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An Interview with Joseph Thiriot

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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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 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

Preface

Joseph Thiriot is a longtime Las Vegas resident who served the community as an educator. He was born in 1906 in Provo, Utah; one of five sons born to George W. and Elvira Thiriot.

He has vivid memories of moving about, including living in Idaho where his father sold a "typing machine", a forerunner to the typewriter. Eventually the family moved to a ranch in Pahrnagat Valley, Nevada, where the limits of educational opportunities compelled his parents to send him back to Provo to finish his education while living with family there.

Gaining a teaching certificate enabled Joseph to teach in rural Nevada. He completed his degree at the University of Utah and after meeting Las Vegas Superintendent Maude Frazier he relocated to Las Vegas to become a teacher.

He reminisces about his life and the changes that have occurred over the years in Las Vegas.

Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

Project Director, Peter Michel, Special Collections, UNLV Library, 895-3252

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Name of narrator: Joseph E. Thiriot

Name of interviewer: CLAYTEE D. WHITE

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Joseph E. Thiriot 8/10/
Signature of narrator Date

621 South 9th St
Las Vegas, Nevada
89101

Address of narrator

Claytee D. White 8/10/2000
Signature of interviewer Date

This is August 10th, 2000. I'm in Las Vegas at the home of --

Joseph Thiriot. T-H-I-R-I-O-T.

We're just going to start by talking about your early life if that's okay. Give me some idea of early life; I want to know what your parents' names are, if you have brothers and sisters, and where you grew up?

Oh, dear, let's see. My mother's name was Elvira, her other name Elvira Henrie, H-E-N-R-I-E, and then she married George W. Thiriot, my father. I don't know exactly when they were married. It was about 1898, I believe. I had an older brother—he was three years older than I—and so he would have been born in about 1903 and I was born in 1906. His name was Henrie. They used mother's maiden name, her original name. But when he was about five years old -- in those days they had these children's diseases that were very difficult -- he had scarlet fever and then I think he had something else on top of it and he died. So I got to know him very little. I was just very young and I knew him a little bit. My mother always wanted girls, but she didn't have any girls.

What did they do for a living?

Every time they had boys. So we had four boys, five boys all together. All the boys were younger than I except the one who died. Now they're all gone; I'm the only one left.

What were the others' names?

Next to me was named Dean, D-E-A-N, and then James and then William, Bill.

What did your parents do for a living?

My father, first, he was an assayer; he worked for the government. In those days there was a lot of discovery of metals. I was born in Provo, Utah. My mother said that I came before the doctor did -- [laughing] -- in the morning. At any rate, we went to Idaho where my father—he loved to hunt and so in his spare time he'd go (there) hunting. Then on the creeks up there, he took his gold pan and would pan for gold. I have quite a few little gold nuggets that he panned years and years ago—oh so many, many years ago. But we used to go fishing, (which) went right along with panning for gold. So we got quite a few gold nuggets.

And then later on he was selling special machines—in those days, kind of a typing machine. It was the forerunner of the real typing machine. Then he worked for the government awhile. Later on he went into mining, did a lot of mining with his sons.

So you had a business together?

I didn't. I was never in the business.

When did you first leave home?

Well, we lived on a ranch in Pahranaagat Valley (Nevada). When I graduated from eighth grade, there was no high school there. So I had to go back to Provo with my aunt who was in Provo, Aunt Dee was her name. She invited me up there to go to school. So I really left home when I was going to high school. And all the winters I spent up there going to high school. In the summer, I went back to the ranch and worked, learned how to milk cows, hoe weeds and cut grass and alfalfa and bale hay and all that kind of stuff that you do on the ranch.

So after high school when did you start working and where?

Well, after high school I wanted to go to college. In those days it was very, very difficult. Nobody had any money. When I tell the kids who are going to college now that I went to the BYU (when tuition) was only \$25 a quarter; \$25 four times a year. I went two times, stayed with my grandmother and went to college. Then I came home and didn't have any money, and so I worked all summer.

My dad—we had a great big corn crop. I think we had 40 acres and ten, about 50 acres of corn, great big ears of corn. He couldn't sell it. So he decided to get some steers and fatten the steers and then sell them. So we got to work and fed all that corn to those steers. They really got nice and fat. In those days we had to go 50 miles to the railroad. So we had to drive those cows 50 miles to put them on the railroad to send them to California.

So this was like "Rawhide?" Do you remember the TV show "Rawhide?"

Yes, I do. You bet. Uh-huh.

When we got down there, the market went down and we lost it all; didn't make one single dime on all that corn and all the work. So when it came time to go to college that year -- that was in my junior year -- my brother said, "Look, I'll go work on the road and get enough money so we can pay your tuition." I said, "If I can get up there, I know I can get a job; I know I can make it all right." So he worked on the road and gave me \$40. Twenty-five paid for the tuition and the rest paid for some of my books.

What kind of work did he do on the road?

In those days you had to use a scraper. They started building highways, building little roads and all kinds of roads, county roads. There were very few roads. This is back in the 1930s, you know.

So which year were you born?

1906.

1906. So this is in the 30s. How long did it take your brother to earn the \$40?

Oh, I guess it took him about a week.

