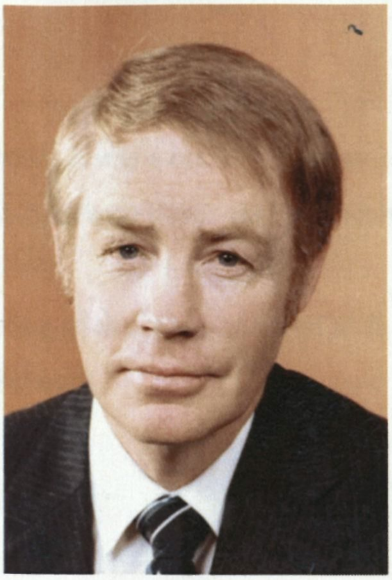
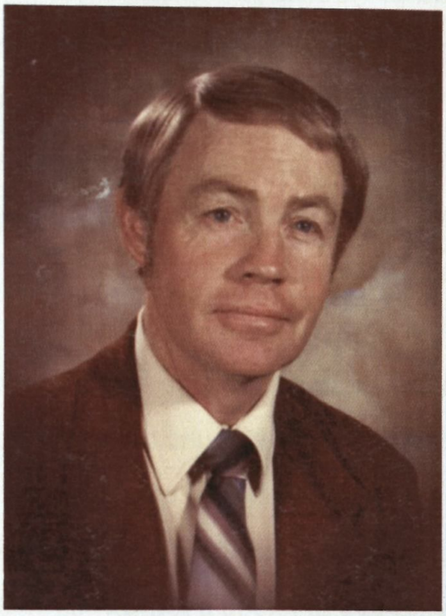
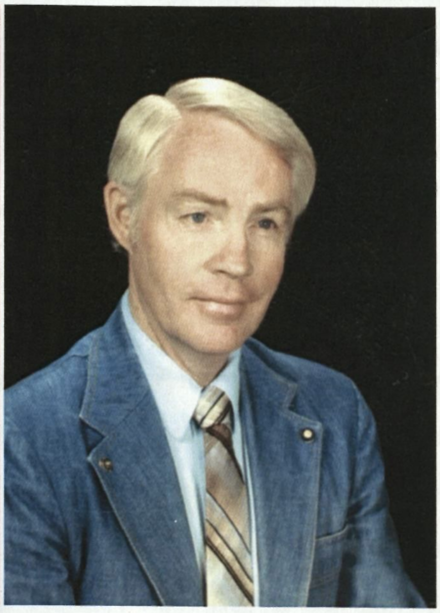
In fact, I remember one thing she said. The women in Las Vegas are really unusual. So anyway, this lady said the women in Las Vegas are really unusual. Of course, she's talking about the ones that shop at Victoria's Secret. She said the women of the night all want to look like ladies and the ladies want to look like women of the night. That wasn't her exact terminology.

Yes. I can imagine what the terminology was.

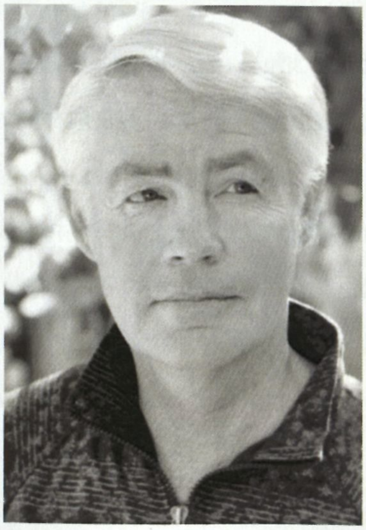
Educator

Dennis (left) as principal of Jo Mackey School (1969).

Association of Retired Administrators (2000). Dennis is in back row, fifth from right.

Dennis Ortwein photos.



Where and what did you teach?

Okay. I taught grade five at Lincoln Elementary School. It was a brand-new school. There wasn't a house within a quarter of a mile. It's out near Nellis Air Force Base. So I was there for three years.

So tell me about being able to attend the first meeting of the school district as it consolidated.

Oh, yes. Have you been to the old Las Vegas High School?

Downtown?

What's now the academy.

Yes, of course.

Okay. Well, the theater there was the only theater in the school district at the time. And R. Guild Gray was the first superintendent of schools. Now, you know how to spell Guild Gray, G-U-I-L-D. And "R" is just the letter "R."

R, period.

R, period. Anyway, he was the consolidating superintendent of schools. There had been a Bunkerville District and a Paradise District and a Moapa District and whatever, like 11 little districts.

So at that time all of the teachers and administrators in the now Clark County School District got into that one venue. As we were standing outside waiting to go in, I was able to connect with three of the people that I had met in Chicago at that convention when I went in to sing for the Nevada contingent, that National Education Convention that I had attended. So Dr. Gray made—he was not a doctor at that time. Nobody was. But he was shortly after. He made a very dramatic speech. Then we all went off to do our jobs.

So I was very active there in the PTA. At that time, it was K thru eight, kindergarten to eighth grade. There were a number of men on the faculty. I think it was like the second year I was there I was elected to be the representative to what we call the union now. Oh, you couldn't say union then. It was an association. So we were in negotiations for contracts. And so some things only the years change. Just some of the details changed. We were having difficulty with salary negotiations and the association leadership decided to withhold the signing of contracts. When contracts arrived, they were gathered up and were held. So no teachers signed. Well, here I am just a fledgling, just a young kid. And when I would go out on the playground or something, some of these, especially the men, they'd come up to me and they'd kind of be out of sight at the office and they'd tell me what I should do or what I should say. I said, you know, would you say that? What would you do? Would you go and talk to the principal about that? Well, I have a family. Anyway, the principal called me in when we finally were going to sign contracts and they were delivered to people. So his contract was on the desk like that.

His, the principal's?

No. My contract was on his desk. We had a little short talk. He said, you know, you could probably go someplace in this district, but you have to decide who you're working for. Anyway, we had a little conversation about that. And I went on and worked for him for another three years in that school. Then he opened Jim Bridger Middle School or what was then Jim Bridger Junior High School at the time. He brought several of his teachers from Lincoln to work with him there, and I was one of them. So then I went to Jim Bridger. I was teaching eighth grade social studies and English. Very, very interesting, very diverse population. A lot of people from Nellis [Air Force base].

Soldiers?

Well, no. Their kids. I mean the Air Force. And then I was also the assistant to the assistant principal. And I ran the student council and was involved again in some of the association work.

You told me a little about entertainment, how you used to go to some of the casinos to see fights and things like that. So what was the Strip like?

Well, the Strip was—people dressed up to go to shows. In fact, I have a couple of pictures like when my mother came down from Montana. She just loved to come down here; she'd come with a lady friend. My dad usually didn't come. He came a couple of times. Once he got here, if you got him out of town, he was the smoothest guy on the Strip. But she loved to come.

Anyway, they had dinner shows and crystal and silver. It was lovely. Of course, we look back and think how we paid five bucks for those. But, oh, we thought it was expensive at the time. Every hotel had a lounge and some excellent entertainment in there. You could even take your chuck wagon dinner or your buffet and eat in the lounge and watch Jackie and Roy or Shecky Greene or Don Rickles or whatever. It was, well, really very friendly. The thing is you almost had to know—it was easy to get comp-ed.

That's what I was going to ask.

Like there was a lady in the apartments where I lived who was the head secretary to the president of the Riviera Hotel, which was brand-new at that point and the tallest building on the Strip then. I'd say, gee, I have a date and I'd like to go. So I'd be comp-ed to go into the hotels. When Caesars was built, I had a friend who had come down from Montana. When gaming was eradicated from Butte, Montana, a number of those Montana people came down and became prominent in gaming down here. So I could call Jack. He was the head of keno. And he would set it up for me. And if my brother came from Wisconsin or my brother came from New Hampshire or whatever, we would be comped to a dinner show. And that was very lovely. Of course, we all know what it's like today. But it wasn't that everybody out there was a plutocrat because they weren't. I mean we were just plain old people.

I had one of my very best friends here named Paul Anderson. He was my assistant principal when I was principal at Tom Williams School. But we'll get to that later. Then he was one of the leading math book authors of the country. Anyway, a way to kind of describe what the Strip was like, my friend Paul had a friend called "Harry, the hairdresser." Well, "Harry, the hairdresser" was a very friendly guy. He knew everybody, he thought. So among the several of us we could always go out somewhere and get comped. So Paul and Harry are heading out to the Tropicana Hotel one time. And Paul says, well, who do you know out here? And Harry said I thought you knew somebody. He said, no, I don't know anybody. So Harry said, well, I'll just tell them I'm the lieutenant governor of Wyoming. Paul said you don't even know who the hell the lieutenant governor of Wyoming is. And Harry said neither does anybody else.

That's right.

So they got to the hotel and went to a house phone. Paul says, oh, I'm so-and-so. He says I'm here with the lieutenant governor of Wyoming and we wonder if we could see your property. And, oh, my goodness, yes, come on out. And so Paul says who should I ask for when we arrive at the hotel? Well, they're already there having a drink at the bar. So they wait about 15 minutes. And then he goes and says this is so-and-so with the lieutenant governor of Wyoming. And I don't know whatever name they gave. And could we see Mr. So-and-so. Well, anyway, they went in and they were taken right down front and were just treated with --

Like royalty.

But nobody cared. It's just kind of the way it was.

Oh, the entertainment. The entertainment was wonderful. In fact, you know Ronnie Simone.

Yes. I just interviewed him yesterday.

Well, I've known him 40 years or something. His sister accompanied me in singing. Her name was Louise Camera and her husband, Leo Camera, was perhaps the greatest percussionist. Now, Howard Agster, who is currently the only one left standing of some of that group; he's a percussionist here in town now. Howard A-G-S-T-E-R, Agster. And he's wonderful too. But they were great friends. In fact, I saw Ronnie and his wife at a function the other day, and the Agsters were with them.

Every one of these hotels had an orchestra. A lot of those people bought land and whatever and ended up doing very well. But there was no such thing as recorded music.

Everything was live. Just the thought of that --

Oh, it was. And every hotel had a line of girls. And you probably noticed in the paper the big article that Betty Bunch wrote about the demise of the Follies Bergere. But, of course, both the Follies Bergere at the Tropicana and the—oh, it leaves me now—at the Stardust were big. Well, they were variety shows. They all had the same kinds of elements: the big orchestra and the beautiful dancing girls and whatever. They'd sometimes shift out some of the specialty acts. But they lasted for a long time and they were a lot of fun. They were shows you could take the family to.

Was there ever a connection between the casino industry and the school district? Did they ever do anything special for you? I know that guys in the casino industry at that time, the families, they would do things in the community. They built a hospital. They did all kinds of things. Anything special for the school district?

That the casinos did?

Yes. Or the families or the boys.

Oh, well, the families, oftentimes the musicians would go and do special things in the schools. In fact, probably you'll be talking to some people who will tell you about Young Audiences. There was a group called Young Audiences. Some of them were people from Strip orchestras and others were in the community. There was a percussion group, which was five of them; like Howard Agster and Leo Camera and a fellow named Roger Rampton, they were kind of the lead percussionists in town. And they were wonderful. Besides drums they can play all these percussion instruments. They would go out and do programs in the schools. Then they had a vocal group. And they had a string group. They had a brass group. So they were mostly people from the Strip orchestras who put those things together. And, of course, because their work was at night, they could work out where they could go and help out there. Now, Tony Morelli—of course you already know all kind of things about Tony Morelli.

Well, tell me what you know about him.

See, when I came to town, it doesn't take me long to start singing. So I got into a group that was called—not a very fancy name—but the Community Chorus. It's the forerunner of the Musical Arts Workshop today, which is Doug Peterson's group. Now, the Community Chorus, when I came here, was being directed by Antonio Morelli. Of course, he was in charge of the music. But he had it where he arranged things so he could have an evening a week. I guess it was his day off from the hotel when he would conduct us.

So he did this every week?

Yeah.

And where were these concerts?

Well, we met at different places. But one of the places we met was—we had a music room in the old high school, Las Vegas High School auditorium. And he would come there and that's where we would practice.

Anthony Thomas—you probably didn't know him. He died sometime ago; but he was a wonderful baritone. In fact, he was a black fellow. When I left to go to Nigeria, he used to say, say hello to all my friends in the old country. But anyway, Maxine Deacon was in that group. You'll probably run across her somewhere along the way. And we were singing together in there. Louise Camera, Ronnie's sister, was the pianist. Pat Clary was a tenor with me.

Well, we would do our concerts in the hotels. Sometimes they'd be on a Sunday afternoon and they would be sellouts. Of course, he was a real showman. And they'd be advertised. Like at a Christmas concert, we would do Christmas music. We might do one serious piece. But we wouldn't do the "Peaceable Kingdom" and "The Messiah" and say that's our concert. And they'd say, well, where is "White Christmas" because people want to have some Christmas music at Christmastime. He had a great balance. He would have something that would show off the group that clearly they can be challenged and come up with a real product that might bring a tear to your eye. But then he would do things that were just fun like the Mary Kaye Trio. He would bring them and they would do some things.

The Silver Slipper, now, this is creativity at its best. The Silver Slipper had a comedy act there, a big comedian named Hank Henry. He was a Jewish fellow whose name was really—his stage name was Hank Henry, but on his official papers he was Henry Rosenbloom. Well, he was a comedian and he did stuff just on the side of shady, sometimes over this line. But it was just really slapstick, vaudeville stuff. He had two little guys that were really short, almost dwarves, and they were his sidekicks. And, of course, they would play different roles. One was Matt Dennison and the other one was Sparky Kay. Probably none of them are around anymore. But I remember them so vividly. At Christmastime one year, the Convention Center had opened and we're having this in the Convention Center, having this big concert. Well, he gets Santa Claus on a forklift. So they're in the rotunda. But because the people are all up in the old Convention Center, you know, sitting around, he had them up on a forklift. Well, Sparky Kay and Matt Dennison were the elves and Hank Henry was Santa Claus. But it was a kind of thing where he would bring the community together.

Now, how often did he present these concerts for the community?

Oh, just a couple times a year. But then the thing that it did, it brought a lot of the people who were interested in that kind of music and in singing together so then they could sometimes do other things, which they did.

So what kind of other things did you do?

Well, of course, I did church choir work. I was a soloist. And I met people that then accompanied me. Maxine Deacon, I met her and we sang duets around. So it was just sort of a good connector at getting things going. Now, of course, they have things like that in other communities, too. But it was especially good for here I think especially with the growth and so many of us had just gotten off of the boat, or so to speak.

So was the church here any different than church back home?

Well, see, I'm in the Catholic Church.

Right. So were there differences when you came here?

Well, you've been to Catholic Church I bet.

Yeah.

Okay. Well, the Catholic mass is the same basically wherever you go. Well, they were bigger. Well, they weren't because when I was in Billings going to school, they had several large churches. One thing that was different is that they were growing. I was in a number of different Catholic churches and because I was single I could kind of go wherever I wanted to. One of the good things about being a Catholic is that you never have an excuse for not going to mass because you have mass on Saturday afternoon and all kinds of times on Sunday and so forth. So it's like if you're in a church with only one service and you have a conflict, you can't go.

But Our Lady of Las Vegas Church was not built at that time. They had built what is now the social hall. Then it became the church. And for years they didn't build the church. So finally, when they did I was the song leader for like 35 years in that church where I was the soloist in weddings and funerals and so forth and so on. So, of course, then when they got the committees going to build the church, I was very active in the fundraising efforts and so forth for that church. Then the same way up in Saint Elizabeth, which is right up here off -- it's one of the newest Catholic churches here in town. And I was also active in planning the school, which is the only Catholic school that's been built here for the last 30 years.

Is that Bishop Gorman?

No, no. Bishop Gorman, the high school, has been here for many, many years. But this is an elementary school, K-thru-eight. But there were about seven or eight elementary schools here for many, many years even when the town was small. See, when I came here there were less than a hundred thousand people in the county.

When you came, they were testing bombs out at the Nevada Test Site.

Oh, sure.

Didn't you have a priest here who was very, very active protesting that testing?

Oh, yes.

Do you remember?

I do.

Tell me a little about him, anything you remember.

Well, can I tell you first a little bit about the bombs?

Of course. Yes.

Okay. Well, initially they were doing the aboveground testing. And we were all interested in it, of course. We didn't think anything of it; that there was any harm could come to you. So a bunch of us schoolteachers would go -- sometimes they're supposed to have an early morning shot like 4:30 a.m. We would go to Uncle John's Pancake House, which was on Fremont Street. And that was kind of the forerunner of something like the Original Pancake House. But we would go there and drink coffee and eat pancakes and then go see the shot, and pretty soon it's over. Gee, it's five o'clock. What are we going to do now? Well, we would go to school and get a lot of work done.

Okay. Louie Vitale. Those days were very volatile in this community because -- I also wanted to tell you about the nuns who came here from California because—well, do you want Louis Vitale now?

Yes. You can tell me about both.

Okay. Louie Vitale was I think the son of either second or third generation Italians of a wealthy Italian family. And he was one of the most wonderful people I've ever met. He had a heart bigger than anybody. I guess it's been said that after Pearl Harbor—not after Pearl Harbor, but Hiroshima and the other one, Nagasaki, it just almost tore him apart. It just kept grating on him. So he and others made a big effort to try to stop the nuclear testing. If there's a world record for being arrested for that, I think he holds it easily. There are some others. Are you familiar with the Desert Experience group here?