So did he continue to work on the road until he earned the \$40?

Yes, he did.

Did you ever pay him back?

You bet. [Laughing]

Are you the only one who went to college?

No. My brother Dean went to college. And my brother Jim went one year and then he joined the Marines. It was during the wartime. Then my brother Bill, he went to college and learned accounting. Oh, I could tell you stories about him, I'll tell you.

Give me the name of the place where the ranch was located again.

Well, it was between Alamo and Hiko and they call it Pahrnagat Valley. About in the middle there, there was a spring called Ash Springs.

Now, with five boys, at that time were you going on missions?

Yes. But we didn't have any money to go on missions.

Tell me about what you did when you finished college.

Well, I taught one year before I finished. It came to the last year and I didn't have any money again. So I decided to... teach in grammar school.

Some kind of certification?

Certification to teach in grammar school. I got that in summer school and I got a job teaching up in White Pine County. That's just a little below Lund, Nevada. It was an eight-month school, \$110 a month; \$880 for the year. Well, that was a fortune. It permitted me to go back to school and finish up. So I finished in the summertime because I had to finish before that last summer; and, therefore, I -- in those days they only graduated in June. So you had to wait until the next June. You're all through and you've got everything done. So I applied for school, a school up in Panaca, Nevada, to

teach high school before I had really marched. You might say march. You knew you'd march and get your degree. But I had finished everything; therefore, I was qualified. So I got a job in Panaca, Nevada.

Now, that first job where you made the \$880, did you live with a family?

No. They had a special room where we had the school, a little school, and there was a little room there where you could live and a little kitchen. Luckily, they had a piano there. So I played the piano and had a lot of fun. One of the little girls that I taught wanted to learn to play the piano. So all the time I was there I gave her lessons, teaching to play the piano. Eventually she learned to play the piano. Isn't that something?

Do you still play the piano?

Oh, yes.

What kind of music?

Oh, I used to play tough stuff, but I don't anymore. I just play waltzes and things of that sort. There's a number that I wrote for my wife when we were courting each other.

Oh, great. So you're a real romantic.

[Laughing]

So tell me what happened after you taught the second year of school. You went back then and you marched in June.

Marched in June and got married in June.

So how did you meet your wife?

I met her in summer school when I was trying to make up this extra time in summer school. I went up to the University of Utah. I think it was providential because my Grandmother Thiriot lived in Salt Lake and my Uncle Joe, who I was named after, called me and said, "Why don't you come up here to summer school instead of BYU because Grandma needs somebody to kind of help her a little bit?" I said, "Sure, I'll come." So I went up and helped her and did all her shopping for her and did things like that that she needed done and went to the University of Utah, and there I met my wife.

What was she doing?

She was going to summer school, too. [Laughing] Yep. We took a class in geology, and I've always loved geology. That's where I get my interest in all the rocks you see. So that's where I met

her. Then the next winter, you see, I taught high school in Panaca, and she was already teaching. She was teaching grammar school up in Salt Lake. So we taught that year and wrote back and forth and decided to get married the next spring after I had graduated.

Where did you live?

In Panaca. We got to work and built a house in Panaca.

How long did you live there?

Seven years. I taught high school there for seven years. Wonderful bunch of kids. The high school at that time was bigger, a bigger high school than the one in Las Vegas.

So now, where is Panaca located?

Panaca is between Pioche, which is a mining town, and Caliente, which is a railroad town, about halfway between. So they used to bus the kids from Pioche and from Caliente to Panaca.

So that's why the high school was so big.

Uh-huh. We had a nice high school, great.

Did you start your family right away?

I guess about a year and a half after we were married.

How many children did you have in all?

We had three daughters and one son.

What is your wife's name?

Ellen.

And your children's names?

Alice is the older one. Janetta was next. And then there was a miscarriage. And then Jon, J-O-N, not J-O-H-N, J-O-N. That's the French because my father's mother was English, but her husband was French, and that's where we get the name Thiriot.

So after living there for seven years, is that when you moved to Las Vegas?

Yes.

Why did you decide to come to Las Vegas?

Well, Ms. Frazier, who was the superintendent out here and I had known her, she called and wanted me to come down.

Is that Maude Frazier?

Maude Frazier. I knew her very well. What a gal. And she wanted me to come down and offered me a little bit more money than I was getting up there. It was very difficult to raise a family or do anything on the salaries they paid teachers. So I came down here and I didn't realize that they didn't have an auditorium. We put on our plays over in the grammar school gym. They had a stage there, but it was a very poor stage.

What did you teach?

Dramatics, public speaking, English, grammar, literature, and one time I even taught typing. And then I taught Glee Club. That's Girls and Boys Glee Club. I did that up in Panaca. I taught that for seven years up there.

So did you ever do anything with all of that musical talent, artistic talent, other than teach?

Yes, I certainly did. We formed a quartet when I came down here. Of course, I had sung in different organizations before that. But we formed this quartet. We sang for, oh, a lot of the things that started out here and kept on working and, finally, I had a very good friend who invited us to get into the Kiwanis Club. So we all joined the Kiwanis Club and became known as the Kiwanis Quartet.

Who was in the quartet?

Well, it was my friend Wayne Gamette and Joe Wendell, Fred Gillis and me. We sang for the Kiwanis Club I guess for, oh, maybe nine, ten years. Went all over the country. We sang at international conventions. We sang from coast to coast.

Tell me just a little something about what the Kiwanis Club does.

Oh, they are a great organization. I still belong. Their biggest push is just to help kids, help children go to college, help children do this and that and try their best to help parents be good parents. That's the big push.

So tell me where you lived when you first moved to Las Vegas.

It was about five blocks from here. This wasn't a very big town then. The high school was here on Seventh Street, you know, right where it is. That was about the last of the town. It was a little bit. Finally, they built this little section down here. When we moved here there was not one single house between here and the mountain, not one.

Now we're almost to the mountains.

Oh, yes. Up on the mountain.

Yes. That's true.

We just rented there for the two years is all.

Give me some your first memories of Las Vegas. What did it look like when you first came?

You just told me about the size, but what was here?

Well, when we used to come from Salt Lake. [Ellen] lived in Salt Lake, so her family was there and we often went up there. When we'd come over that hill at night, just look down here and there was just a little bunch of lights down here in the middle, just a little bunch, nothing else.

Just in the middle of the desert.

Right. Well, the first year when I taught over here at the high school, they didn't have the roads paved. They were still muddy roads when it rained. Then we had this big rain and the roads were just simply terrible, mud. So Ms. Maude Frazier called the Union Pacific and she said, "Look, we're having troubles down here; the kids can't get across the street without getting their feet all muddy and then they track it into the school. It's terrible. Can't you bring some ties down here so they can walk across?"

"Sure." So they brought ties down, they put them down there, and the kids walked across on the ties so they didn't get their feet wet crossing the road. They had sidewalks, but nothing across the road.

So Fremont Street wasn't paved, either.

Oh, yes, Fremont Street was paved when I came.

Which year was it that you moved here?

1940. The fall of 1940.

Tell me what kinds of stories were being told about early Las Vegas. In 1940 what were some of the stories that you heard as soon as you moved here?

Well, the first thing we heard about was about the high school, of course. I think it was built in about 1935 or '36, somewhere along in there. It was almost new when I came. Ms. Frazier was criticized very severely for building the high school so far out of town. Can you imagine?

No.

[Laughing] Very severely, yep. Well, there was not much.

So how far was it from town at that point?

The same distance as it is now.

So downtown was -- we're talking about --

Fremont Street. Fifth Street and Fremont.

Okay. So Fifth and Fremont. And we're at Ninth and -- and the school was at Seventh and --

Uh-huh. Just two blocks.

Just two blocks.

Can you imagine?

Wow.

So you can see how sparse it really was.

Yes. So tell me about the church life here when you first came.

Well, there were two or three churches here when I came. There was the LDS church up here on Ninth around Clark, this building up here. Then there was a Baptist church. We knew all of them very well. There was a Catholic church and there was Methodist. When I was with the quartet we used to go and sing at all the churches. Yeah. We sang at all the Easter ceremonies for years because we sang a lot of religious numbers and at one time we knew 100 numbers.

Tell me what kinds of things your wife got involved in? And by the way, is she still teaching?

When you come here, does she still teach?

She didn't have a job when I came, but she soon was called on to teach. She was a very good teacher. She was probably a better teacher than I was.

Did she join any kind of women's clubs?

Oh, yes.

Do you remember any of those that she participated in?

The church, of course, has what they call the Relief Society and she belonged to that. But there were two or three other clubs that she joined, all women's clubs.

What about entertainment for adults and children? Other than school, what else did your children do as they were growing up here?

Well, of course, they had church activities. All the kids had some church activities regardless of what church they belonged to. They used to have dances, church dances, that they all liked to go to when they got old enough... We used to take the kids wherever we went. When the hotels were first

starting out here, why, we'd go out to dinner, we'd take the kids out, always took the kids.

So if you were going out to dinner, would you go to a place that had a casino as part of it or would you go to a restaurant?

Well, there were very few restaurants by themselves in those days. Most of them had a casino attached, but we often went to both.

What did you teach your children about gambling?

We just told them that the best way to double their money was to take the bill and fold it and put it back in your pocket.

[Laughing] What kinds of services were available in the early 40s? What kind of mail service did you have? What kinds of grocery stores?

The mail service was usually pretty good. We almost always had good mail service. They came right down here and delivered it right in our little place here.

And grocery stores?

They had quite a few different grocery stores. They were just local; they weren't national or anything like that. But we had some good ones. We always knew the owners and we'd always go visit a little bit, you know, or knew the guys that ran it and worked there, so you got well acquainted with them.

Were there many clothing stores at that time?

On Fremont Street there were some good ones, yes. Yep. They had Hanson's and then -- oh, dear, the ones that the ladies went to. Fanny's? Fanny's, oh, yes, they all went to Fanny's. That was a good place to go. They always got good service there.

Now, a few minutes ago when I first came in you showed me some rings that you had made for some great-grandchildren. At that time, early on in the 40s, were you interested in stones then and crafts and making rings and things like that?