Oh, sure. Yes.

Well, you know, they are Desert Experience. This is a group of nuns and priests and others—

Oh, no, I'm not familiar with that.

—that are on that same kind of effort. I'm sorry. But they are active here now. I'll have to get that to you because I think they're somebody that would be very interesting for you to talk to. Anyway, Louie, I met him several times. In fact, he was a priest here. I can't remember. I sang so many masses with so many priests I can't remember.

He was probably at Saint James.

Well, he was at Saint James. But he was also at some other places, too. Yeah, he was at Saint James. So was Father Ben Franzanelli. That's another one that was on that same bed. But Louie -- in fact, there's a nurse here now and I see her. I just said, well, is he in or is he out?

What were race relations like at that time?

Can I tell you about Father Franzanelli?

Yes, please, and about the nuns from California.

Yeah. Okay. Well, Father Ben Franzanelli was kind of—I don't know if he ever got arrested like Louie, but he was very much, you know, a champion of the downtrodden and the people who haven't been given a chance and so forth. My wife and I were involved in a Catholic retreat association. You know what that is. Well, it's where people get together for both social and religious meetings. So we had a retreat end-of-the-year function at Death Valley. So there are people there from several different retreat associations in town. Now, Ronnie Simone's sister and the Agsters were in the same one I was in. It was interesting because these people would come. We'd be having a meeting on Saturday night and they would come to the meeting. They'd do the early show. They'd come to the meeting and eat and have a drink, but then they'd go back and do the late show.

Anyway, so we were—it was the last day of this retreat and we'd had speakers on. It was for married couples on how to solidify your marriage and love each other more. So we're on the golf course. One of our wealthiest and most prominent citizens said, you know, we're having some people in tomorrow night. Would you like to come over? And so my wife said, gee, I've always wanted to see that house. So when we got there it turned out it was a meeting of the John Birch Society. They were showing a movie from the 20s and the 30s and then showing the soup kitchens and the people with their little pan waiting to get their soup. And then they showed President Johnson, Lyndon Johnson and Kennedy. They'd have fixed up the picture so they looked snaggletooth and stuff like that.

Well, Ben Franzanelli was there. And so was monsignor—there was an Irish monsignor who had been here for many, many years. And Ben saw that. He said, I'm getting the hell out of here. So the monsignor goes with him and notice the old Dennis traipses along too. I go along too. We go outside. So Ben Franzanelli says, that's terrible. He says, that's just everything that we're against. He says, I'm not going to put up with that. So the monsignor says now just a moment, Ben, just take it a little easy. He says, you know, they probably contribute a third of the income to this parish. And Ben Franzanelli says, well, by God I'll get the money someplace else.

Good for him. Whose house was that?

I don't know.

Yes, you do.

Yeah, I do. It was the Von Tobels'.

Okay. I'm not surprised. So did we have an active John Birch Society group here?

I didn't know that, but I guess we did.

Yeah. It doesn't surprise me.

But anyway though, this has also to do with Ben Franzanelli. Well, here's another interesting person for you, Betty Scott. She was Sister Betty Scott. She's a professor at the College of Southern Nevada. She's Dr. Betty Scott now.

Anyway, this is where I'm going with this: I'm principal of an elementary school. And Archbishop O'Connell—I can't remember exactly which one it is—but from Los Angeles, insisted that the nuns wear habits. Well, the nuns said, look, there's lots of work that we could do and where we can be effective. But when we come in people think we look like penguins and the people in Watts and other places like that are afraid of us. So they wanted to just wear street clothes. And they were basically -- not excommunicated, but the agreement was that they would leave. Some of them would leave because they said we can't do any good work there.

So I was contacted by Ben Franzanelli. And Father Franzanelli told me about the situation. He says, you know, most of these people are skilled teachers and nurses. So anyway, I was, I guess you'd say, influential in touching base in the district, greasing the path for them to come in here. Betty Scott was one. I believe she actually was one of the first teachers in the community college here. There was a Sister Norita. There were several. They lived over on Helen Street, Helen Street on the Westside.

North Las Vegas.

North Las Vegas, yeah. And so that's where they lived. And they had great support in the community. They were here during the time of the racial riots that we had when we were going through all of the school integration struggles.

So you're talking about in the 1970s.

Yeah. Well, I guess Betty Scott came before then. Well, actually it started in the late 60s.

So you actually had riots?

Yep.

And those were around school integration?

That was the centerpiece of it, yes. Yeah. In fact—I don't know where to go now. You know when we were talking about the schools, we jumped from the schools to the church. But the schools—

Well, because the nuns tie it together.

Yeah. In fact, one of the nuns, Dr. Joan Tansey, became a principal.

That's right.

I mentioned when I was 28 I became principal of Tom Williams School, which is having its 50th anniversary in just a few weeks. And I was the second principal at that school. Actually, there were several teachers on the faculty that I had dated and I guess they were older than I was. But that was kind of an exciting time. And, of course, being a very new, young principal, as was the case every year, you had growing pains in the schools.

And one of the things that we did there was develop a year-round—not a year-round, that was later—a half-day-session program where one group of kids would come in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Two teachers would share the room. The morning teacher would share with the afternoon teacher. We didn't have a librarian, but we took a classroom and several teachers volunteered to set up a library and after school would check out books to the kids. The teachers and I developed a program whereby the afternoon teacher would come in the middle of the morning and so that even though the kids had a shorter time in class, they had every bit as much one-to-one assistance. It worked out really very well because we didn't have any activities.

It was just straight academics for the morning. You have two teachers there for half of it. Then in the middle of the afternoon, the other teacher would come in. And it worked very well. Now, there are many parents who really liked that at the time, because we still had a lot of stay-at-home moms. So they'd take the kids to the library. They'd take the kids to Scouts, to piano lessons or whatever. It really worked out fairly well.

Tell me about the sixth grade centers.

So in the school district I was—we'll get to the sixth grade centers—I had been teaching three years elementary, three years middle school, and I was principal of Tom Williams School for four years. And I got a little restless and was sort of looking around; thinking, gee, is there something else out there? Well, some people came through from Ohio University and they were proposing a new social studies program. Well, the people in curriculum called me in the middle of an afternoon and said, hey, we need to have our heads examined. We're meeting with these people who are proposing a program for us, but we don't have anybody meeting with them who's in a school. So could you come?

So I did. We met at Denny's on the Strip. These guys kept talking about—well, Dr. Ploghoft was his name. He had been the chief of party setting up the framework for building a teachers college in Nigeria, which was called an advanced teachers college to train people to work in these little teachers colleges all around. I thought, gee, this sounds fascinating. And he would keep veering off talking about that, about Nigeria and having been there and what it was like living there and working with the people. And I got quite interested in it and began to communicate with them. They invited me to come back for an interview and ended up offering me a job to be the assistant director of international programs at Ohio University and to be the liaison with the Nigerian programs. They had two, one in the north and one in the south. One's down in Ibardan by Lagos and then in Kano, K-A-N-O, which is where I went.

I got a leave of absence to work on a doctorate halftime and do that halftime. So we're all ready to go to Athens, Ohio, Ohio University. Get a call. They said we have somebody that hasn't been in a school for years who's slated to be the lab-school coordinator and student teaching coordinator and we're thinking you'd be a lot better at that. How would you like to go to Nigeria and then come back to the campus afterwards? You know how long it took me to make a decision?

Yes. Instantly.

Just like that. In fact, there were two principals who were picking me up to go to a meeting. Anyway, that's that same story there. So the thing that was kind of interesting about that is that I had been scoping around for different programs and I found one that ended up getting this young lady, Sandra Hungerford, a wonderful special program at a master's degree counseling institute. That's when there was a lot of interest in counseling, math and science and reading, as you remember. And then this one, this lady, she went to Columbia.

Deanna Hanson.

Yeah. And I discovered those programs as I was looking at these things. It was a wonderful thing for her. She ended up getting her master's degree, one of the first, in early childhood education and then ended up being a professor and author in California.

Wonderful.

But anyway, the Nigerian experience is a whole other thing that could take us through tomorrow.

Well, just tell me—you were in Nigeria for how long?

Two years.

Okay. And what was the experience like just overall academically, socially?

Well, it was right at the time—I don't know if you're old enough to remember knowing about the Biafran War. The Biafran War was a tribal war where the oil-rich southern EBOs seceded from Nigeria. And, of course, then the war started.

So it sounded like the Fourth of July. Well, first of all, we arrived and got off the plane. I had a two-year-old and a three-year-old son, who later looked like that.

Oh, great.

So my then smallest son was two at the time. He says, Daddy, what are those people pointing guns at us for? I said, oh, they're just protecting us. Oh, okay. So we had this little entourage of cars taking us to our house. And, of course, it had been built by the Nigerian government for the Ohio University people. There were about eight or ten homes that had been built for us. People were there including four servants. That's just the way it is. So wherever the British are you're going to have a golf course and a club and servants and no ice in your scotch.

Nigeria: 1966 – 1968

Dennis teaching at Advanced Teachers College Kano, Nigeria (1966).

Dennis performing with Peace Corps Quarter ~ Kano , Nigeria (1967).

Betty buying vegetables from a trader.

Jeff and Matt with Abdu, the night watchman in Nigeria (1967).

Ortwein home in Nigeria from 1966 to 1968.

Coaching basketball practice with young Nigerians.

Anyway, we were welcomed. We were quite a spectacle as you can imagine with these little red-headed boys going out in the community. They were something like nobody had seen before. So we enjoyed being there. My wife enjoyed it very much being there. In this book I tell a little bit about some of those first experiences that I had there. I'll tell you about the first day, though.

So the first day I went out and I sat down with the Nigerian principal who's like a president of the college—they called him principal—Albert Ogunsala and Dr. Paul Roeden from Ohio University. And they talked to me about what I'd be doing. One of the first things I was going to be doing was revising the staff handbook. That sounded pretty exciting. Well, they said, oh, Mr. Zaycek had problems getting in on a visa so we'd like you to take his classes for a couple of days, but he'll be here later in the week. And I said, oh, yeah, what do I do? They said, well, he has some lesson plans, so you go down to the room. It was an English class. So I go into this room and I look and I've got about ten minutes to get ready. So this one class is working on—was it *1982* or—what is that? Orwell's 19 --

Oh.

1984?

That's it.

Yeah, okay. So they were working on *1984* and *Julius Caesar*. They had two streams of students, the younger ones, which would be like high school, and the next, which would be like the first three years of college. Well, this was the younger group. So they come in, about 30 of them, mostly men. And they're all wearing whites. They all walk in and they're all standing. And I say good morning. They say morning, sir. You may be seated. I introduced myself and we did a little bit of *Julius Caesar*. And it was interesting with the students who had -- you know, they'd grown up with tribal language -- sometimes a tribal language and Arabic because this was the Muslim part of the country. The Christian part was down in the south. So I'm getting onto the dialect a little bit thrown in with reading *Julius Caesar*.

So now we're taking a look at *1984*. And we start through. So this one says, Mr. Ortwein, how can we understand this song? Well, you know, in the book they decide that they need to develop a national anthem that says, "Beasts of burden, beasts of England, rise up," and so forth.

They said it says it's halfway between "La Cucaracha" and "Clementine." We do not know those songs. And he was serious. So I said, well, I think we can take care of that very easily. So I sang a little "Clementine" and then I sang a little "La Cucaracha." I said, now, there you have it; it should be a simple matter to place a tune between.

Now, I thought of myself back in an American classroom where if I called on somebody to do that they'd have crawled under the desk. Right? You know what they did? They all wanted to do it. So after about three -- and they just roared. I guess it was one of the most bonding moments of my life because I couldn't go anywhere for those two years without still seeing them. The word got around fast because what basically they were accustomed to was that the professor walks in, lectures, they take notes, maybe ask a few questions and take a test. But this was totally new to them. And quite a few of them were at the airport seeing me off when I left.

Wow. That's great.

So it was—in fact, one of the fun things that I did—you know, they had a school year that went through most of the year. They didn't have three months off in the summer. There would be several weeks when there would be no school. Two other fellows and I that would go to some real bush country community where the teachers they had sometimes had hardly had any training at all. So we would do these workshops where we'd do practical kinds of things. I was sort of the manuscript expert of the group. I'd show them how to do script and kind of a little formula for how to do it with the circles and the stems and so forth. And then we would show them how they could use various materials in the community for instruction and also how they could use people in the community and bring in people that were professionals to kind of give the kids a little look at the world. So it was a wonderful time.

Well, after about the 20th day we were there, we heard this pop, pop, pop, pop. That was the initiation of the Biafran War. People were trying to leave on the planes to go back to Biafra in the south of Nigeria and they were being shot at the airport. Like I say it sounded like the Fourth of July.

As I said, we had servants. We had two inside, a cook and a small boy. It was easy to invite somebody over to dinner in the morning and say come at five. We also had a night watchman. These were some pretty fascinating guys. They were uneducated. They came off of the Sahara Desert. They had never been to a school or anything. And they just would save money to go back to their family. The way they lived, wow. Like they'd live in your garage. We had a couple of little houses for the other servants.

Now, we also had a gardener. One gardener left and so I hired another gardener. And he had wonderful recommendations. Guess what? He could really read and write very well. Well, he was from Biafra. So the other guys teased him. One time he came to me and he said I want to go back to my country. I said, you know, it's dangerous out there. And he said, no, I must go back. So I gave him some money and he left in the night. And guess what? Never heard from him. But you know what his name was? Savior Sunday. So he could hardly pass himself off as a Muslim.

So were those programs successful?

Well, when I got there I thought I was going to go to the college. But it was in construction. It wasn't even built. So we had classes in several of the schools around. We had one school that we completely took over. But then we had some classes that were held in other schools because we didn't have the classroom space.

One of the things that I did is I would place the students in the college as practice teachers. Of course, I'd have to go visit them. So one day I went out to one of the schools. It was built in a horseshoe. All of these teachers are men, surprise, surprise. I got out of my car and as I started in to the school, somebody must have rung a bell -- all of these teachers come walking out towards me. And I'm thinking what in the world is going on? I wasn't afraid or anything because I had such a great relationship with them. They said we have just one question. I said what is that? If America is a free country, how can they make the champion of the world go to war? They're talking about Muhammad Ali, you see. So, of course, I told them a partial truth. I said, well, in America it is the duty of every young man to serve his country. And if he is drafted and if his number comes up, then he goes. It doesn't matter if he's rich or poor or black or white or anything else. And they said thank you and they went back to the classrooms. Well, there are apparently ways to get deferments, or some people did. But, again, you hope that most of them were legitimate.

So after that was over did you come back to Las Vegas?

Yes. Oh, incidentally, I came back to Las Vegas, but I could have gone to the campus.

For two additional years?

Pardon me?

For two additional years?

No, no. I could have gone to Ohio University, on the faculty. See, I was on the international faculty. I could have gone there on the faculty and been teaching on the faculty and gotten my doctorate. But when I got over there thinking that I was going to work on a doctorate, with the war and so forth it wouldn't have worked. I was a little bit security minded too, because I had ten years in state retirement here. And I thought, well -- because I knew a lot of people that had kicked around here and there and never had a retirement plan or anything. So I came back here. Oh, there were two openings --

When you came back?

Yes. I got a telegram—this is before email or anything—and they assigned me to the Indian Springs School. Says you can be principal at Indian Springs, which is right now K-thru-eight. We want you to develop the high school at Indian Springs and then you can come out to the—we'll have something out at the education center.

Well, my wife looks at that and she says you're such a daydreamer. She says you're always meditating at the wheel. So she, of course—there were people—you'd hear about the wrecks, people going to the Test Site. They called that stretch of road "The Widow Maker." So she said, well, ask them if they've got anything else. So I sent back my little message and said are there any other options? It comes back and says would you accept a Westside school? Well, there was a school called West Side. And it was an old -- it was like one of the very first. So I sent back and said yes. But I didn't know that it meant a Westside school. I thought it was going to be the old West Side School.

Oh, I see.

It was Joe Mackey. Well, Joe Mackey was almost a new school at that time. You know where Joe Mackey is?

No.

Well, it's on Revere Street.

So H becomes Revere in North Las Vegas.

Okay. H.P. Fitzgerald had been the principal and his wife, Virgie, was a teacher there. He had his own little kingdom, H.P. did. So then I came in as principal and here I was—this was about the first time that—sometimes a young white principal would go to a Westside school and then would go to another school.

Why?

Well, that's just the way they did it. See, the schools were still segregated. And it was still very unequal.

Oh, right.

So anyway, I went there. I was very active in the community. The faculty was about half black and half white. The student body was 100 percent black. That was just at the time when the school district was working on an integration plan, so that would have been 1968.

When they started working on the plan?

Yeah. And that's when I went to Joe Mackey. So it was pretty exciting during that time. We had a new superintendent named James Mason. And he was only here for maybe two or three years I think. I guess he'd been here a year before I came. See, that was at the time when I—when I was in Nigeria we'd get Time magazine. You'd get the stories about Governor Wallace and Governor Orville Faubus. Of course, the integration thing is going on and also the Six-Day War with Israel. There would be signs on the tree that says Johnson is the executioner of the world, meaning President Johnson. Then there would be letters to the editor where people would write in and say there are many bad things going on in America, blah, blah, blah. They always called it America, but the people from Ohio are here to help us and we must help them.