No, I learned that later. I was pretty busy at that time, but when my son graduated from high school, I asked him what he wanted as a gift. He had taken a class in lapidary. Now, lapidary is the science of making things out of rocks, stones. He said, "Yeah, I'd like to have an outfit so I can do some lapidary work."

I said, "Okay." So I bought this outfit, presented it to him.

We went out there and he tried to show me two or three things that he learned. Shortly thereafter, he graduated and then the next year he went on a mission down to the Navahos. So he kept writing back and saying, "Dad, get to work and learn how to do that so when I come back you can help me." So every little while he'd do that.

So every morning I'd get up early and set the saw so it would cut a rock and it automatically would cut it and turn off when it got through. You can set them to do that. So I did that, oh, all the time he was gone, a year and a half. When he got back, I had a lot of slab cuts. So, good, we'll try it some more. I think we tried maybe two or three times and then he was called into the armed forces, war.

He joined the navy, went into the navy, (and) had a great time. He went to China, even, when he was in the navy.

So do you remember which year he went into service?

I can't remember exactly. I think it was World War II. Or maybe it was Korean War. I don't know. It's hard to remember.

Tell me about race relations when you first came to Las Vegas. Do you remember anything --

I don't remember having any problem at all. We had some colored children and some Japanese and I think we had some Mexicans, sure we did. There didn't seem to be any problem at all.

Did we just have one high school at that time?

That's all, one high school.

So all of the kids went to the same high school.

Now, you were telling me about some of the major changes. You told me about some of the families on this block and how now there are only three families left that were here when you --

In all these four blocks. There's one, two, three, four. Then you get on the next block and part of that goes into Charleston Boulevard. And so although there were -- I think we knew two people that we knew down there, but all the rest of them were kind of businesses, even then.

So what are some of the major changes when you look outside of the neighborhood?

Well, as I said, it looks like they get a great big 40-acre piece of land and it isn't like they used to do, they just clear the whole thing and build the whole thing all at once and sell the houses and they all

look alike. At least our houses were different a little bit so that you could recognize the difference.
[Laughing]

When you first came in the early 1940s, what kinds of stories did you hear people telling? Did they still tell stories about when everybody here worked on the railroad? Did they still talk about that?

Well, you get with the right people you can talk about it, but most of them don't talk about that anymore. In those days, of course, the railroad was very important. It was the lifeblood of the community.

Heavens, I can remember the railroad was really something when we lived up above Caliente. My grandfather ran sheep and he ran them up on that mountain. Ely Mountain is the name of the mountain, north of Caliente. We lived in a little place called Dutch Flat. In the early spring after school was out they used to come and shear the sheep. And when we wanted to go from there to Salt Lake or to Provo, you had to go on the train. My dad used to go out and the train would come out of this great big tunnel. and there was maybe 200, 300 yards before it got to where we were. He'd get out there and flag the train. And that train would stop, we'd get on, and away we go. Now that doesn't happen anymore.

It was like flagging a cab.

Yeah. Isn't that something?

[Laughing] Yes.

But the railroad was very important, it was, and it still has some importance here. But you can hear the train whistles at night and that's about all.

Las Vegas is one of those places that are sometimes still called the Wild West. We saw it in the movies in the 50s and the 60s. How would you describe crime? What was the atmosphere like when you first came? Was there fear? Was there crime? Would you have considered it the Wild West at that point?

No. We didn't feel that at all. In fact, I can remember in the early days they'd bring horses down and they used to have a place over there where you could tie the horses up. Lots of people who had horses would ride their horses. As the quartet I remember we rode some beautiful horses. They weren't ours, but some of our friends had them and we went riding on their horses.

Did the quartet ever take part in the Helldorado Parade?

Oh, yes. Yeah, we did.

Did you ride in the parade as a quartet?

No. We rode on a float as the quartet for the Kiwanis Club.

Tell me about the Helldorado Parades.

Oh, they were wonderful. I've got a lot of slides of the parades, of the early parades. Some of them were really fabulous. We even had an elephant in the parade one time. And in Las Vegas an elephant was unusual. And then, they had horse drawn vehicles and cowboys riding horses. Of course, the high school always had their band in there. And there was a marching group of girls. They were always in the parade.

I want to ask a question that most of us don't know that much about. If you feel free to do this, could you tell me information about a mission? When your son went on a mission, could you tell me what happens then?

Well, of course. The purpose of the mission is to get people acquainted with how our church started and some of the precepts of the church. In order to do that in those days they went out and talked to them a bit and told them some of the things that they needed to have done. Now they prepare them much better than they used to. But then they would go and usually have someone in that particular area who was a good member and who had a home and kind of looked after things. Then they'd go, two of them together -- they didn't know who their companion was going to be, but it would be somebody maybe from a different state. So they got together and then they'd talk it over and decide who they'd go and visit and every day they go visit somebody and talk to them about it and try to get them to join the church, you see.

Now, the young boys do that. Do the young girls do anything?

Yes. The girls do missions now, too. They do a lot of the things on the missions. They have different assignments and they're not sent to some of the places that the boys are because they're a little bit rough, you know. But they have thousands of missionaries now, all over, all over the world.

And how long is a mission?

Two years.

And can you stretch it out longer if you want to?

Not that mission. You can come back and then you can volunteer to do something else, but that mission ends in two years.

Okay. Now, getting back to the Las Vegas of the 1940s, did your family ever go to movies here?

Oh, sure. There was [a movie theater] up on Fremont Street, and about the only one that we knew about then. Then later there was one down here that was just a block away.

Now, was one the Majestic?

The Majestic, that's the one uptown.

Where was that one located?

Oh, it was in about -- oh, dear, what was it? It was about Fourth Street, maybe Fourth Street on Fremont.

On Fremont.

Yeah. They've changed that so much now I can't remember. But I have some beautiful pictures of that street before they changed it.

You still have them now?

Oh, you bet. Taken at one o'clock in the morning on a rainy night so that there was not many cars or people in the way.

You know that I have to see those.

Oh, they are just beautiful. I'll invite you over and show you a lot of stuff.

Good. Las Vegas had a thing back in the 30s called the dude ranches.

Do you remember any of those, what they were for?

To give people a chance to know what a ranch was like, give them a chance to ride a horse, maybe a chance to learn how to throw the lariat, catch the horse and hit them, and how to cut the cattle out and do the things that they did on those early ranches.

So did the locals do that, as well as the tourists?

Sometimes. Of course, when we were on the ranch, we always had lots of horses. We had mustangs. Now, those are wild horses that you catch and tame and teach them so that you can ride them. We had the most beautiful little horse called Pat that was a mustang.

Now, did your father still have the ranch when your children were born?

Yeah.

So your children were able to go to the ranch and ride horses?

Yes, if they got a chance. It was just about two years was all, and then they sold the ranch and went up to the mine.

What do you remember about Basic Magnesium?

Ooh, I worked out there one summer. I surely did.

I worked as an electrician because I had taken electricity and knew something about it and had a chance to work out there. It was probably the biggest money I ever made in a short time. They needed people out there in their big plant. I can't remember exactly, but there were three or four of us that went out and all got jobs and worked all summer, every day.

That was during the war?

That's right.

During the war were you involved in any of the rationing programs, any of the scrap metal drives or anything like that?

Oh, sure. Absolutely.

Tell me a little about that and how they were organized and who took care of that.

Well, they had certain people assigned to take care of it. When they were trying to get metal, of course, then they could melt it up and make guns out of it or whatever they needed to, bullets. You just went around and anything that you didn't need that was metal you'd contribute it or if you knew somebody who had a whole blacksmith shop and a lot of old iron, why, you went and talked to him. I think we went one Saturday and got quite a bunch of stuff from a couple of places.

So were you involved in that? It sounds like you did some of collecting?

Oh, yes, I think they tried to get everybody involved that they could. I think as a result of the schools, of course, we were sort of pinpointed to pass the word along and be examples, and so that's what we did.

Were you aware of special security measures for this city since there was so much? You had an air force army base, you had Basic Magnesium and I think there was a gunnery place.

Yes, there was.

So were there any special -- did you notice?

I think we felt it at one time there when it was a little more important than later. But I don't think it affected our lives too much.

Do you remember a housing area near the Basic Magnesium Plant called Carver Park?

Yes, I do.

Did you ever see that?

You bet I did.

Could you describe it to me?

I remember it very well, Carver Park, you bet. It seems to me the houses were pretty much the same. I remember we went out there one time. Of course, I went out more than one time, but I remember the one time we went out there it looked like it was just a lot of people there. We just thought that they were good people and wondered why they'd come there, you know. But I don't know.

In 1947 the Flamingo was completed. What did people in the town say about it? What was the talk?

[Laughing] Oh, gosh. Well, of course, there was a lot of—this Bugsy Siegel and some of those. It kind of bothered people to think that these rats, they called them, were doing it, but it became quite the place and I think people eventually went out there. We did. We went out there. In fact, as a quartet we went out and sang there sometimes.

Then we went out—Billie Gather was the photographer out there. Of course, I've always been interested in photography and got acquainted with her. She took a lot of pictures of our family. We went out and had dinner and all that. It used to be that you could have dinner and then they'd have this little show afterward. And it was a good show, singers or dancers or something of that sort. So we'd go out and have our dinner and then see the show. Sometimes we'd just have the dinner. But it was very good, and she'd take pictures of family. Some of our best pictures were taken by her.

Tell me what the Flamingo looked like.

I've got pictures of it.

Well, [the Flamingo was] set back from the road. They were not right on the road. They were back so that you had, oh, something in here, the decorations and some signs or something on the building and a lawn usually in the front. But now they just build them right out almost to the

sidewalk.

Since you and your family went out to dinner at several of these places, how would you compare this new Flamingo with the old places that you had eaten in previous to that?

There's no comparison, none, completely different. I don't know. We haven't been out to eat here very much. They were pretty fancy, though.

Did you dress the same to go to the Flamingo as you dressed to go to other casino restaurants?

Probably. In those days if you went out you usually dressed. You didn't just go in your old grubbies like they do now.

What were some of the stories that you and your friends told -- I want to know how you talked about the boys, the mob. You just called them "the rats" a few minutes ago.

[Laughing]

What was said about them?