So we were ok; you know, I was never afraid of anything, even during the Biafran War when people came through our yard with machetes and clubs looking for the bad guys. You'd just say they went that way, you know.

Getting back here to the school, I went to the first administrators' meeting. This Mason, the superintendent, was a real smoothie. He was very handsome. He'd change his suit about four times a day and had a lot going you might say. We're invited to the hour with the superintendent. I can't remember. I guess it was just once a month? I guess it was. So I go to this meeting. And I said to the principal sitting by me, I said, this is really neat. I'm glad to see that a superintendent -- usually you don't see superintendents much. You see all the underlings. It's great to have somebody who will really listen to his people. No, he says, you're going to listen to him. I said oh. He said, yeah, Vince Cortney asked a question last week and he got his head bit off. And he was principal of Las Vegas High School at the time, Vince Cortney. Then a guy named Vern Waite, he was the principal of a school. And he'd ask a question and got lambasted. So basically, he would just rail on about his pet peeves. So he said, oh, there's one thing. He said I have two programs I have to place. He says I have these two women.

At that time there were a couple of classrooms that were not occupied at Joe Mackey. And so he said Mabel Hoggard, who runs a program called the Westside Council. Does anybody have a room? My hand goes up. He said then there's a lady named Edythe Katz. She has a program called Volunteers in Education where she gets ladies from the community to work in schools. My hand goes up.

So we became the magnetic trio, the three of us. Well, there was one other program, too, that -- anyway, I get those two ladies come to Joe Mackey. People talk about they were afraid to go to the Westside. They might have something happen to them and so forth. And Edythe Katz, she said, hey, I'm over there every day. So is Dr. Ortwein. What are you talking about? So they got their programs going. We developed kind of a -- it was called POSE. The acronym was POSE, P-O-S-E, Program of Social Enrichment. It was a fifth grade program. Once a month fifth grade classes from the Westside would go and visit in the east side or whatever other side they called it. They did some academic things together and they did some social things together. And some kids developed some friendships.

Well, that was prior to the court order actually coming down. We had a raft of people coming over to the seven Westside schools and volunteering every week, including some of the wives of hotel presidents. Well, Edythe Katz just called up. And I called too. And, of course, Mabel Hoggard was a gem. She, of course, was—we were all trying to prepare for school integration. Of course, the court ordered—well, you asked about sixth grade centers.

Yes. Go ahead.

Okay. The court ordered the school district to come up with an acceptable plan by a certain date or the court would say what the plan was. So people from the school district communicated all over the country, visited everywhere that was going through these kinds of things. And for several reasons -- one, the sixth grade students -- the numbers of total sixth grade students in the seven Westside schools could be moved to most of the other schools in the greater Las Vegas area to bring the classrooms to what would approximate the community racial averages.

Okay. So it matched the makeup of the community.

The makeup of the classrooms would be somewhat like the classroom of the -- oh, and then the kids in the sixth grade, the kids in the seven schools would stay there and the kids from the others would come from -- like my three sons all went to sixth grade centers.

Actually, it was a pretty good program. It's kind of like anything. If it was run well—now, they had some really good teachers. They had some bad ones. But that's the way it is everywhere. It gave them an opportunity where principals were a little bit more creative and so were teachers. And people joined together, which hopefully most of them did. I think they really prepared kids for middle school very well.

The white community did not like sixth grade centers. Did the black community like that plan?

Well, I think that it would almost be hard to generalize because some did and some didn't. Of course, it was eventually abolished because the quote, unquote, if you want to still call it black community, felt that they were carrying the burden of busing, which is absolutely true. They were. Now, my sons didn't ever complain. In fact, they didn't mind riding the bus at all. But, of course, the kindergarten kids stayed in whichever school the whole time. The busing only started with first grade.

Oh, I see what you're saying. Okay.

The thing about it was the sixth grade kids were bused sometimes a very long distance. And here were little first graders being bused way out. And, you know, sometimes several hours of busing in a given day, it was -- but, again, if the community had developed it the way it should have, then that wouldn't have ever been necessary, obviously.

You talked about your children a few minutes ago. So getting back to that, give me your wife's name and your children's names.

Okay. The oldest one is Jeffrey. He's with Deloitte and Touche, accounting firm. And Matt, he was the one that was so skinny. He's the tall one.

He asked you about the guns?

Yeah. Well, I'll tell you about what he did. He's with Nevada Power. Son Mark was conceived in Nigeria. I don't think that makes him a citizen, but he was conceived in Nigeria, born in Montana, and then came back to Nigeria. See, the family was evacuated for part of the time during the war.

So you had to send the family away?

Yes. Well, part of it was also that she was—when Betty was pregnant, the way the war was going they could just see something happening that would cause mass evacuations right at childbirth time. She was in Montana for some months and then came back there. But one of the fun things -- fun things. Matthew was only two years old and then three. The (buzoos), or the night watchman, loved this little Matthew. He would go out and play with the prayer ring. Abdu, A-B-D-U, Abdu the night watchman had his prayer ring. And, of course, he would go pray at all the proper times. Matthew would go hide the stones. And Abdu just thought it was so funny because he always knew where to find them.

Okay, good. Now, getting back to Las Vegas and getting back to entertainment again so we can just talk about Morelli as we end this, did you and your wife ever go into the Copa Room at the Sands?

Yes.

Okay. Describe that to me.

You know, I don't remember. I don't know. I don't hardly -- I can't really distinguish it in my mind right now from the other showrooms because most of the showrooms were at that time -- you know, you had tables, tables for two and tables for six and several different levels. The Copa Girls roller skated.

Yes. That's great. That's a nice picture.

Well, this calendar is great.

Where did you get that calendar?

Well, it was done by The Nevada Magazine. Do you want to look at this?

Yeah. That's a 2008. That's a nice calendar.

Oh, Don Kemp. Don Kemp was here.

Oh, that's a beautiful picture.

Don Kemp is a piano player here. He's a good friend of mine. He accompanied me quite a bit. He was one of the greatest piano players. He still lives here. He owned Music World downtown, but he sold it. That's him up there. And this is the Lido de Paris at the Stardust.

Okay, yes. Oh, that's wonderful. That's a wonderful picture.

You know, with all of your history on the Strip and being here as you can see hotels go up, how do you feel now when a hotel is imploded? Well, I should say a few years ago when they got rid of the Sands and the Desert Inn and --

Stardust.

-- Stardust, how did you feel?

I thought I was losing a little piece of all of us somehow. I don't know. Somehow I thought they would keep the Desert Inn, somehow I thought because of the country club. You know, like I remember I even went to Oscar Goodman's 25th anniversary as a lawyer in Las Vegas. And it was at the Desert Inn. It was one of the more lavish parties you would ever attend.

So how did you get invited to that party?

Well, I had retired from the school district and I was doing a number of things. There was a lady who was trying to get some things going in business and she knew I was a pretty good writer. I had written some proposals for her and got invited in somehow. And I was actually sitting right in the room where they were—I was sitting right in the room where Oscar was. This one attractive girl came over and kind of leaned over and put her arm on my shoulder. It was Janet Jackson. Tony Curtis was there in that little group that night.

Wow. Did you or your wife participate in political life here at all?

No, but political life often blends with community life. I served by gubernatorial appointment through Governors Bryan and Miller on the Board of Psychological Examiners, The Holocaust Education Committee, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission

Okay. Now, did your wife work outside the home?

Yes. She was the librarian. Well, first she was a schoolteacher at West Charleston, which later became named after Howard Wasden, Wasden School. So she was a teacher there. Then when we went overseas and came back, she substituted some. She got her master's degree and her library credential, so then she was librarian in Twin Lakes. And she was at R. Guild Gray. Oh, golly. Cashman Middle School. She retired from Gray. We have departed, but she is still in the community.

Wonderful. When you look back now, are you happy that you came to Las Vegas?

Oh, very much. This is home. Earlier I mentioned that I had opportunities to go to Ohio University. They offered me several jobs. One was to run the Teacher Corps program there. The other was to run some other program and also have the opportunity to work on my doctor's degree. What happened was that UNLV and UNR established a doctoral program the same year. And they had a lot of applicants. And I don't know why. Somehow I didn't think I'd make the cut on that, but I did.

At UNLV?

Yes. So the first year—the first summer—see, UNR was still in control of things. There was quite a struggle going on because there were some strong people in the education department down here. But they agreed that the doctoral students from here would go up to Reno for two months in the summer and that the Reno people would come to Las Vegas the next year. Well, what happened, of course, the Reno people never did come the next year. I don't know if you know any of the other people or if you want their names or anything. But Darnell, Marshall Darnell, Bob McCord, Owen Roundy, Bruce Miller and myself went up to Reno and went to classes and were just regular little old wonderful Pack people for the summer.

When you first started here you moved through the ranks really rapidly and became a principal. Could women move through that fast at that time?

Well, yes and no. Mostly no I think. Women could sometimes become elementary principals. I remember a case where there were no women senior high administrators. Now, it's hard to image that.

No, it's not.

I remember an exact case. Not too many people could tell you some of these things. But there was a lady named Carol Sorensen. And she and Paul Sorensen had come down from Utah and they had been here a long time. And she was I think maybe vice principal. Maybe she was in a middle school. But the word was out. She had applied. She thought she was being selected to be the assistant principal at Las Vegas High School. So she's at the meeting and so are friends and family. So, typically, the board goes into personnel session -- comes out -- for assistant vice principal of Las Vegas High School, I move the approval of Bob Strnod. Quiet. Quiet. Quiet. So something happened in the back room. She would have been the first. Well, later on she did find some other opportunities. Yes, there was discrimination.

What do you feel about the four-percent cut that will probably go across the board? It will probably be elementary school, UNLV, everyone. Four-percent cut and one day off per month is what they're proposing. And I think maybe it has passed. I'm not sure.

Well, first of all, I have believed for a long time that we've been under-taxed. And I think we should—I'm for more taxes.

Me too.

Let's go back. When my parents were in the Depression, my parents had a couple of kids and the flourmill shut down. My dad worked for the dairy farmer to pay the milk bill and for another farmer to get a bag of potatoes and stuff like that. I mean anything to put the food on the table. I remember my parents when we were talking about the Depression because I was—you know, I'm 76 now; so I was in part of it. When you're a kid you don't feel that. My folks said somebody came around collecting money for the poor teachers. Well, the teachers had a job. And so I think back on that.

And so, no, I'm certainly not—I hate to see cuts anywhere, but I hate to see people lose a job. I hate to see the other people out of work. And certainly I'd say four-percent cut is—if it keeps other people working or whatever, somehow we can handle it. It's not—I know that wouldn't be popular in the teacher ranks. If they want to cut my little pension four-percent, they can do that, too.

Okay. What do you think is the most significant change you've seen over this long period that you've been here, 1956 to today, when you think about change over time?

Well, I'd have to say there are two. There was a big story that was written about me when I left the school district and I was asked that question. I said the biggest change is in families, brought on by all of the working mothers. I guess the way I described it is I said when I first went to work in the school district all children went home for lunch. They needed a note from a parent to stay at school for some reason. When I left, it was just the opposite because everybody ate at school. They needed a note to go home.

And the other one, of course, is the racial change, the change in the—much more inclusiveness even with a very diverse population, people joining hands becoming much more what America should be, I feel. Amazing how quickly some things change. For example, when I went to Joe Mackey most of the children sounded like they'd just come out of Louisiana or

Alabama.

Because their parents had just come out of there.

Yeah. But it made a great change when they went to these other schools. And so whatever standard English is became -- you know. But what do I look like? I don't know. You sound just like other people from --

Right. So what do you see as the future for the town or the school district? What do you see? I heard today that we're number 50 in the schools in the country.

Number 50 what?

We're 50th if you're going to rank schools in this country, school systems.

I guess I always wonder what ranking means because are we talking about academics or are we talking about high school graduation?

We're probably talking about all of that.

Uh-huh. If I go back to my hometown where you still have many people from the old families who've been around there a long time, most of their parents have been to college. They don't have our diversity. I think that when we have so many people who grow up with Spanish and then—you know, I've gone in as an acting principal in over 75 schools since I retired in '86. And where we give these paper-and-pencil tests and all that depend on—somehow it's all about the language on testing, that they understand the language, that they understand the culture, understand what's happened before, and then expect that kids without those experiences are going to do well on tests. They maybe do way, way better than they would have done last year or something. And I know I'm wandering all over the place with that, but you know what I mean.

What is the future? Whenever I look at these test results—how do we compare to Spain or how about Somalia? Do we do as well as the pirates of Somalia on tests? You know, I mean that's tongue and cheek. But how do you measure that? I was in, like I say, 75 schools or so as an acting principal and I saw people working really very hard and students trying to do well also.

I don't have an answer for teenage pregnancy or how to stop gang violence or anything like that. But I think that the opportunity to get a good education is here in this community right now. And I feel that my three sons all did get a good education here.

Well, I really thank you so much.

You know, we didn't even talk about my federal programs. You know, there are a lot of things we didn't talk about, but that's okay.

Okay. Now, what kind of federal programs?

Well, for 12 years when I left -- I was at Joe Mackey for two years. And I went out to the education center as the coordinator of federal programs. So this would be --

That's what you did from that point until you retired?

No. My last six years were back at C.C. Ronnow as a school principal where we started the third year-round school.

So tell me about the federal programs. What kind of programs did you help to develop?

We were responsible for all of the monies that come from special state or federal sources. Some of the monies come by formula and some through competition like, of course, the biggest one was Title One, sometimes Title One or Chapter One for low-income, low-achieving children. We had special mini grants for teachers and vocational special programs and Teacher Corps where we took—are you familiar with Teacher Corps? Do you know what that is?

No.

All right. Teacher Corps is where if you have a teacher shortage in certain areas or whatever -- there's always the argument of supply and demand. So you have people who have degrees. Some have just two years or somebody has a bachelor's degree. They have it in math. They have it in history or whatever. But Teacher Corps takes them from that point and prepares them to teach.

Okay. And then they can, yes.

So they end up with either—like we had both a bachelor's degree for people who already had two years before and people with bachelor's degrees who could work on a master's. I mean master degree program. And much of it would be practical and seminar work and so forth.

So they would be getting their educational certificates.

They'd end up with one and it would be in connection with UNLV.

Right.

So we developed those programs with UNLV.

Okay, yes. Uh-huh.

I went to many conferences and seminars where I learned about different programs. It was a fascinating time. But then I really—12 years in the central office was long enough. So I went back to a school where we started the third year-round school. I retired early at the age of 53.

So then I did a number of really other interesting things. I was the executive director for the National Conference of Christians and Jews here, which is a humanitarian organization for all people of goodwill. Esmeralda County, which is the county just north of us here, was having problems. Their superintendent and the board were at loggerheads. The board didn't think they could get somebody adequate in the middle of the year. So Dr. Wentz was the superintendent here and Dr. Paslov was the state superintendent of public instruction. They both called me and asked me if I would go up and talk to the board of our—anyway, they hired me. And I was just there for a semester. But, you know, it's amazing what you can do when you know that at a certain time you can put on your white hat and ride into the sunset, isn't it?

That's right. That's great. Yes.

So anyway, the first thing the old superintendent did, he took me around. He still lived in the superintendent's house. I lived in an apartment there. Anyway, he told me who all the bad guys were. So the first thing I did—you know what I did—I met all the bad guys. I took them to breakfast or lunch or whatever and I found out what their concerns were or whatever. And so when I went into town, you know, the 50-50 approval rating, I was riding high in two weeks because the previous superintendent didn't have any procedure. He'd put out some proposals and say, all right, read those and everybody in favor say aye. So I set up the administration just the way that they do here with notifications of meetings. Board members would receive materials two weeks ahead of time, so forth and so on. And, of course, you know everybody because it's so small.

Great. Is there anything else that you'd like to add? Tell me about your singing career. Did you continue that? Have you continued it until today?

Oh. Well, yeah, I've got so many things. You know, I wrote this book here. It's called *Experiences Outside of the Box*. The first chapter is about my singing career, which has been extensive, going on since I was a little Chinaman. Then the next chapter—

So did you continue the singing?

I still do.

That's what I meant. Okay, great.

So the next chapter is called "The Look." I was singing at the state PTA convention at the old Frontier hotel. So I'm singing there, and the convention is over and everybody is leaving. Have you ever -- you know that old song "Somewhere across a crowded room you see a stranger"?

Yes.

Have you ever just felt like somebody is coming my way? Well, that's the look. So anyway, I'm going out and here is this attractive lady going through the crowd. And I thought, you know, I think she's coming to see me. I don't know why, but I just had that feeling. And so she came up and she said Tina would like to see you. And I said, oh, who's Tina? Well, she owns the Lenz Modeling and Talent Agency.

So how long ago was that?

1986, because I had just retired from the school district. So anyway, I did some TV commercials. But the singing has -- of course, I've mentioned several things along about it. For example, Tom Williams is having its 50th anniversary. Jim Embree, who was the first principal there, and several other people were going to be speaking. And I said, well, I won't speak, but I could say a few words; I could sing a song. So I'm going to sing "What a Wonderful World." Also, there was a former principal who had died recently and they're having a celebration of life for him. So I'm singing there.