I imagine that we got a lot of stories that weren't true; may have been exaggerations, probably. But it was always a little disconcerting to have the mob, as they called them, or these people who had been making their money illegally invest it and get a big thing going. It took a lot of people. And some of them didn't go along, I imagine. I don't know. But we always thought we probably would not have gone if we hadn't been in the quartet and hadn't been singing. It was kind of an in for us. Then sometimes they had some great entertainers there. They would invite us out and we went out and sang with some of them. There was a whole bunch of girls and we went out. And they took pictures of the whole gang of us with them and it was fun.

Do you remember anyone that you sang with?

Oh, I've forgotten their names. I don't know. None of the big stars.

A lot of people that I interviewed who came here in the early 40s have told me that the town was so safe at that point. They accredit that safeness to the mob.

Could have been. Yeah, could have been.

Why do you think that's possible?

Well, they didn't want any fuss here. If they're going to invest their money here and people have already said things about them, they weren't going to get in to any more trouble. They were pretty careful about that.

Back a few years before this, with an air force army base at that point, what was the presence of soldiers or military men like in the town?

We didn't see too many. I don't remember seeing too many. Of course, I didn't get out. Remember, I'm teaching school, and so I'm tied up almost all the time except in the evenings. Oh, once in a while you go out and you see some of them, but they weren't what you call highly visible.

At the end of World War II, the Cold War started and atomic bombs were tested here in Las Vegas, in this area. How did the government inform the community that there was going to be a test?

Well, we knew. I don't remember how. Many times we went out, way out there in order to see it, not knowing that probably would be an infection of some kind. We didn't know that. We went out there. And I don't know whether my wife got that as a result of that or not. She had breast cancer. But we would go clear out there and wait. Boom, the whole sky would light up, just light up everything. It was just as light as day when that thing went off.

Did you take the schoolchildren out there to see them?

Never.

Did they close the schools?

I don't think they did. Most of these were early in the morning or late at night so that you could see them. I don't know why they did that. Maybe they had some in the daytime, but, of course, I wouldn't have been able to go. I'm sure they didn't let any school out for that.

Living here where we are now -- and the Test Site is probably 60 miles away -- did you feel the earth shake when there was a test?

You could feel something and you could see the light in the sky. And that's a long ways away. But we used to go out quite a ways, you know, in order to see it better. But even when we were here and we knew one was going and couldn't go, why, we'd go out and look and see the sky light up. It was amazing.

In the 50s you had sort of a financial downturn in the city, a lot of the businesses. Some of the casinos had a problem completing construction and things like that. The Moulin Rouge was one of those. Do you remember in 1955 when the Moulin Rouge opened?

Yes, I do.

Did you ever go to the Moulin Rouge?

Yes, I sure did.

Can you tell me what it was like?

We thought it was great. Yeah, it was very, very interesting. We all had a feeling that it was not going to be successful because it was on the wrong side of town. We figured that that was one of the reasons that it might not be successful. And sure enough, it wasn't.

Did you hear the reasons -- other than the one you just gave, did you hear any other reasons that maybe were given that it wasn't successful?

Oh, there's probably some, yes, but I don't recall. Some of the people involved in it, yeah. I remember just a little bit of faint talk about that, you know.

Did you have a sense even at that point that you were living in a tourist destination, or were you kind of isolated here on Ninth Street?

[Laughing] No. We knew it was because the big thing in those days was people came here to get married. Hundreds of people came to get married. Right up here, we used to have a couple of friends who ran one of these places up there, and they had a great time. People got married because there's no waiting. You didn't have to have a blood test. You would come and get your license and go right over and get married. Now, many places they had a three-day waiting period or you had to have a blood test and that took a while. And they'd come here because they could come up here and go get their license, get married, and go back.

So you said that you had friends who ran a wedding chapel?

A wedding chapel, yeah. That's where they'd marry them. Oh, yes, good friends. In fact, as a quartet we sang at quite a few of those because he was their friend and he'd have somebody special, so he'd want us to come over and sing a couple of nice numbers for them.

How do you think your family was affected, when you look at your childhood and your children growing up in a tourist town, how do you think your family was affected by living in a tourist town?

Well, we were lucky I guess because some of them it affected them more than it did us. We tried to maintain a regular family and not let it affect the family, and I think we did very well because the kids turned out to be fine. They got married. They've all done very well.

Your church, even though all churches try to keep the family together, your church has a reputation for being family oriented.

That's one of our main points.

Do you think that had anything to do with it?

Oh, sure, because some of the things they ask us to do as a family is the thing that keeps the family together, you see.

Can you share any of those ideas?

Every week we have what is called Family Home Night, every week. It was Monday night. You're supposed to get your family together, talk to them, read a little scripture, find out their troubles, if they have any, and try to help them solve your troubles, and you do that every week. That seems to help knit the family together. It certainly has done that with ours. You see we just got back – I went with my two daughters and my son and my son's wife, and some of the others couldn't go or they would have. We tried to get all six of them to go and there would have been seven of us, but we only got five. We all went to China, you see, and spent 18 days.

This was to see another family member?

Well, he was supposed to meet us in either Shanghai or Hong Kong, but it turned out that he just couldn't manage it.

So the great-grandson who's living there, you didn't see while you were over there?

We didn't get to see him while we were over there. He couldn't make it. Couldn't get over there. Things happened and, you know, this certain time – if it would have been two days later, he could have done it. But that's just the way it went. Well, we talked to him on the phone and it was fun.

That's wonderful. Do your children still practice some of those --

Oh, yes. And then we as a whole family, we try to get all of them together at least once a year, the whole family. We don't always make it. Some of them can't. Sometimes we have about 90 percent of the family, the whole big gang.

Now, do you consider that a family reunion?

That's a family reunion, once a year, at least. And then we used to have a family letter. In other words, one in the family would write to me and send me the message that they had from the family before. Then I would read that family, read them all, and send those with my letter on to the next

family. We used to do that. Every month we'd have a shift. So I'd get a letter with all of them about, oh, about every six weeks, and that way it keeps the family together.

I love it. I want to know about -- we're almost in the 60s now. Earlier we talked about the various ethnic groups in the community. And we know clearly that there were at least four different ethnic groups.

Yeah.

Now we're going into the 1960s. Can you tell me how relations among and between these groups, how it has evolved or how they have evolved?

By the 60s, we really had every nationality here. The schools were changing, too, because it was a bigger community. They would bus the kids. They couldn't stay after school. You couldn't have them stay and talk to them after school. I was about ready to quit in the 60s. In fact, in '65, well, in the 60s I got pretty tired of it because you couldn't really get to the kids. Their families were shattered; a lot of them didn't have a mother or a father, one or the other. They bussed them from way over in that part of town over to the high school.

We were talking about children and how the city is changing. Children are being bussed. You are in the arts. You put on plays and do things like that. So children can't stay after school any longer to participate in those activities.

The ones that are bussed, (right). There were some of them that could, and some of them did whether they could or not because they were so interested. But it's just not the same. Before, you'd have a bunch of kids that were so gung-ho they'd stay regardless, as long as their parents would let them.

So what do you think could have been done, or maybe we can even do now, to change the way kids, groups, generations interact?

Well, I've always felt that the best way to improve education is to improve the family. As long as you have a split family or kids going their own direction, nobody looking out for them, you're not going to have a good school. They're not interested in school because they don't have parents that are interested in it, not interested in achieving because there's nobody to praise them for achieving. They can get much more praise for being a hellion. As long as that happens, they're not going to work hard in school unless they've got some kind of—they have to have something behind it and lots

of them don't even have religion. So they have nothing. It makes it pretty tough. I don't think they're going to improve the schools unless they improve the family. Now, that's just my own idea.

Sitting here today just the two of us, how can we improve the family?

Well, we're headed down the wrong way right now. Marriage is becoming not so important. I think the only thing we can do—and we try to do it in our church—is to make marriage a very important event and make it so important that the whole family comes to it. We center on that. Then after that we center on trying to help them, help them get along. It's not easy to get along. You know that.

What do you do to help families get along?

Well, sometimes they need money, a little bit, at the right time. Sometimes they need encouragement. And most of the time the kids kind of disturb the family. Those kids need to have somebody say, gosh, you're doing swell. You're doing a good job. This was fine. This was good, but this was great, you see. You'll need to have about 40 ways to congratulate those kids so they'll want to do something and they'll want to get married and they'll want to have a good family. It's discouraging, the things that are happening now. And this matter of women marrying women and men marrying men, what is that for? Well, it's just to do what you want to do, you see. It's no good.

So somewhere along the line we have to start taking more responsibility.

Absolutely. You have to be responsible for your kids. And I am. I try to do my very best, even now. Here they are, they've got kids. I've got great-grandkids. I try to call them at least once a week and say hello, how are you getting along, what can I do to help you? Yeah. All the kids that can work, I have them come over and cut my lawn and do things for me. I could do it myself, but, you know, it makes it much better if they come and then I praise them a little bit and give them a little money. You bet.

Now, you have a daughter who lives next door.

Yeah. She just moved there.

They had a great big house out here. When their family grew up and they all left, they have this two-story house with two of them rattling around. Why, it took half their days to keep it clean. And I said, "Why in the devil don't you just sell that house; move over to a little house? There's only two of you. I think you could get along." So they came over and looked. We had to do a lot of work and fix it all up. You'd be surprised. That's a beautiful little house. I'd almost move over there

myself. [Laughing] It's beautiful.

And then they get along fine and they can go visit their kids, no problem. They don't have to spend all their time fixing the house, paying the house with the big bills and all that.

So are they happy here?

Well, they're not quite settled, but they're doing fine...Get all those boxes emptied. Had too much, you know. We all have too much.

Oh, yes. Especially if they're coming out of a bigger house.

Yeah.

Getting back to the era of the 60s, tell me what kind of an impact Howard Hughes had when he came to town.

Well, a lot of people thought he was really great. He did a lot of things and he built a lot of things. They couldn't understand some of the things he did nor the way he performed sometimes, but they realized that his money had done a great thing. He built a place out here that was just fabulous.

Have you been out to see it?

Where?

It's (a) great big office building and three or four buildings and the roads are nice around it.