Good.

And I'll be singing "What a Wonderful World" again and, "Perhaps Love." Are you familiar with that song?

Probably.

It was a John Denver song. It explores love in different ways. I once called it my signature song or my all-purpose song because you could sing it for somebody's anniversary or a wedding or a memorial or anything. Then I'm going down to the Marriott hotel in Palm Desert, California, to lead the singing at a Rotary Club convention. There will probably be four or 500 people. So that's the end of the month. Then the first week of the next month, of June, I'm going to sing something for a musical being held in Sun City called "Sun City Boulevard." Now, here's a bunch of songs that I just will be singing at this convention.

So you are still quite busy with the entertainment.

Yeah. You know, they say if you don't use it, you'll lose it.

That's right.

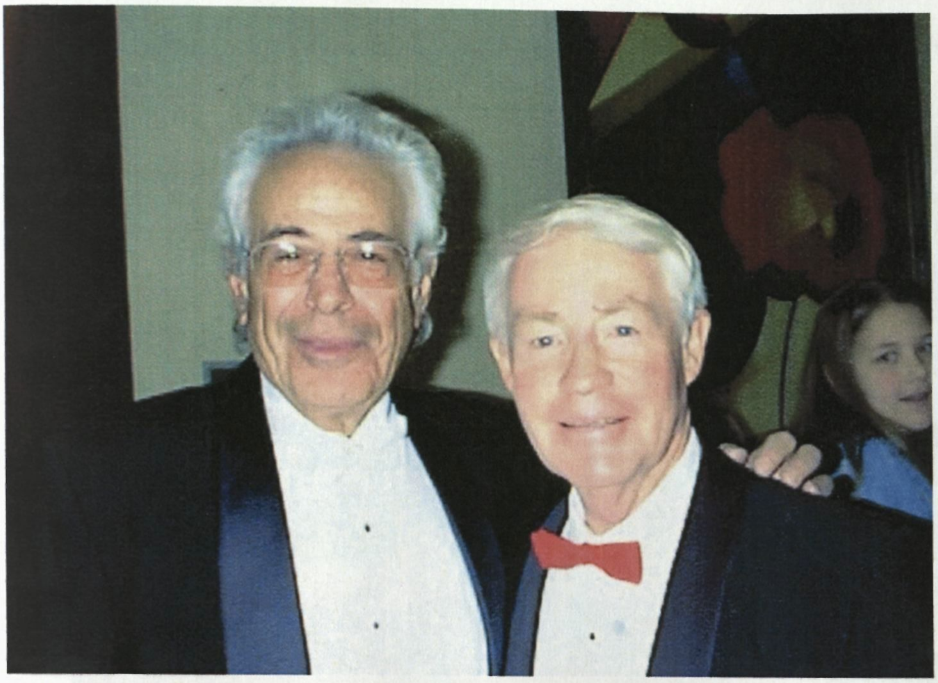
So it's been a nice ride.

Well, and it still is a great ride.

Yeah, it still is.

Okay, great. Well, I really thank you so much.

Singer



ABOVE: Dennis (right) with longtime accompanist Maestro Bernard Baskin.

LEFT: Dennis singing at one of several hundred weddings during his lifetime.

Philippines

Dennis with student choral group in Quezon City, Philippines (1997).

Rotary Group Study Exchange team before leaving for Philippines (1997).

District 5300 Group Study Exchange team receiving key to Quezon City, Philippines.

Dennis with "Jeepney" in downtown Manila (1997).

Appendix

Remembrances email to Rick Watson

Las Vegas Sun article: A student's principal, Ronnow's Ortwein retires after 30 years in Las Vegas (May 18, 1986)

Experiences Outside of the Box, a book by Dennis Ortwein

Las Vegas Sun, May 18, 1986

SUNphoto by LEE ZAICHICK

Principal Dennis Ortwein relaxes with students during break from physical education class

A student's principal

Ronnow's Ortwein retires after 30 years in Las Vegas

By HOWARD STUTZ
SUN Staff Writer

Ronnow Elementary School principal Dennis Ortwein wandered into the campus library one afternoon, moments before a first grade class was about to be dismissed.

In days long since past, any sign of the principal visiting a classroom usually spelled trouble for a student or two.

But not here.

Even with an enrollment of 843 students, Ortwein knows the majority of those pupils by first name.

All rushed up to him so they could show off what had been accomplished during that session. They flocked around him as a newspaper photographer snaped off some pictures.

Moments earlier, Ortwein had spent spent some time with third graders during a physical education class. While two kids at a time would practice an exercise for the teacher, the others sat on the ground and watched.

Ortwein plopped right down with them and — in their own way — the children explained to the principal what was going on.

It was because of students like these that Ortwein left the position of Federal Programs Cordinator he held for 11 years in the Education Center to return to the confines of the campus in 1981 as Ronnow's principal — a position he [illegible] bored with that job and I wanted to be back with the students. This is what I enjoy the most."

□

When Dennis Ortwein began his career with the Clark County School District at Lincoln Elementary School, there were no houses within a quarter-mile of the campus. Only dirt roads lead the up to the building and about only 40,000 people lived in the entire Las Vegas Valley

Still, some things haven't changed in 30 years.

"I think our biggest problem still facing us is classroom space for students," said Ortwein, 53, who is retiring at the close of this semester after a distinguished career with the CCSD.

"We're still looking to where we are going to put students. Not enough schools was our problem back when I began, and it's still a problem even today "

After three years at Lincoln, Ortwein moved over to Jim Bridger Junior High where he was a jack-of-all-trades.

Besides teaching english and social studies, he cor-rdinated the audio visual services and was the student council advisor

"You kind of had to do everything back then," Ortwein recalled. "When I started, it was the first year of the Clark County School District. That's when all the districts in North Las Vegas and Henderson and Boulder City com-

When Ortwein began teaching,

(Continued from Page 1B)

"We only had about 20 or so schools and just two high schools (Rancho and Las Vegas). So, it was really starting fresh."

The district soon recognized Ortwein's talents and in 1962 — at age 28 — he became the district's youngest principal, taking over at Tom Williams Elementary School.

Overcrowded schools played a part in Ortwein's years as principal at Williams. Half-day sessions were started but he didn't see a problem with them.

"They worked out quite well, I thought. We had joint teaching of classes and even with the overcrowded schools, everything went well," Ortwein said.

It was after his stint at Williams that Ortwein took a couple of years off, spending 1966-1968 in Nigeria in conjuction with the U.S. Agency for International Development. He ran the labratory school.

"That was a real eye-opening experience," Ortwein said. "While I was there, I saw through their eyes the Watts' fire, the Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King assinations. They had a lot of questions about all these events.

"I enjoyed the experience a lot and I wouldn't mind going back some day. It would be interesting to see how much the country has changed in the time I have been gone."

Upon his return, Ortwein went right into a hotbed — principal of all black Jo Mackey Sixth Grade Center from 1969 to 1970.

"It was a time when we were wrestling with desegregation and different programs," Ortwein said. "We had several programs housed in that school. Of course, it was a time when there was unrest in the country."

The district then moved him into the Education Center, where he administed federal programs for 11 years. It was a chance for Ortwein to get involved with all facets of the educational system.

But the love of the classroom and the students brought him back to the campus and to Ronnow.

□

Every week during Dennis Ortwein's career brought about a new memory. When asked to describe his favorite moments, it was a question that was tough to answer.

"Last week, our PTA honored our teachers during Teacher Appreciation Week by bringing breakfast one day and lunch

many streets still unpaved

another day," Ortwein said. "They also put little presents for the teachers in their mail boxes each day. Things like that happened all the time, so for memories, it's to pick out one certain event."

Since Ortwein came aboard, the CCSD has grown to more than 110 schools and has become the 19th largest school district in the nation.

But elementary school students haven't changed that much.

"What's really changed is the family unit. There are so many problems that can happen with the family today because both parents work or there are single parent homes, that students are always in a state of flux," Ortwein said. "Youngsters have a great many frustrations nowadays. More so than when the district first began. Also, it's much harder to be a principal today, I believe."

Private business, college teaching and other opportunities await Ortwein when he leaves the elementary school campus. He's also looking to spend some time traveling and out on the golf course.

However, while he won't miss 99.9 percent of the problems, it's the students that he'll miss the most.

• • •

The faculty and staff of Ronnow Elementary are hosting a retirement party for Ortwein on May 28 at the Elks Lodge from 4-7 p.m. Those interested in attending should RSVP by May 21 by calling 799-7159 or 799-7912. Cost is $5 per person.

The Arthur F. Brunn Memorial

EXPERIENCES OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

by

Dennis Ortwein

Las Vegas, Nevada

October, 2006

Acknowlegements

The inspiration to assemble these avocation happenings comes from several sources:

- "The Voice" from my first accompanist, brother Terrence; my first vocal duet partner, sister Noreen; and my spiritual model, brother John (deceased).
- "The Look" from Lenz Talent Agency president, Tena Hauser, who put me in several memorable episodes.
- "The Diplomat" from Ohio University's Dr Milton Ploghoft, who gave me a fascinating international role.
- "The Ambassador" from Rotary Club Governor Conrad Von Bibra, whose guidance and provision of leadership opportunities made a life-changing experience a reality.
- And finally, long-time friend, Joyce Standish, who edited and prepared these pages in a highly readable fashion.

PROLOGUE

Approaching the fourth quartile on this earth, it seems appropriate to reflect upon what has gone before—What have I done? Where have I been? Many people say they have had a boring life or bemoan the fact that "I should have . . . I would have . . . . I could have . . . done this or that." Certainly, each of us has had numerous highlights in our lives, with a few stumbles along the way. But "should have," "would have," and "could have" do not count. Let's look at a few highlights.

Now, let's see . . . can I find these highlights? Should I call them special passions or avocations?--call them activities outside of the box or ones which lit my fire?

Yes, these highlights are all of the above: "The Voice," "The Look," "The Diplomat," and "The Ambassador."

"THE VOICE"

The Boy Soprano

When three first-grade boys debuted on stage in "Christmas Around the World," who would have guessed that the freckled redhead in the middle was kicking off an avocation that would become perhaps his main life identifier? Those were the days when mothers made almost everything for their children . . . no costume shops in 1939. Mom had dyed silk stockings black for the braid, made a kimona from a flowered flour sack and slanted my eyes with a cosmetic of the day.

Preceded by the pretty Dutch girls clomping about in their wooden shoes and the little Mexican boys performing "*La Cucaraha,*" the moment arrived for the China boys. Prompted by Mrs. Santa's wand, the boys stepped forward and gave this rural Montana sellout crowd their touch of Asia:

"Runee downee cellar,
Catchee lots of mice.
Makee chop suey . . .
Velee, velee nice."

Several years passed, and the China boys received no invitations to again hit the boards. The Second World War was the big daily news, especially in Harlowton, this small town of 2,000 souls. Co.D. of the Montana National

Guard had been called to the Pacific shortly after the Pearl Harbor attack. Word of soldiers killed or wounded was often heard by loved ones on the daily radio reports. Dad's blond, curly-haired brother, Larry (barely a high school graduate), was killed by a sniper. Mom's brother, Bob (a real Montana cowboy trapper), went down in a bomber. I went to the shed behind our house to cry, because boys were supposed to be brave.

Three years passed, and the China boys had apparently faded from everyone's memory. But, not to worry. "Christmas Around the World" was being advertised in the Harlowton Times. Young thespians were rehearsing daily for what promised to be another hit on the Harlo stage. It would be neither "Oklahoma" nor "Carousel," but a can't-lose "revival" in this place at that time.

For the revival Mrs. Santa was upgraded to a fairy godmother, played by beautiful fifth-grade sister Rosalie, who tippy-toed about the stage with her star-tipped wand, waking the pretty Dutch girls, the little Mexican boys and other world representatives to demonstrate holiday joy from all corners of the earth.

It was time for the closer. The former China boy wore no braids. He stepped forward in a simple khaki uniform, highlighted only by corporal stripes and in his clear soprano voice, slowly rendered the song in the hearts and on the minds of all present, "I'll Be Home for Christmas." As the song wound down with . . . ". . . if only in my dreams," the entire crowd stood, as though cued by Rosalie's magic wand, and cheered for interminable minutes. It would be easy for the former China boy to have thought at this moment that a star was born. He later would realize that numerous factors determine the success of a vocal presentation—time, place, audience, circumstances. This fourth-grade experience would become the prototype for later on using "the Voice."

The Teenage Tenor

"The Voice" was never on vacation. During high school I frequently joined sister Noreen for duets at community affairs. We prided ourselves in both looking and sounding just right for whatever occasion, and usually got it right—but not always. Sometimes there were factors beyond our control. Invited to perform at the State Moose Lodge Convention banquet was a real feather in our caps, we thought. We prepared a Nelson Eddy-Jeannette MacDonald medley, including "Will You Remember?" and "Indian Love Call." Noreen looked gorgeous in her long hoop skirt and many-buttoned top, and I complemented her in appropriate hat and jacket.

The conventioneers had been making whoopee before entering the banquet hall and continued their drinking and laughing throughout dinner. We were introduced and began singing. The conventioneers continued their whoopee behavior, and we finally realized that we were just singing to each other. The prototype had not yet been put into practice. In retrospect, a sing-along beginning with "Roll out the barrel and we'll have a . . ." would have been perfect.

In a small high school of less than 150 students certain musical groups and presentations are difficult to produce, such as full orchestras and full-scale musicals. But as in the movie, "Hoosiers," you can occasionally hit the jackpot on a smaller scale. The early 20-something music teacher, Adeline Mattilla, called for male quartet auditions, and left standing were voices probably never assembled before or after in that place. There were three six-foot seniors and one five-foot, six-inch freshman. The bass, Morris Deering, was a real find. He could be mellow or booming, a true bass, like one who rarely comes along. Frank Robertson, the baritone, was perfect for the quartet, with an excellent sense for harmony. The first tenor, Phil Smart, had returned from the U.S. Army to finish high school, and on the side became the National AAU light heavyweight boxing champion. But this was music. Phil was the rare lyric tenor who soared effortlessly above the staff . . . yes, one of those who should have been discovered. I was the lead, or second tenor, and often sang the melody.

Our offerings included many of the old tried-and-true tunes you hear performed by barbershop groups today. But several numbers were included, which we realize today, were more politically and personally incorrect than the China boy's song. In those days no black students were in the school, black-faced minstrel shows were in vogue and there was no sensitivity to lyrics. Morris sang in his commanding bass, "Well, some folks say that a nigger won't steal," as the three of us harmonized, "But I caught one in my corn field," and so on. The only objection to such lyrics came from my mother, who said it was not a proper song. The three seniors graduated. A call went out for replacements, but it was never the same. The locals did not realize what they had, if only for one year.

Throughout high school years "the Voice" was readily available for solo or group singing opportunities in school, church and community. As an active Future Farmers of America (FFA) member, I participated in the Montana FFA Chorus and was selected to represent Montana in the National Chorus; this created a major crisis, especially with the football coach. As the team fullback in this football-crazy small town, my leaving the team for several practices and one conference gâme was highly unpopular with Coach Williams and his cocktail cronies at the Graves Lounge. But what a marvelous experience it was!—riding the Milwaukee Road east and the Rock Island Line south to Kansas City. I was joined in travel by trumpeter, Bob Pimperton, of Belt, Montana, and three Idaho musicians: The Montanans were Catholic; the Idahoans were Mormon. We buddied throughout the convention, and somehow the football team won without me.

Chorus and band members arrived three days early to prepare for performances and recordings. Uncle Joe and Aunt Ethel lived there and offered to show us the town. Joe arranged to take us boys to a wrestling match. He mentioned that he had been a rabid wrestling enthusiast until one night, the match was so fake, a group of patrons tore the ticket booth from the building. Joe had been one of the group, and this was his first return to the arena since that event.

The main event pitted Lord Albert Mills (announced as the "Champion of Montana") against local favorite, Olie, the Swede. Using no prototype to guide our behavior, we began to cheer lustily for our Montana champion. Naturally, our voices were very lonely, and it was soon evident that Olie would satisify the blood-thirsty crowd. When I stood to cheer on Lord, two huge hands engaged my shoulders from behind and slammed me back in my seat. A huge, Mafia-type hollered, "Kid, another word from you and I'll take you out!" Uncle Joe gave me the look and the sign to withdraw support for our Montana champion and let Olie have his way.

Let's see . . . what was the prototype-- time, place, audience, circumstances?

* * * * *

<u>The College Troubadour</u>

So, after high school . . . what's next? Mom said that Gonzaga had an excellent choral program and would surely welcome "the Voice." Along with that suggestion was another: "We can't help you financially, but stay in Harlo and work a year at the mill for your Dad and you can finance college." I thought about the other young men about town. Yes, I'd get stuck there just like them, marry the remaining waitress and begin raising the next generation of little Harlo Engineers. On to plan B.

The University of Montana had invited me to join the Grizzly football team with the following letter:

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

Missoula

15 December 1950

Department of
Intercollegiate Athletics

Mr. Dennis Ortwein
Harlowton, Montana

Dear Dennis:

I want to take this opportunity of extending Christmas greetings to you and congratulating you on your fine football season.

We at the University of Montana have been watching your progress with interest and we want you to know that we are very much interested in you.

We would like to see you continue your education as one of our Grizzlies. We think that the University has a great deal to offer our own Montana boys and that you in turn will be able to contribute a great deal to making our future Grizzly teams outstanding. I hope that I will have the chance to meet you before the school year is completed and talk things over. In the meantime I would like to hear from you regarding your future plans.

I would like to point out that our R.O.T.C. program will keep the draft off your neck. It is important that you get your application in early, so let me hear from you.

With best regards, I am

Sincerely yours,

TS:rh

Ted Shipkey

Head Football Coach

I had been a four-year starter and was named All-Conference fullback in the Southern Montana Conference my senior year. Because running backs get all of the ink by scoring the touchdowns, I was apparently being "tracked" by the scouts for four years. As I was often the leading scorer in basketball over those four years, the Ortwein name became familiar on the sports pages. My senior year, freshman brother Bob (same birthday) was left halfback and scored eleven touchdowns in an eight-game season. With "Ortwein" credited with a raft of touchdowns, the elder picked up the All-Conference medal. Brother Bob's distinguished career would culminate in his being named Catholic College All-American out of Carroll College.

But I knew that there was a huge jump from high school to college and could see myself on the bench and on the practice squad. Actually, I thought perhaps “the Voice” might be the better option.

Uncle Tom and Aunt Madelyn lived in Missoula and invited me to bunk in and attend the university. I signed up for voice lessons with John Lester, a magnificent baritone, formerly with the Met. Mr. Lester had plans for me, so much so that he saw me with Mario Lanza (the great Italian tenor) quality in need of expanding vocal range. In several weeks, however, the first of two auto accidents put me in a year’s convalescence. So, farewell to Missoula.

Sister Noreen graduated high school the next year, and we decided to go 90 miles east to Billings and Eastern Montana College. Billings was closer to home, and we could both work part-time at St. Vincent’s Hospital, almost adjacent to the college. Noreen worked as secretary to the director of nursing, and I was an evening orderly. During this time sister Rosalie interned as a nurse in the hospital. Even with working and serving on the Student Legislature, “the Voice” stayed active as soloist for college choral groups and musicals, along with earning a few bucks as a banquet and wedding singer.

Although singing was usually in the forefront and speaking only an accessory, there were instances where "the Voice" stood alone, sans melody. The advisor to the Student Legislature was Dr. Ray Lowe, an energetic, creative live-wire, who served as Assistant to the President. He once asked to speak to me after a meeting and proposed I join him in a weekly Saturday morning radio show. Dr. Lowe said: "I've been listening to you in the meetings and think you'd be a perfect announcer." And so, "Eastern on the Air" was born. We sometimes were in his office Fridays until midnight, but at 10:00 a.m. Saturday morning the theme song began, and "the Voice" intoned, "Welcome to Eastern on the Air . . ." A good example of what we aired would be presentation of an evening concert by the Brigham Young University symphony orchestra. We taped everything from pre-concert warm-ups to the standing ovation applause . . . and whizzed back to the office to create a proper half-hour radio program. Actually, it sounded quite realistic, as "the Voice" whispered over the tuning musicians: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Dennis Ortwein at the Lincoln Junior High auditorium in Billings, Montana bringing to you a special concert . . ." But alas! . . . Dr. Lowe was hired away by the University of Oregon, so after a short but successful run, "Eastern on the Air" was off the air.

As graduation day approached and the "Halls of Ivy" would soon be in the rear-view mirror, it was time to get a teaching job. I had been Montana President and Northwest Region Representative of the Future Teachers of America and was well-known among the school superintendents. Several unsolicited offers came from small-town schools that needed teacher-coaches and general handymen. I could see myself in some small town, being praised when we won and harangued when we lost. No doubt I would get stuck with the chorus. If I stayed long enough and the principal moved or capsized, perhaps I would be elevated. Perhaps I would marry the remaining waitress or the spinster school mom.

Recruiters came in weekly from school districts all over the country, but I only took one interview—with J. Harold Brinley from Clark County, Nevada. Mr. Brinley showed a colorful map, not at all to scale. You could go snow skiing at Lee Canyon and water skiing on Lake Mead on the same day. There were easy one-day drives in all directions to Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, Phoenix or Mexico. You could eat a scrumptious buffet for a buck, while enjoying quality entertainment in any hotel lounge. You would be joining the "maiden" faculty of the just-consolidated Clark County School District. My reaction: Sounds good. Sign me up.

Mom was delighted. She had spent her life "stuck" in Harlo and urged her seven to reach out beyond small-town Montana. And yes, she thought, Las Vegas would be a great place to visit. And so it was.

In August of 1956 "the Voice" entered Las Vegas for the first time. The gray "52 Chevy coupe approached the bright lights from the north just after dusk. Even then, with Las Vegas and Clark County populations approximating 30,000 and 50,000, it was a miraculous sight to this red-haired former "China Boy." The first three evening meals were taken for $1.00 at the Thunderbird Hotel buffet and eaten in the lounge, watching Jackie and Roy and other alternating groups.

For several months "the Voice" was pretty much on vacation. As a fifth-grade teacher getting started on a career in a new community, singing ranked low on the priority list for several years. A mention of my Montana roots often brought a "You're from Mon---ta-a-a---na-a?" followed by a chuckle. Now, 50 years later, those same people yearn to visit "The Last Best Place," a name by which it is now known.

But the vacation was relatively short and gradually took on a life of its own. I became a soloist for numerous community events, i.e., Memorial Day Services, the Mayor's Prayer Breakfasts, PTA State conventions, and others. For 35 years, first at St. Francis de Sales and then at Our Lady of Las Vegas, I was the paid cantor and soloist for Masses, weddings and funerals. In addition, I performed at many weddings in various churches, in back yards and in wedding chapels. Palm and Davis mortuaries and several Protestant churches commissioned me for funerals. Over 50 years, 500 wedding performances and countless memorials is probably a conservative estimate.

Participation in community organizations sent "the Voice" in several directions. Membership in Rotary Club from 1962 to the present led to leading songs at weekly meetings and at 30+ district conventions, not only in Nevada, but also California and Arizona. For several years I composed special lyrics to a familiar tune in celebration of each member's birthday.

A fun-performing group grew out of Rotary music. My good friend, John Ahern, owner of Ahern Renter Centers, was an excellent harmonica player and joined the song-leading at weekly meetings. We were soon joined by two guitars, a bass, a mandolin, and a fiddle. People heard us at Rotary, and the word spread. For several years the Ahern Rent-A-Band played and sang at District Rotary conventions, Strip conventions, political gatherings, or wherever asked to take part. The convention music was always highly anticipated by the Rotarians, especially when I teamed with two outstanding keyboardists, first, Dan Stover and then, Don Kemp.

Dan Stover was one of those Rotarians who "lived" Rotary, perhaps over the edge, so much so that his honeymoon trip was planned to not jeopardize his perfect attendance record. He was a jolly, chubby Alhambra school administrator who played piano and organ with seven full fingers and three partial fingers. For years Dan was an icon at Rotary events around District 5300. He would take off the legs of his traveling organ, put it sideways into a special trailer and be off to a performance. At conventions he would play at meal sessions and later in the hospitality rooms. As a new Rotarian, I joined him in a hospitality room for a few tunes, and we clicked immediately. As the fates would have it, the assigned convention song leader failed to appear, and "the Voice" was drafted into a duo, which provided ongoing Rotary music for sixteen years.

In 1987 Dan was fighting cancer and had shrunk from his robust 200-plus pounds to around 90 pounds. It was assumed that he would miss his first Rotary convention in years. John Ahern of the North Las Vegas Club arranged to take Dan to the convention in Santa Barbara. "The Voice" organized music around the "Ahern Rent-A-Band" and personal friend, Alice Gerety (on grand piano) with Dan Stover a question mark. Well, Dan rose to the occasion. He was hoisted onto the organ bench, put in remote control and literally rocked with Alice and the Band.

At the Sunday closing session, when all the "thank-you's" and hugs took place, Governor Joe Buckley approached me and said, "Let's take a chance." He proposed a short Dan Memorial with Dan as the major recipient. Governor Joe delivered a beautiful, heart-wrenching tribute to Dan, followed by "the Voice" and Alice presenting "Danny Boy," while the entire assemblage stood in Dan's honor. As tears flowed, Dan beamed. Two weeks later he passed to the other side. The prototype: Time, place, audience, circumstances-- had all just fallen into place.

But excellence in Rotary music was to continue, as Don Kemp of the Paradise Club stepped up to the plate. Don was owner of Music World, the state's largest music store. He had accompanied many early great entertainers—from Tony Bennett to Jerry Lewis to Vic Damone. Where Dan Stover was the upbeat, fun, jovial player, Don was an expert player in every idiom—from classical to jazz. "The Voice" often felt like stepping aside, forgetting the song leading and just letting all hear Don's magnificent playing. A favorite for Don and "the Voice" at each convention was to select a number for a surprise presentation to the governor's spouse at the final banquet. "Wind Beneath My Wings," for example, typically brought a tear to the eye of many.

While serving on the Nevada PTA Board of Managers, "the Voice" was often called upon. One particularly memorable occasion was the Ely State Convention in 1981. Ann Lynch (later to become Nevada's first and only national president) was state president and named her Board of Managers "The Lynch Mob." Each member took on the name and persona of an icon in Western history, from Calamity Jane to Wyatt Earp. As Roy Rogers, I put together a lyric book of familiar country-Western songs. And what a time-saver it was!—as participants moved quickly from one session to the next with lyric book in hand, ready to join in "Mammas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys" or "Help Me Make It Through The Night."

Another fun interlude came, when I collaborated with outstanding guitar/banjo player, Tom Marth, on a convention/meeting song-leading venture. We put together a check-book size lyric book of familiar standard and patriotic songs. I had 2,000 copies of "Sing A Song with Dennis and Tom" printed. After four or five jobs Tom began working full-time with a Strip band. As of this writing Tom is the guitar/banjo guy for the popular Scintas group on the Strip. Several hundred lyric books are still in their original box.

The summers of 1957 through 1959 found me motoring to the University of Montana in Missoula for a Master's degree. During the fourth summer back in Las Vegas "the Voice" was entered in a singing contest sponsored by Budweiser. Remember "Pick a pair of six-packs . . . buy Bud?" For five weeks on Sunday evening five singers performed on the CBS affiliate Channel 8. On the sixth week the five weekly winners competed in the sing-off, with the winning pair earning a trip to Hollywood. The viewing audience voted, and somehow, "the Voice" garnered more votes than the other four, performing a medley of "Arrivederci Roma" and "Til."

With two Channel 8 chaperones, Jack Reynolds and Hal Morelli, and the second pick, a Ray Bolger impersonator named Jack Shaw, I was off to be "discovered." We were to perform on "Rocket to Stardom," a weekly amateur show held in the showroom of Yeakel Brothers Oldsmobile. (I bought a white dinner jacket with all the trimmings at the Stardust Hotel Men's Shop, did not enter it in the checkbook, and the check bounced.)

There we sat, Jack and I, waiting to be called. The little Jones sisters harmonized on "Whispering Hope," Jasbo Fulkerson clicked spoons off his knees, and on and on it went. Between performers the one camera was wheeled to the lot to advertise a car: "Here is a genuine '46 Studebaker," and so on. Barely awake, I got the call at 2:30 a.m., plunked my music in front of the disinterested accompanist, listened while he created an introduction, and muddled through my medley. I realized that this was no place to "get discovered" and was pleased the talent scouts were home asleep.

Still, the trip was memorable in numerous ways. We were interviewed on two popular daytime TV shows--"Ladies Fair" and "Queen for a Day"-- and dined at the Red Barn and the Seven Seas. On Sunday evening we were guests of Sammy

Davis, Jr. at the Moulin Rouge dinner show. It was his sister's birthday, and the audience included Sammy Davis, Sr. and Will Masten, Sammy's uncle. Backstage was fun. I chatted with Sammy while he dressed and tied his tie. As a pretty showgirl walked by, he blew his whistle. Everyone froze. He ran out, gave the showgirl a nip and a pat, blew the whistle, and everyone got busy again. I could not understand the excitement when another attractive blonde appeared backstage. They all looked good to me! Whispers of, "There she is!" meant nothing to me. At that time Sammy and the famous actress, Kim Novak, were an item. And, of course, there she was. Yes, it was late August and time to get back to Las Vegas and the business of teaching school. And there I went.

*****

In August, 1962 at the age of 28, I had been appointed principal of Tom Williams School. For whatever reason, I auditioned to play Will Parker, the comedy's second lead in the Musical Arts Workshop presentation of "Oklahoma." What a relief it was, when I was told that, although I sang better, a tall, gangly cowboy better fit the Will Parker persona. Good. My first year as principal . . . who needs another job! Well, the gangly cowboy bombed early, and they came begging. So, off I went to nightly rehearsals, sandwiched between PTA and faculty/administrative meetings.

"Oklahoma" was a big hit. Review-Journal feature writer, Don Warman, wrote in part:

> . . . the best show in Las Vegas is not on the Strip; it is in the Las Vegas High School Auditorium . . . the Workshop has struck pure gold in Gloria Simon (Ado Annie) and Dennis Ortwein (Will Parker). Their lover's quarrels make you wonder if their relationship, not Curley's, is the centerpiece of the play. . . . . Mr. Ortwein, an elementary school principal, troupes like he was born in a trunk in Pocatello. Las Vegas will be clamoring to see more of them.

The Sun City Star

A move to Sun City, Summerlin in 1993 opened new vistas for "the Voice." The Sun City "inmates" are continually looking for new entertainment, as well as savoring the tried and true. "The Voice" retained some performing options on the "outside" but gradually found most opportunities right there in Sun City by hooking up with several talented musicians who continue as performing partners and personal friends as these memoirs are being written.

I met the Maestro, Bernard Baskin, at a charity dinner for the Nevada School of the Arts. In our tuxes and with our white hair, we struck up a conversation around the hors d'oeuvres and wine table. Discovering that we both lived in Sun City made exploration of possibilities a natural. That meeting was followed by a working and friendship relationship, which continues, even as the Maestro, at age 81, has moved to an assisted-living situation.

The Maestro, even when in the U.S. Army, was a pianist, composer, arranger, conductor and talent coach. In the twilight of his career he was looking to keep the show on the road. Bernard contracted for a series of concerts at the 350-seat Sun City Starbright Theatre. Six "Bernard Baskin in Concert" shows included "the Voice." Most presentations featured a female singer joining "the Voice" in several duets, while each presented solos, reflecting the concert theme, i.e., "The Bells Are Ringing" at holiday time" and "Some Enchanted Evening," featuring the music of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

For years I had dreamed of singing a concert with all songs centering on cities and towns. I proposed such a concert to Bernard, to include only the Maestro and "the Voice." And what fun it was!—from planning to performance. We both created long lists of songs, ran through them and ended with one and one-half hours of wonderful songs for the show. Before a sell-out crowd, "Your Kind of Town" began with "the Voice" coming on from stage right singing, "Your Kind Of Town, Chicago Is" followed by some Bernard intro chatter. The program saw the Maestro and "the Voice" carrying the audience around the U.S. and then abroad, with just enough patter to tie it all together. "Shanty Town" and Tom Lehrer's tongue-in-cheek, "My Old Home Town" set the stage for the city/town specific numbers to follow. The Maestro bunched his tunes into regional or city sets, i.e., New York or London. My numbers were interspersed with tunes from west to east, i.e., "I Left My Heart In San Francisco," "By The Time I Get To Phoenix," "Sioux City Sue" and "Chattanooga Choo-Choo."

The international section was mostly European: "Torna Sorrento," "Arrivederci Roma," "April In Paris," "How Are Things In Glocca Morra," and "The Rose Of Tralee," to name a few. This show occurred the evening after President Clinton's "State of the Union Address," and thus, provided an easy segue into a natural closer. "The Voice" got heart-to-heart with the audience, remarking that the President had made a strong point of cozying up to China. No one present knew that my vocal avocation had begun as a China Boy in the first grade. Still, I invited all to join the President in his endeavor. I told them that the Maestro and I had decided to move cautiously and start somewhere across the bay. Our closer, "On The Road To Mandalay," brought the full house to a lengthy standing ovation.

The prototype: time, place, audience, circumstances? . . . . absolutely!

*****

The second hookup came with Lynn Burdick, a contemporary of the Maestro and a highly skilled musician/composer. Lynn has been in music for most of her eighty years. Besides her ability to churn out age-specific musicals, from the playbook to music and lyrics, she has the charm and drive to assemble and inspire often neophyte actors, singers and dancers to rise above themselves. "The Voice" appeared in several of what she calls "skitsos," the most recent a hillbilly farce titled, "From Stinky Creek to Sun City." Internal to the main story (paralleling Ma and Pa Kettle in the "Beverly Hills" TV comedy) was a musical show direct from the Las Vegas Strip, which featured two groups of dancers-- waltzers in tuxes and gowns and lady jazz dancers with top hats and canes. Vocalists on either side of the stage, also clad in tuxes, were Dick Schorr and "the Voice."

A week before "Stinky Creek," "the Voice" contracted friends Lynn Burdick on piano and Jimmy B. on drums to help with a fun musical seminar at the Sun City Talent Hour. For this one, I reached into the closet for my Montana duds top to bottom from black and white hats to silver belt buckle to dusty boots. Preceding us on the program were some jazz dancers who finished with "Takin' A Chance On Love." I strolled onto the stage with "Yes, takin' a chance on love . . . we all do it and we've all done it. But somehow all too often we end up on a rocky road. Now there's a solution, a perfect formula, for avoiding the bumps on that rocky road; however, first let's look at where the rocky road might lead us." At this point Lynn and Jimmy B. began the intro for "Walk On By." There was huge applause when I finished. "Well, what's next?" A voice from the audience hollered, "Divorce!" My response was, "Let's be gentle; how about calling it departure?" and we went right into, "Please release me; let me go, for I don't love you anymore." So "the Voice" scratched his head and told the audience that it's mighty lonely back on the streets and suggested a quick fix might be a one-night stand. After "Help Me Make It Through The Night," it was time for the formula to avoid the rocky road.

Introduction to the solution formula went something like this: I reviewed the many songs I sang at several hundred weddings and discovered the formula; it was written and performed by the late great John Denver, who, as most of you know, found many bumps in his road to love. But he discovered that many relationships go sour because one or both participants focus selfishly only on their own personal needs. It is all about ME—only for ME. Denver suggests that shifting the focus from ME to YOU, Only For You. I know that this formula works, because as I sang this song at their wedding ceremony, Jenni and Joe got up and danced cheek-to-cheek, and they are still dancing cheek-to-cheek.

FOR YOU by John Denver

Just to look in your eyes again
Just to lie in your arms
Just to be the first one always there for you
Just to live in your laughter
Just to sing in your heart
Just to be every one of your dreams come true
Just to sit by your windows
Just to touch in the night
Just to offer a prayer each day for you
Just to long for your kisses
Just to know that I'd give my life for you.

For you all the rest of my life
For you all the best of my life
For you alone, only for you

Just to wake up each morning
Just to you by my side
Just to know that you're never really far away.

Just a reason for living

Just to say I adore

Just to know that you're here in my heart to stay.

For you all the rest of my life

For you all the best of my life

For you alone, only for you.

Just the words of a love song

Just the beat of my heart

Just the pledge of my life, my love for you.

Being a church soloist can take one in many directions. Now that "the Voice" has been retired from cantorial duties and the day job (school administration) for some years, far more spin-off remains from the avocation While singing Masses, weddings and memorials on a weekly basis, I became highly recognizable throughout the greater community. Even today, I am called over at a restaurant or an event with comments such as, "I remember you from my sister's wedding" or " 'Perhaps Love' is still my favorite song because of how you sang it."

Let me share with you how experiences expanded beyond the church. For years I cantored 8:00 a.m. Mass with Liz Lynch at the organ and sang with the choir at 9:30 a.m. Mass. A handsome couple seemed to show up about monthly, and I noticed they made a positive impact on tones from the pews. Several times they walked past Liz and me after Mass and complimented us on our presentation. One day the gentleman, Robert MacNeal, remarked, "You must just roll out of bed on key at full voice. I can never do that." And so, the conversation following revealed that they were professional singers of some repute who came to Las Vegas monthly from California to visit Melissa Mac Neal's elderly parents. The MacNeals had met years earlier while playing the leads in "Carousel" at the Pasadena Playhouse. We became close social friends, and "the Voice" visited them when they moved to Camano Island, Washington. Even after both parents passed away, Melissa and Robert continued their trips to Las Vegas, always with plenty of interaction with "the Voice."

In early December, 1996, I received a call from Robert. He said that since moving to Camano Island, he had been inundated with singing requests, with the big one just ahead. He was to headline a three-night Christmas Celebration, with proceeds to benefit the Northwest Organization for Animal Help (NOAH). Unfortunately, Bob was to sing eight songs but had contracted laryngitis; he told the Board that if he could not shake it, he could think of only one person who could fill his role. He hoped to be okay, but asked if I could clear those days . . . just in case. Several days passed, and I received a call from Bob. They had purchased my ticket and would pick me up in Seattle. We sampled coffee and delicacies on our trek through the new world coffee capital between Seattle and Camano Island.

Upon arrival in Camano it was down to business. The show accompanist (who would be joined by a small orchestra for performances) rehearsed the eight songs with me. The next evening was dress rehearsal, but much of the time was spent on blocking and touching up a few loose ends. Still, I wasn't concerned, as the songs were already in my Christmas repertoire.

On the third evening it was show time. A vocal trio, including Melissa MacNeal, introduced the program with "We Need A Little Christmas." The chairman of the Board welcomed and thanked the audience before introducing the planned star of the show. Bob stepped on stage, elegant in his tux and a colorful vest, with his trusty boxer dog, Buddy, at his side. The audience would naturally be surprised at Bob's message.

Expecting to hear their recently adopted world-renowned baritone burst into song, instead, Bob offered a brief apology and introduction of his "replacement" with humor and aplomb: "Ladies and gentlemen, I have been nursing laryngitis for some days and unfortunately, cannot sing tonight; however, all is well. I knew there was one vocalist who could step in and sing this program tonight, my best friend, Dennis Ortwein, from Las Vegas, Nevada. We performed on stage many times in such musicals as 'Oklahoma' and 'Carousel.' The only problem was he kept all the pretty girls for himself. (Much laughter.) No doubt, several years ago some of you were delighted by a handsome red-haired tenor in Las Vegas; it was probably Dennis. And so, direct from Las Vegas, here's Dennis." I shook hands with Bob and patted Buddy, as we exchanged positions on center stage.

After short but generous applause, you could hear a pin drop. They were thinking: "Will he really sing Bob's opener, "Mille Cherubini In Caro?" But no . . . "the Voice" opened with his only program change, a soulful version of "Mary's Little Boy Child." Various community soloists and groups performed throughout the evening, with "the Voice" the soloist on "O Holy Night" and "Count Your Blessings Instead Of Sheep." "The Voice" was also soloist on a beautiful medley in concert with the lovely children's choir, Legacy, singing harmony and descants on "Gesu Bambino" and "Panis Angelicus" (in Latin).

A real highlight was the playlette featuring ten-year-old Christi and her grandfather (Dennis). Christi was facing a bleak Christmas, when grandfather appeared and placed gifts in her fireplace stocking and around her tree. They joined in singing "I'll Be Home For Christmas" and enticed the audience to join their duet of "White Christmas."

After each performance the Washingtonians were warm and generous with comments to the substitute star. Several even remembered seeing him on the Las Vegas stage in the days of yore: "I believe I heard you at the Sahara," to which "the Voice" responded, "Most probably. Thank you for remembering."

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For ten years my brother, Robert, pediatrician in Racine, Wisconsin, had been the money-shaker of "Irish Night for Literacy," with daughter, Michelle, and son-in-law, Jim McVeigh, joining in the planning, organizing and grunt work. The St. Patrick weekend had grown from a small event to a major fun/fund-raising effort in the community. Proceeds supported the work of the Racine Literacy Council.

Irish Week had grown to offer something for everyone. From Thursday through Saturday there were workshops on Irish Music—fiddle, tin whistle, flute, bodhran and Irish dance. Irish gifts were for sale and Irish food and drink plentiful. The Irish Book Exhibit had The Book of Kells (one of only four facsimiles in existence) as its centerpiece.

But the big money-maker and culminating activity was the concert, that year of 2004 being the Tenth Anniversary Concert; unbeknownst to anyone, this would be brother Bob's swan song, and, as usual, was sold out. The Celtic Club (the deep-pockets folks who show up once a year to eat, drink and write healthy checks) were assembled in the box seats looking down on the multitude. Members of Dr. Bob's family took over the box seats nearest the stage and turned out to be my cheerleaders.

When the committee met to plan the concert, they suggested the usual groups:Frogwater, The Sandcarvers, the Jeff Ward Band and the Trinity Dancers. Brother Bob mentioned that something missing from other concerts, which should be a big hit with the audience, would be an Irish singer who would involve the audience in some traditional Irish music. After minimal brain-storming the committee had no problem with the singer being the chairman's brother, but a singer with the name "Ortwein" might be a hard Irishman to sell. When Bob said that I signed checks "O. Dennis Ortwein," someone piped up with, "How about Denis O'Denis"? And so, Denis O'Denis was added to the marquee.

The concert literally rocked, with the upbeat bands and dancers giving the full house a workout. Centerfold to the program were several green pages of Irish favorites. After receiving a generous introduction, "the Voice" led the community of "Irish for Today" folks in "The Rose Of Tralee," "I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen," "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" and "Mac Namara's Band." He closed with "How Are Things In Glocca Morra" and "Danny Boy."

Thousands poured into the Literacy Council coffers, as brother Bob (accompanied by several family members) took leave of this project. Observing all of the Ortwein/McVeigh planning, publicity, ticket-selling, graphics and plain old grunt contributions to this event makes one wonder who will next step up to the plate. Brother Bob left his lofty position with only two words of advice, two words on which he had harped throughout his tenure with the Literacy Council: "SELL TICKETS!"

And so, the moral of this story is to sell tickets. In a follow-up on Irish Night, the report came back that the 2005 and 2006 attendance had dwindled. It appears that the project will be scrapped.

In all concerts in which I performed with the Maestro Bernard Baskin, we played to a full house, largely because I SOLD TICKETS! I have discovered that the best way to ensure a standing ovation is to fill the seats with your friends.

* * * * *

One can become a bit smug, when most auditions end with the call. After all, we're not only dealing with "The Look" here, but also with "the Voice." While in Missoula, Montana pursuing a Master's degree in the summer of 1958, there was a call for musical tryouts. "Of Thee I Sing" is a satire, taking the American political system to task at almost every turn. Some great songs were written for the 1931 play by the Gershwin brothers.

At the audition, it was apparent that home cooking would rule the day. A group of Montana music teachers showed up, some on campus for summer school and others there just to amaze audiences with their outstanding talents. They were quickly slotted into the major roles, including the one I really wanted, that of the French Ambassador. I lost out to a gangly, bearded beanpole, who could sing a little and bumble through his lines with a humorous French dialect. Somehow, I thought if you were "the Voice," it should be easy for everyone to tell. I could see myself intervening in the international incident, singing, "She's the illegitimate daughter of the illegitimate son of the illegitimate nephew of Napoleon." But it was not to be.

I played some fun bit parts as the presidential candidate, John F. Wintergreen, had the most fun courting each of then-1958 Miss America candidates. He was to propose in Madison Square Garden and marry Miss America—where else?—but "On The Boardwalk In Atlantic City."

The vice-presidential candidate, Alexander Throttlebottom, was played by Professor Carroll O'Connor (later to become famous as Archie in the TV series) and portrayed as a bumbling non-entity who had to join a tour to see the White House. At a rehearsal one day an eighteen-year-old buxom beauty, fresh from small-town Montana, asked Professor O'Connor to define one of my bit parts, Supreme Court Justice, with, "Back in'31, who were the AK's?" The soon-to-be Archie replied, "The same as they are today, my dear . . . ass-kissers." The girl had wondered why we got such a laugh just singing, "We're The AK's Who Give The OK's."

As I drove away from Missoula, several things came into focus: Sometimes you can't write, much less control, the prototype (time, place, audience, circumstances). Sometimes a role may go to someone better-suited for the part because it requires a bumbling, stumbling and grumbling person (or he was more like Peter Sellers than me). Sometimes you're caught up in "home cooking," but don't really notice it when you're the recipient of its favor.

"THE LOOK"

Meeting Tena

Moving toward retirement in May of 1986, I closed out considerable tenure with the Nevada PTA Board of Managers at the state convention in Las Vegas. The Friday evening entertainer was George Dare, writer of "Runnin' Rebel Fever," which he performed that evening as his final number. To add some pzazz to the finale, he asked for audience participation: "Has anyone here ever been on stage?" Fingers pointed my way, and I joined a handful of PTA ladies mimicking the leader by snapping our fingers, slapping our knees and waving our arms. Of course, entertainer Dare was unaware that I was to be the vocalist at the Saturday banquet.

Later, exiting the Frontier Hotel showroom, my eye caught a well-dressed and attractive woman working her way through the crowd. Somehow, I knew that she was heading my way; sure enough, my hunch was correct. She touched my arm and said, "Tena would like to meet you." Tena was the president of the Lenz Modeling and Talent Agency, the largest in Las Vegas at that time.

What followed were the pictures, the resumes, the interviews, and yes . . . the cattle calls. Initially, I was selected for numerous senior roles in TV commercials, mostly for the Convention Authority and shown in major U.S. cities.

Selling Las Vegas

For the first shoot I arrived at Caesars Palace with enough clothing changes to stay a month (and quickly learned to come with only two appropriate outfits).

The shoot was at pool-side, where another 50-something male joined me on a chaise lounge, reading a magazine. When two stacked beauties strolled by in bikinis and gave my modeling companion and me that "something" look, what were a matched pair of red-blooded octogenarians to do? We removed the sun glasses, closed the magazines, looked at each other, gazed back at the girls and nodded affirmatively.

We both agreed: After all, we *are* in Las Vegas!

* * * * *

Not being otherwise employed at the time, I answered some cattle calls from the Agency. It was always: "We think you have just the look for . . ." whatever.

Upon arriving for the audition or interview, it was clear that they thought otherS also had "the look." Of course, the hotel or corporation wanted choices to represent their product. Frequently, I apparently had "the [best] look."

The circular drive at the Aladdin Hotel was cordoned off with yellow tape. A crowd began to gather, asking, "What's going on?" and "Who're the stars?" With a white-haired lady on my arm I was clad in casual white twills and blue blazer. We waited for valet service. A young, handsome, elegantly dressed couple stood beside us, ready to drive off in style. A valet zoomed up in a sparkling red convertible and opened the door. I helped my smiling lady into the passenger seat and gracefully slid behind the wheel. I glanced over at the refined twosome, whispered, "Ta-ta," and burned rubber to cheers from the crowd.

After all, we *are* in Las Vegas, I thought.

* * * * *

Several cattle calls placed me in the company of the sharp-elbows folks. A goodly number of us "personalities" would be selected to act joyously in a casino buffet line or at a crap table. The aggressive ones invariably pushed to the front or engaged the person in charge in order to be featured.

Sam's Town ran a commercial to hype their fifth anniversary by holding daily drawings for cash and cars. About twenty "personalities" were in a room with a bright-red Taurus. When the background music started, dollar bills floated from above and a deep baritone intoned, "Money, cars . . . money, cars," while the twenty raised hands to catch the bills and appeared to be awestruck before the sparkling vehicle.

A sharp-elbows young couple moved to be featured entering the car, as I stood off to the side. The project director stopped and looked around the room, pointed at an attractive 50-something brunette and then at me. We came forward and replaced the young sharp-elbows pair. The brunette opened the door for me, and I got behind the wheel, with the money still falling. Unlike the Convention Authority commercials, this one was shown locally on all major television channels numerous times daily.

Producers apparently liked the white-haired couple from the Aladdin valet shoot and used us several times for Convention Authority segments. One shoot took place at the Dunes Country Club Golf Course, just prior to the implosion of the hotel. The time was set for about 6:30 P.M., so that the course would show in its lushest and greenest condition. The white-haired couple was in a golf cart. The lady (let's call her Wilma) encouraged her hero, as he exited the cart and prepared to tee off toward a par three hole, bordered by a pond and a sand trap. Smack! The ball was airborne and miraculously rolled to within a foot of the hole. Wilma cheered and clapped.

I gave a humble hand gesture in response.

After all, we *were* in Las Vegas.

* * * * *

Thanks But No Thanks

During this time of having "the look," I was still aware of the fact that as in most things in life, we do have choices. I was called one day to meet with Tena at the Lenz Agency. She said that there was an opportunity to be featured in a national commercial, which would pay big money. I was not told the subject of the "gig," but went to a medical complex for an interview. Once again, they told me I had "the look," and I was offered the job. My face would be shown everywhere as the poster boy of impotence relief.

For me, it was an easy choice: Thanks, but no thanks. Shortly thereafter, the face of another white-haired, 50-something began appearing in newspapers everywhere as the poster boy of impotence relief; and it could have been me.

Being a successful "personality" requires that you be available for cattle calls, call-backs and extensive on-site sessions. To fulfill these obligations, it would be difficult to be otherwise employed. When after-retirement work offers started, I decided to retire the "look" and get a real job.

After all, I realized, this *was* Las Vegas!

"THE DIPLOMAT"

Finding Kano

My mother, as mentioned earlier, was "stuck" in Harlo for life. She thirsted for the world out there and urged her seven to explore it. Just like she said, "Go for it," when Las Vegas called, she was excited when international possibilities started floating around in my head.

In 1966 I had taught six years and served as principal for four when I decided to seek a little adventure, contacting several universities with overseas programs. The result was productive for my faculty as well as for me. Besides information on my area of interests I received brochures on other high-profile programs receiving special funding at the time. Fourth-grade teacher, Sandra Hungerford, received an excellent grant for a Master's degree in counseling and became prominent at Arizona State University. Dee Hanson, a Kindergarten teacher, was selected to pursue a Doctorate degree in early childhood education at Columbia University. Dr. Hanson is currently recognized as a leading pioneer in the development of the California early childhood program.

So, two of my faculty members went off to bigger and better things as a result of my overseas exploration. But what about me? Actually, my connection came as a sort of coincidence, if you believe in coincidences. Ohio University (Athens) was at the forefront of several innovative educational projects, both at home and abroad. I received a phone call from the school district curriculum director, informing me that two Ohio U. professors were meeting with him and a colleague about piloting a new social studies program in Clark County. He said, "We need to have someone on the firing line there. Can you join us tonight at Denney's Restaurant?"

One of the Ohio professors was Dr. Milton Ploghoft who had served as Chief of Party in Nigeria the previous two years, heading up the development of Advanced Teachers College Kano. Ploghoft was a real live wire and easily departed from "social studies" to fascinating tales from the "old country." All three of us were interested in further exploring the overseas project. The next morning we all mentioned Nigeria to our wives. The wives of my district colleagues apparently saw themselves being boiled in pots or worse. Wife Betty immediately shared my enthusiasm, and serious communication with Ohio U. began.

During the initial meeting no mention of available positions had been made, but after numerous phone calls and a visit to the Ohio U. campus, an offer was made. I was asked to serve as Assistant Director of International Programs, with site visits to the African and Asian projects at the top of the duty list. So, wife Betty began to prepare our family of four to move to Athens, Ohio. Sons Jeff (2) and Matt (3) did not seem to mind all the excitement of the preparations. We sold the house; the district granted me a leave of absence for two years. Thus, our move was all set. A bonus to the move was the opportunity to work on a Doctorate degree while holding faculty status. In a month we would be in Ohio.

As I walked out the school office door for a principal's meeting, the phone rang. "Hold on, it's Dr. Ploghoft." (The office staff had gotten pretty well-acquainted with him.) He made me an offer I could not refuse, explaining that a campus professor who had not worked actively in schools for 20 years was slated to be Lab School Coordinator. Ploghoft suggested that I take that slot for two years, then return to the campus. They planned to put Bob Forbes in charge of the Inservice Center.

About face! We received tremendous help with a multitude of issues from the U.S. Agency for International Development (U.S.A.I.D.) officials: air freight, sea freight, home storage, medical/insurance documents, and so on. One factor which could have added undue stress to this move was that I had been selected as the Nevada representative at a six-week regional reading institute at Texas A & M

The family accompanied me to College Station for the first part of the summer. The time requirements kicked us into gear, and we prepared for adjustments from Nevadans to Texans to Nigerians with enthusiasm. And several weeks as a Texan served as a valuable diplomacy internship.

Finally, there we were in Kennedy International going through Customs, when we suddenly realized that our party of four numbered only three. Where was Matthew? He's only two . . . where did he go? Jeff just stood within feet of his parents as we waited in line. We had to make our flight. I quickly moved about, looking for Matt, feeling increasingly desperate, then spied a tall man, Matthew in hand, coming in from the loading area. The two-year old had gone out "to see the big airplanes." When the man saw our red-headed party of three, he knew where Matt belonged.

After a one-night stopover in Rome, we received an eerie but majestic welcome in Kano. As we stepped off the plane, Matt asked, “Daddy, why are those men pointing guns at us?” I explained that they were protecting us, not realizing that the first massacre of the vicious Biafran War would take place on that very spot in twenty days. But just past the soldiers were the white camels with their riders trumpeting our arrival. An entourage of Ohioans warmly welcomed our family and drove us to what would be our home for the next two years.

The sun was setting, as we drove into the laterite driveway. Many Nigerians and a few Americans were standing around to get a glimpse of the new arrivals. We were introduced to servants who were carryovers from the previous “masters”: a cook, a small boy (or inside worker), gardener and maiguardi (guard or watchman).

The house was one of twelve built by the Nigerian government for the U.S.A.I.D. families and had two wings separated by a large enclosed patio/garden. Mango and papaya trees were abundant on the grounds. The sleeping wing bedrooms and bathrooms were roomy, and the living wing- kitchen, living and dining areas were comfortable and modern. Behind the main residence were houses for the two inside servants. I never did become accustomed to being addressed as "master," but that designation apparently continues from colonial times.

The College

The first morning I was driven to the college in a U.S.A.I.D. van. Although considerable orientation had occurred stateside, a rapid learning curve was needed that first week. Advanced Teachers College Kano had not broken ground, and both offices and classrooms were in temporary quarters borrowed from several schools. There was neither a lab school nor a lab school faculty. There were student teachers in the field, and yes, we would be supervising them. Our college faculty included Americans, Irish, Iranians, Israelis, Australians, Nigerians and British. The curriculum consisted of two streams: The first prepared students in grades 8-11 to teach in primary schools; the second prepared students in grades 12-14 to teach in secondary schools and junior teachers colleges.

I sat down that day with Chief of Party Paul Roaden, and the two gentlemen who would become my mentors and special friends, Dr. Ed Baum and Dr. Luther Haseley, both from the Athens campus. They agreed to assign me the task of updating the staff handbook and oh yes, a more immediate need-- Mr. Zajicek's flight was late, and . . . could I meet his English class?

Having no idea what to expect, I walked into a classroom of mostly tenth-grade boys (many of the girls had already been sold as brides), armed only with a lesson plan and two books. The plan called for reading a section of Julius Caesar and discussing Orwell's Animal Farm. As I stepped into the room, all stood and in one voice said, "Good morning, sir." I responded in kind, introduced myself and got right into *Julius Caesar*, with each student anxious to read in a very animated way in his British dialect, tempered by whichever tribal language he had inherited. Sticking to the lesson plan, we switched to *Animal Farm.* A hand went up, followed by the question which would solidify my relationship with this group for two years: "Mr. Ortwein, it says here that the animals wrote a national anthem, "Beasts of England," and put the tune halfway between "Clementine" and "*La Cucaracha.*" How can we possibly understand this? . . . we do not know those songs."

Well, we were off! These students expected every class to be the same—hear a lecture, take notes, pass a test. I asked the class to listen carefully, because they would be up next. As I sang "Clementine" there was initial shock, followed by thunderous applause. After singing a few lines of "*La Cucaracha,*" I said, "Now, it's your turn. You have the lyrics "Beasts of England, Beasts of Ireland," etc.). You've heard the tunes. It should be a simple matter to sing halfway between them." As several students wailed away on their personal national anthem tunes, others were practically falling out of their chairs laughing. After three brief solos, we finished the class with a lively discussion on the subject. This group found someone to whom they could relate and a person who would be available to them even outside of the class. When I left Kano two years later, many of these students showed up, along with many other well-wishers, at the airport to wish me "bon voyage."

The Bush

The college year was pretty much year-round, with no breaks exceeding a month. During the several breaks or vacations, faculty members were free to travel, hang out at the Kano Club, or whatever. Art Olson (Ohio) and Bob Eller (Iowa) teamed with me on several occasions to conduct in-service sessions out in the bush for unprepared primary teachers. A typical bush school consisted of seven classrooms and seven teachers, one of whom served as headmaster. Usually, the headmaster and another teacher or two had some preparation. Lower grades were often taught by someone who had just finished Grade 7.

My partners and I would organize a several-days seminar through the Ministry of Education and with a driver and a cook, head out for the bush. Festivities began with a welcoming/thanking ceremony, including speeches in a tribal language and then translated into English. As the emirs and officials drove away in their Rolls-Royces, the trio would then get down to brass tacks with workshops on: Creating a simple lesson plan; teaching script writing; finding teaching materials locally; and securing local speakers and human resources. While the workshops were much the same, each trip to the bush brought a new set of adventures.

<u>Relating</u>

Art Olson's favorite word was "relating." He believed our main purpose in Nigeria was to relate positively with the local gentry. Bob Eller's main purpose in Nigeria was, as he put it, " . . . to get the hell out of Iowa." As we were out of Iowa, emphasis was on relating. Art also believed that you needed to relate to people beyond the Kano Club, more specifically, to where the locals were drinking beer.

After our workshops one rainy day we stopped by a typical beer bar:

Refrigerator, but no electric power; hard dirt floor with one bench; no tables, chairs or stools. Being the only non-Nigerians within many miles, we caused a stir when the proprietor kicked several Nigerians off the one bench in order to seat, "these very important men." I felt a bit uneasy, and maybe Art thought we were relating, but only moments after being seated, some loud activity was happening at the bar entrance. A street vendor had come in out of the rain, carrying on his head a huge tray of items. When the proprietor asked him what he would like to order, the vendor said he only wanted to stay dry. The proprietor ordered him off the premises. An argument followed, and several of the local gentry voiced their support for either viewpoint. The perplexed proprietor looked over to our bench and said, "We will have them decide." In one of my few moments of brilliance, having noticed the tapping sound on the tin roof had stopped, I stood and walked to the bar entrance. When I turned and said, "The rain has stopped, you may go," a cheer went up, and the locals joined the three Americans around the bench. No one sat. Apparently, we had "related." As animism or witch doctors held sway over many in this area, this "miracle" may have been told and retold throughout the community . . . but probably not.

Starting to settle in after dinner, we heard the beat of distant drums. I felt rather honored to be in a residence that had been reserved for visiting government officials and other important (ahem!) people. I was content to just lean back and enjoy this unusual provincial house. Bob was happy just to be out of Iowa, but Art was on a roll. There was an important tribal ceremony taking place. The drumming got faster and louder—which actually meant that the revelers were drinking more palm wine and chewing more kola nuts. Art was determined that we go to watch this special "show."

The driver whizzed us toward the sounds of the drumming. We had barely arrived at the village, when the music stopped, and young women began lining up. The drumming resumed, and the girls, hand-in-hand, formed a circle around us and started doing a dance of "selection." Because Americans were thought to have much more money than the village people (which was true), we were expected to select a new female friend from among the dancers and pay the chief for the privilege. As the drumming escalated, so did the movements of the circling young girls. When the circle broke, the not-so-amorously-inclined trio headed for the waiting Land Rover. Back in our provincial bungalow, Art surmised that you never bat 1,000% and that in either baseball or relating, .500% isn't bad.

Diplomacy was a daily exercise during our two years in Nigeria. I often thought more emphasis should have been put on that role in our overseas preparation and in-service education. These were tense times in the world—1966 to 1968--with Americans seen as aggressors and racists by much of the Third World. In this highly Islamic part of Nigeria the media painted the U.S. with a bleak and black brush, as we supported Israel in the Six-Day War and seemed to be in racial disarray with our desegregation struggles. Somehow, the Ohio U. faculty received immunity from most criticism. Both letters to the editor and an occasional news article explained that the Ohio people were helping to raise the education level in the Kano area and did not necessarily endorse all actions of their government.

It was difficult for some Americans to appreciate the cultural climate in which we found ourselves. Some complained about the lack of American amenities; some could not come to grips with from where our students came. Many students had never used indoor toilet facilities before arriving at the college. As education post-Grade 7 is subsidized and students are sent to various schools based on test scores, each student arrived with a letter of appointment from the Ministry of

Education. It was not unusual to hear an American teacher telling his class, "I paid my own way . . . in America, we . . . blah, blah, blah," and so on.

The stressful times, however, provided special opportunities to reach out, relate and put diplomacy to the test. Although the media and men on the street loved to portray "America" as the root of all evil, politics in Nigeria was no bed of roses. Nigeria had received independence from the British colonialists only six years earlier, in 1960. After several attempts at establishing some form of representative governance, a military government controlled the country. The several early-days provinces established for British convenience had been broken into states in the hope that smaller units established along tribal lines would serve to create a functional/peaceful nation. But as Fate would have it, an oil-rich southern state dominated by the Ibo tribe seceded from the federal government in order to retain all petroleum benefits. The brutal Biafran War continued for most of our two years in Nigeria, but no perceived misdeed in "White-racist America" escaped major attention.

When Robert Kennedy was assassinated at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, diplomatic action was almost necessary. The Kennedys were seen in Nigeria and most Third World countries as royalty on one hand and saviors of the poor and downtrodden on the other. It was easy to see this event as yet another racist act.

I was teaching classes on campus the day the assassination hit the news. As you might expect, the class activities were set aside. I started each class by announcing what had happened, then went to the chalkboard and diagramed how the U.S. government works. Along with answering numerous questions, the students were also given information on the electing of the American president and our system of checks and balances (Judicial, Legislative and Executive). Some students thought that the Electoral College was unfair or unnecessary; others could not understand how political parties could work. When the bell rang, signaling the end of class, the students did not want to leave; they had many more questions.

Because of the Biafran War and Betty being near a delivery date for son Mark, my family had been evacuated and were staying with my parents in Harlowton, Montana, leaving me alone in our home. That evening when dinner was over and the servants had gone to their quarters, the quiet night was interrupted by the sound of many voices. I walked to the entrance to check out the commotion. Down the street came 20-25 people, a group I hoped was not a lynch mob. As they reached the driveway, I recognized them as my students.

I opened the door, greeted them and invited them onto the large patio. The first question was, "If an election doesn't turn out right, how can they get everyone to go along with it?" We sat for several hours, with give-and-take on any question asked. Some lively debates took place, and even some good-natured laughter.

Reaching out? . . .yes! Relating? . . . yes! Diplomacy? . . . yes…yes!

* * * * *

Anyone who knows "the Voice" would expect ongoing activity regardless of time or place. And how better to demonstrate diplomacy than through song? I noticed that two Peace Corpsmen occasionally brought their guitars to events and another sang along with them. They were all pleased to have me make the group a Peace Corps Quartet and set up some performances. Another Corps member

(Peace Corps Mary) became our manager. Most of the students in Northern Nigeria were from Islamic families who made every effort to shield their young from "Western ways." Most of the students, however, were thirsty for the music of the '60's, and we were an immediate hit. As Peace Corps members lived on the economy, a bicycle was their usual mode of transportation. With U.S.A.I.D. paying my salary, I was the guy with the green Volkswagen. How cozy we were, stuffed into the green bug—Mary, the quartet and two guitars!

Our programs consisted of period songs made famous by such as the Kingston Trio, the Four Freshmen, Peter, Paul and Mary and Pete Seager, along with a few upbeat gospel numbers. Our set program concluded with "If I Had A Hammer." Then came the encores, as many as we had ready that day. When we ran out of encores, I would step out in front of the group, and while they softly strummed guitars and hummed harmony, I did the "diplomat thing." I would tell the multitude briefly about our mission in Nigeria and how the wants and needs for our families are much the same as theirs. Then we went into our signature closing, "Where Have All The Flowers Gone?" There was never a dry eye in the house. Students felt comfortable enough to come forward and hug four former strangers, and, oh yes, Peace Corps Mary also got her share of them.

With one exception, our "concerts" pretty much found the quartet initiating the relating and the diplomacy, with some reciprocation at and after the program. The Sisters of St. Louis served us a gourmet dinner prior to our performance at their residential convent school. And what a treat it was! The girls, all in uniform, were particularly gracious and appreciative, inspiring the quartet to reach its finest hour.

Back to the prototype (time, place, audience, circumstances), it also relates in diplomacy.

<u>Walking A Tightrope</u>

Diplomacy was often just a matter of doing the right thing—doing your job while recognizing and appreciating cultural differences; that worked well in the classroom and around the campus. Out in the Nigerian and expatriate communities due diligence was required. Foreign nationals had varying relations with Nigerian tribal groups, and there was a brutal war on—with the Federal Government trying to quell the secession of the Ibos from the South.

Radio messages on short wave daily trumpeted the bravery and vigilance of each side. Although the U.S. and European powers were suspected of playing major roles in the secession decision in order to win the "oil game," the Ibos were left to go it alone. The war moved, largely to the South, and many Ibos in the North were in constant danger. When Northerners came through our yard with clubs and machetes looking for the "bad guys," we obviously had seen none.

Because of the war, Americans walked a tightrope much of the time. Frequent trips to the Kano Airport required advanced planning, because every vehicle and all riders were searched before given gate entry. For whatever reason, there was a fascination with ladies' purses. And for whatever reason, the American ladies did not scale down to necessities and continued to present those "shopping bags" to the examiners, who were required to chart any suspicious contents. The first event of the Biafran War was the massacre at the Kano Airport —only twenty days after our arrival. Most of the following hostilities moved to the South, although one bombing effort was made on the Kano Airport. Word came to our compound that a Biafran transport plane was approaching. Certain Americans acted inappropriately at this time. Jean Baum, a shapely six-foot redhead, invited yours truly and several others to join her on her flat roof to observe the excitement. We were close enough to see the side door of the aircraft open and several large barrel bombs descend toward the airport—boom! . . . boom! Then the plane slowly lugged toward the South.

Casualties were one airplane wing and one Nigerian who broke his neck attempting to negotiate a right turn to escape from the tower. While Jean and friends watched from the roof, Chief of Party, Paul Roaden, skidded into the driveway, screamed at the "idiots" on the roof and broke his toe with several swift kicks on his auto tires. Using his most colorful street language, Paul suggested we apparently did not know that we were "walking a tightrope.

The American Department of State developed several movies designed to cement relations among the nations. Unfortunately, these movies can only be described as boring and flawed at best. When Art, Bob and I went on our training ventures to the bush schools, upon occasion, we took several films and a generator system in our van. We would find a large white wall, such as that surrounding the Emir's palace for our screen. The first (and also the last) time we showed a State Department film, it was really embarrassing. When the first vowels in Kano and Lagos were pronounced incorrectly, eliciting giggles all around, we screened our films for the next time out.

The audiences were the village people who formed a crowd, when our unannounced showing began. Law enforcement would show up to control the crowd, and when people pushed too far forward, the "gendarmes'" whips moved back the large throng. Amazingly, the temperature around the projector raised and lowered with movement of the crowd.

Our most popular film was "Sportraits in Ebony" which simply showed black athletes conquering their adversaries: Most of the villagers had never seen a football, basketball or baseball game, but cheered when Jim Brown carried some foes into the end zone; when Bill Russell dunked the basketball and when Willy Mays upended the second baseman and was called safe. More cheers went up when Arthur Ash and Althea Gibson smashed their winning points. The audience roared when Joe Louis demolished Max Schmeling. And, they literally laughed, danced and hooted, when Muhammad Ali made a fool out of several helpless opponents.

It became apparent that the prototype worked very well on any kind of presentation. Time, place, audience, circumstances.

Many Ibos from the South worked in the North. Because these Ibos were by and large more highly educated than their desert-dwelling brothers up North, they held many responsible positions, simply by demonstrating they could read and write. When the war started, numerous Ibos were massacred and most others tried to flee South; this put American and other expatriates in a delicate position.

One evening all guests but the local Shell Oil Manager arrived on time for a dinner party. Two hours passed. We could not locate him anywhere. Where was he? Finally arriving, white as a sheet, he told this story:

Two of my best employees are Ibos and are afraid for their lives. I agreed to meet them in the warehouse, give them some money and supplies, and help them plan their getaway Coming out of the ware-house, we were confronted by some young soldiers who had been drinking. All that saved me was that they began arguing about how to kill us. They decided to stand us on a block wall and pluck us off one by one. As they began arguing over who would get to shoot us, an officer approached in his Jeep. After some discussion he told me to get off the wall, drive away and to not look back. So here I am.

* * * * *

My first gardener was a slight young Ibo who was very gracious, an excellent worker and proficient reader. Being the only Christian among the servants put him in an uncomfortable position. He would occasionally read a recipe to the cook, but with his people being attacked daily by the Federal army, he was not allowed to really join the team. Not having command of any tribal language, I could not decipher much of their dialogue, and teasing was not done in English. He approached me one day and said, "I want to return to my country." Because this return needed to be a hush-hush procedure, we met discreetly to plan the getaway. I gave him money, supplies, a map and my address. Somehow, I believe he did not make it back to his country. He could never pass himself off as a Muslim Hausa or Fulani—not with a name like Savior Sunday. My next gardener, named Idi, fit in just fine. One of his first requests was for a loan to purchase a second wife; this allowed him to both raise his social status and demonstrate his virility.

It is rare for a populace to celebrate the defeat of a countryman in world competition, but Nigeria was a new country. As in the case of Savior Sunday, tribal loyalty superseded national interests. Ibo Dick Tiger was World Middleweight Champion, probably the only Nigerian to ever hold a world boxing title. Being an Ibo, he was very vocal to a world-wide audience about Federal Government atrocities. When he was knocked out in a title bout by American Emil Griffith, Nigerians celebrated long into the night, except in Biafra. Americans basically just nodded.

Along with the Kennedys, Muhammad Ali, was a special icon in Nigeria. Like the Kennedys, Ali walked on water. A typical single-stream primary school consisted of seven classrooms arranged horseshoe-style, so that each looked out on the center area. On a scheduled visit to such a school, as I appeared in the center area, all seven male teaches descended upon me right on cue. The headmaster asked one question: "If America is a free country, why do they make the champion of the world go to war?" They waited, and I answered: "Because America is a free country, all able-bodied young men are expected to serve their country. The champion of the world is treated just like everyone else." My answer may not have been 100% accurate, but it saved the moment, and all seven teachers returned to class.

"THE AMBASSADOR"

A natural progression from "Diplomat" would seem to be "Ambassador." And because of the long involvement in Rotary Club activities, the "Ambassador" opportunity came my way.

Rotary's over-riding theme of "Service Above Self" encourages clubs and members worldwide to provide humanitarian service to people of goodwill at home and abroad. A highly effective program in this effort is Group Study Exchange (GSE), in which district governors from two different countries provide a month-long cultural/vocational exchange for outstanding business/professional persons. Not only do team members engage in a dynamic life-changing experience, the direct and indirect interaction with hundreds of people provides giant steps toward world peace and understanding.

A Rotarian since 1962, I had participated in numerous aspects of GSE over the years—as a host and serving on local and district committees. When District 5300 Governor Conrad Von Bibra selected me to be the leader-spokesman (or, if you will, "Ambassador") of his two-woman/two-man team in Quezon City, Philippines, I felt duly honored.

Where Dan Stover and Don Kemp were my cohorts in Rotary music, Conrad Von Bibra of Pasadena South was my mentor on Rotary matters and human relations. He was the consummate "Ambassador" coach who took the team and the "Ambassador" in the palm of his hand and prepared them for basic requirements along with plain old practical wisdom, re: Expect the unexpected, be flexible, and stick with the team. Conrad and wife, Pat, hosted the team pre- and post, along with airport delivery and pickup in L.A.

Conrad's wisdom was immediately put to good use, as our original flight was delayed because of a projected volcano disruption somewhere out there. What a lucky break! Because of being inconvenienced one hour, we were upgraded from tourist to business class. It appeared that the prototype was working (time, place participants, circumstances).

The contingent welcoming us in Manila at about 12:30 a.m. insisted that 1:30 a.m. dinner reservations must be honored. We learned that the original Philippine team leader had abruptly quit, and that Johnny Delacruz would be "Ambassador" in charge of our visit. With a wink, Johnny said we would be following a "working schedule," which meant, of course, that planning was about to get underway. The other bit of before-bedtime information learned was that a five-member team of Norwegians had already arrived. Thanks to Conrad, we were prepared to expect the unexpected, to be flexible, and to stick together.

Johnny Delacruz accepted the month-long Philippine "Ambassador" role with a moment's notice. He would later lead his own team to the U.S. What a charming, charismatic figure he was! To say that Johnny was the single, most important person in the planning and conduct of a phenomenal program for our team would be an understatement.

If I may segue to one bit of Johnny trivia—Johnny was a young lad during the Second World War Japanese occupation. The University of St. Thomas was used to house American prisoners of war. One day Johnny showed up at the far corner of the barbed wire exercise compound and started a conversational relationship with two American POW's. The conversations continued for some months, until the incarcerations were abandoned. For Johnny, this experience started his life-long fascination with and study of the U.S.

Team members were housed by Rotary families for one week. Each of the four family stays provided vastly differing experiences—with one very visible constant: All host families were well-to-do and had house servants and drivers for their cars. My first hosts were Past-District Governor (PDG) Jess and Vere Laxamana. And if I may digress, Jess attended college with a beautiful young lady who attempted to entice him to drive her to a resort over a holiday. When he refused, she hit on the next guy who had a car. Number-two choice agreed. Their relationship began then and continued for many years. And, of course, you guessed the rest of the story: The couple became Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. During our visit to Congress Imelda was a member, but neither on the floor nor in the chambers—perhaps at the mall? But, enough trivia.

Because a daily itinerary had not been prepared, Johnny arranged for one of the 76 district clubs to host us for an entire day. We would meet with club officers and generally agree to a set of activities. The host clubs took their responsibilities very seriously and tried to cram more into a day than we could handle. Johnny and I began to amend the schedules, once we got rolling, so that the team would not totally burn out.

The first day (and night) gave us a base point to use for comparison. Several club members oriented us to Quezon City: Two million residents, almost half of whom were "squatters" from the provinces and another large segment of well-to-do in this northern suburb of Metro Manila.

We quickly learned not to ask a question, if we did not want to "see" the answer. I asked if there were any slums, and before we knew it, two carloads of Rotarians and team members "sped" toward Payatus (the city dump). There were slums, to be sure—with shacks and lean-to's just outside and within the huge piles of rubble. We wound around for some time, and when the cars stopped, both Rotarian drivers got out and conferred. Each thought the other knew the way out. When the subject of being late for the 7:00 p.m. meeting was broached, one driver smiled and said, "It won't start without me. I'm the president."

The president was certainly right. We arrived thirty minutes late and were the first ones there. The meeting was held in a mansion behind a small hospital owned by several Rotarian physicians. Drinks were served along with a gourmet meal. I was introduced and gave a short "Ambassadorial" spiel on our district, along with offering thanks to our hosts. Each team member was given a gift and made short comments: Vincent Chang, attorney from Monterey Park; Roxanne

Kasper, account executive from Las Vegas; Anthony Lagasco, insurance agent from Glendale; and Kathy Musial, curator from Huntington Botanical Gardens. As would happen in almost all club presentations, the first question was, "Kathy are you related to Stan Musial?" She was, and she did spin enough Uncle Stan trivia to satisfy the curious.

The team members were accustomed to meetings which started and stopped pretty much as scheduled; however, this was not to be the case with many conducted by the Filipinos. They started whenever they arrived and stopped when everything was done. After our presentation to the club, the president described a new program being spearheaded by the Rotary district called, "Filipino on Time." One club member leaned over and whispered a bit of wisdom: "We don't have employment. We own the businesses."

Perhaps because Americans were present, or for whatever reason, a visiting Rotarian from Japan stood and launched into an extended and tearful apology for the Second World War. After all of the speeches it was entertainment time.

Well-choreographed musical numbers were performed, first by the Roto-Kids and then by the Roto-Teens. Club soloists did their favorite Sinatra and Mario

Lanza numbers. My early Montana instincts told me it was approaching time to milk the cows. Our own Tony Lagasca, of partial Filipino descent, capped off the evening by singing a lovely ballad written by his uncle, a prominent local composer. The sun was not yet rising, but it would not be long in coming.

Johnny and I decided that the GSE teams and involved Rotarians all played diplomatic roles right along with us. But as team leaders (or "Ambassadors") we carried the heavy load, in making certain our decisions would point to meeting the final goal. As with every CEO, the bottom line stopped with us. We were sensitive to the needs and actions of our teams, along with the internal and external populations along the way. We were planners, mediators, cheerleaders, entertainers, counselors, and bodyguards. For most of the next 29 days we would be with a local club from breakfast and often into the night. Several vocational days, days with the Norwegians, or rest days broke that pattern. But each day the "Ambassador" wore whatever hats were warranted.

Without going into a travelogue, I would like to share several points gleaned from the experience:

Food - Everything is planned around eating. Many Filipinos eat five or six small meals each day. If you try to make a quick visit somewhere and politely decline food offerings with, "We must run" or "We just ate," the food is on the way. We quickly learned to just sample a bit of this and that. Presentation is very important, and both diplomats and the "Ambassador" always commented on those aspects. *Balut* is a duck egg with an incubated chick. This delicacy is often offered with the expectation that it will be graciously declined. Even when visiting Congress, a meal arrived as soon as we sat in the chambers of the minority leader.

Extremes - The population was largely the well-to-do and some not-doing-well, with a hard-to-identify middle class. Shopping malls catered to one class or the other. There is a highly educated population having difficulty finding jobs to fit their degrees. An example is bright/attractive teaching college graduates going to Hong Kong or Singapore to work as domestics. The workday for many is 9-11 and 3-5, but perhaps this schedule relates to just the privileged. Also, the educated Filipinos know all about us Americans, while we know so little about them.

Family/Gender Roles - Parents and children (even when married) often stay together in the same neighborhood or compound. Male and female roles are well-defined, with men open and macho and women reserved and subservient. Some female Rotarians felt so dominated in mostly-male clubs that female-only clubs have been formed. Outside relationships for men are common and seemingly often tolerated by the wives. Men, even those of high position, are often identified by such nicknames as: Boy, Baby, Toots, Bong, Oskie, Gogoy, Mon and Bimbo.

Transportation - Drivers who complain of traffic patterns and overload in Los Angeles or Las Vegas would be stunned if behind the wheel in Metro Manila. Most who own an auto can hire a driver to navigate the bumper-to-bumper traffic in this ten-million-population megalopolis. Amazingly, while out in this traffic daily for a month, I only observed two minor fender-benders. License-plate numbers ending in even and odd numbers were road-legal on alternating days. Rotarian Edwin Medalla bought five cars, so that he would always have two or three for daily use. Besides personal vehicles, streets were loaded with taxis, busses, tricycles with sidecars and Jeepneys. Following World War II hundreds of American Jeeps were left in the Manila area and extended into small busses. Jeepneys propel down the streets with people both sitting and hanging onto to the sides or back. When a new rider jumps on, the fare is passed up hand-to-hand to the driver, an excellent demonstration of the honor system.

Tours/Visitations - Each day brought exciting new learning experiences and interaction with many Filipinos in schools, hospitals, markets, at City Hall, in Congress, at museums, auto plants, mega malls, the U.S. Embassy, cock fights, cathedrals, zoos, the University of the Philippines and the University of St. Thomas. Perhaps the greatest visibility was achieved when the "Ambassador" was interviewed on a daytime TV program, "Tessie," which follows an Oprah-type format. An estimated two million watch the program.

Places visited with special historical significance included: Clark Air Force Base (now a resort/casino), Laharland (where Mt. Pinatubo erupted in '91), Corregidor (with the MacArthur headquarters and the Pacific War Memorial), Subic Bay, and the five-star Manila Hotel.

Rotary Windup - During the final week both the American and Norwegian teams were hosted at the home of Edwin Medalla, who built a small motel wing at poolside, called the "The Rotary Wing." The two-story wing boasted twelve bedrooms and a kitchen/living room complex complete with an extensive bar and a visual Karaoke system. The Norwegians and Americans were in sharp contrast in several respects: No American was over 5'8"; no Norwegian male was under 6'3"; both females were 6', or almost; and the Norwegians wore spiffy, tailored uniforms, while the Americans dressed like the folks on the street.

We were initially told that we would need no formal attire, but learned two days before the Governor's Ball that Gov. Manny Monroy expected us there in tux or *barong*. We were measured and outfitted in a day. The Ball was an elegant affair, held at the Manila Hotel. A major highlight of the evening was a classical dance number by president/spouse couples, all elegant in tuxes and gowns. When commenting on the beautiful presentation, we were told that they had practiced five days a week for five weeks from 9:00 p.m. to Midnight . . . . . Wow!

The crown jewel for each district governor is the district conference, where all clubs join to share their accomplishments and become motivated for the next year. GSE teams typically make a presentation on the final day. We learned that the Norwegians planned a colorful slide show on their country. Here, I put the prototype into action, jumping right to "circumstances" which, after convening, were discussed. We would be closing out the conference. Everyone would be tired and looking for something light. They had been "instructed" for three days and already knew much about Las Vegas and Los Angeles. We were relatively agile and could stay on tune, so –oo—oo, in spare moments we began practicing *tinikling,* the Philippine national dance.

As the conference wound down, the Norwegians presented a very impressive visual show, one which probably motivated some Filipinos to buy a ticket to Oslo. When introduced, the "Ambassador" raced onto the stage and thanked all the new friends, especially our "guardian angel," Johnny Delacruz. It was most fitting then to have Tony Lagasca step out and sing another of his uncle's compositions.

As the music started, two members of the Philippine GSE team grabbed the limbo poles and began clicking them to the music. The "Ambassador" gave a glowing and quick account of what was learned in District 3780, then shouted, "And here's what else we learned in the Philippines!" Dressed in Philippine folk attire, the team trotted out and began the *tinikling,* when introduced as follows: The forward from Pasadena Sunrise; Tony Lagasca; the point guard from Monterey Park; Vincent Chang; the center from San Marino, Kathy Musial; and the shooting guard from Las Vegas University, Roxanne Kasper. The place literally rocked, as the crowd clapped and shouted.

It was time for the "Ambassador" to close out the show. As all were prepped for a warm fuzzy after the *tinikling,* the "Ambassador" poured out this composition to the tune of "I Left My Heart In San Francisco":

The bright lights of Las Vegas,

The magic of L.A.;

They're both so far away.

Still, we'll be there in a day.

But we've made so many new friends
In and around Quezon City,
Before going home,
To you all we'd like to say:
We leave our hearts in Quezon City.
Rotarians have reached out to us.
You opened up your lovely homes,
Joined in song and dance and poems,
Treated us like Philippine Kings and Queens.
So, thank you all in Quezon City,
A special Rot'ry family.
Yes, thank you all in Mega Quezon City,
A Mega Rot'ry family.

To say that there was not a dry eye in the house would be somewhat of a stretch, but it was clear that the oft-used prototype had again worked its magic. As the multitude filed out of the hall, an American in residence whispered, "You own them!"

EPILOGUE

So, there you have it—several somewhat well-traveled roads which added special meaning to my life—and, I believe, considerable satisfaction to many others. Although contributions on the job and joys within the family may be the measure of the man at the moment of judgment, I believe that work and family would be far less effective without delving into my special passions and avocations.

In a sense, the writings just finished follow a rather selfish track—they are all about Dennis. "The Voice" has kept me in the public eye well beyond expectation. "The Look" added to a show-biz persona which continues today. "The Diplomat" brought into focus many public/human relations' skills which proved invaluable. "The Ambassador" demonstrated a coming-together of the previous three.

And, of course, there are numerous other roads out there. Where should we go from here?