Now, is that the area off of Desert Inn?

Probably.

Okay, yes.

Beautiful. Big buildings.

Yes. I agree with you.

And the buildings are just simply marvelous; first-class elevators, everything's first class.

In the 60s in most of the country we had protests against the Vietnam War. Do you remember any activity like that in Las Vegas?

I can remember sometime that there was a little bit generated maybe from other cities that were doing a great job of it. A lot of our good people just said this is just crazy; we should get out of there; this is not good.

One place that is known to have been the area of protests in Las Vegas is Circle Park. Do you remember that as being an area where people used to sort of hang out and where the peace

movement took place?

I can remember a little bit, but I don't think it was too obvious. Maybe I just didn't get there at the right time.

Okay. Because the mob presence was so overt here at one time, Howard Hughes came in, corporations started coming in and buying some of that property, what do you see as the difference, that change? Was there a difference that the natives who had been here for a long time, did you see a great difference?

I can feel the difference, yeah.

Explain that to me.

It made me feel like maybe the mob was having a little less influence and maybe other people had seen things that would be beneficial here. I'm sure that some of my friends in Kiwanis, they said that yes, this is the thing that should happen because we can't go along with this blight on us of the mob; get out of that and maybe we can graduate into a big city. But I never expected it to go so big as it is.

That small-town feeling that you had when you knew everybody on this block -- you called the names earlier.

You'd go uptown and I knew everybody. I'd say hello. Now I don't see anybody (I know).

So how do you feel about that great difference? You've been here for many years. Since 1940, so you've been here 60 years.

Sixty years.

Sixty years. Thinking about that first ten-year period, as this block grew, you knew everybody, and now, how does that make you feel?

I don't know. I kind of get used to it. But it made me feel sort of isolated and lonely for a while. All my friends moved away and some of them went to other parts of the world.

Why did you stay? Everybody I know who's your age here in the city now all moved to nice gated communities or they moved to the Green Valley area. Why did you stay?

Well, I like the house. I like the area, even though I don't have the same feeling that I did then. But if you get in the hobby that I got into, rocks, what am I going to do if I move? You should see my rocks. I've got more rocks than you can imagine. I don't know what the kids are going to do with it when I'm gone. I've tried to convert some of them to play with rocks and do things with them

because they're beautiful. I'll show you some. And some of them are a little bit interested, so maybe. But I've got enough cut already they can spend the rest of their lives making pretty things.

So that hobby is one of the reasons.

Yeah.

Did you have other hobbies?

Oh, yes. I have my singing, of course. I've sung all my life, all my life. When we moved from Provo and I was in the seventh grade and they wanted to move down to the ranch, they wanted to move sooner, but I got a part, a singing part in a little operetta. This is before my voice changed; I was singing soprano in those days. "No," my mother said, "no, we're not going to move until that's over with." That was at Thanksgiving. So we got another Thanksgiving and then right after Thanksgiving we moved.

I have sung all my life. I sang in the quartet for 30 years. When my wife died in 1964, I joined the Desert Corral. Now, the Desert Corral was an organization started by one of my students in high school. She loved music and she started this corral. There are about 90 voices now, but there were about 60 then. She invited me in the first group just to sing with them, and I sang with them for 11 years. We sang about 85 concerts, all over. We went to Salt Lake, Chicago, Florida, Mexico. We sang clear down to Mexico, four or five cities down there.

So I sang with them for 11 years and then I graduated. I gave them a contribution and I said I have other things I have to do, because when you belonged to that you had to memorize everything, memorize. So every week you had a new song to memorize to get ready for the concert, you see. Sometimes you had two songs to memorize. So every week we had a big, long rehearsal, no way out of it, every week. Then you have to memorize all that. But it was wonderful. Got to know all those great people, oh. But family has just been on me to try to get my history written. I said, "Nobody's going to read it." They said, "I don't care; you write it." So I'll get to work and write it.

These tapes might help jar some memories.

I've got some of it already started.

Oh, good. Tell me some of the things that you've written already.

Oh, dear, just my early life, some of the early life. One of the little stories that I tell about my

mother -- she was the sweetest lady in the whole world, I'll tell you. She was just a marvelous, marvelous lady, great cook.

When I was a little boy up in Boise, Idaho -- I was six years old; I was in the first grade -- I had a little boy about four blocks away who I kind of liked him, you know; you get kind of get enamored with somebody. He wanted to do certain things and some of them weren't so good, but I wanted to go with him. And my mother said, "No, you shouldn't do that. You shouldn't do that. Now, don't do that because if you do it's not going to be good."

Well, I said okay. Pretty soon here I'm going down there. Cross all these streets. Here I am a little, teeny guy. My mother said, "You'll get hit with a car, something might happen, and we just can't afford to have that happen."

Well, this time I went down there and I stayed too long. She didn't know where I was. Finally she decided, well, maybe he's down there. She went down there and there I was. She brought me home. She said, "Well, I've got to do something." So she said, "You go out and pick one of those willows out in the hedge." There's little willows that had little leaves all up and down. So I went out and cut one off and brought it in. So she took me and took my pants down, right on the backside there, she whapped me. Oh, man, did that hurt. I looked up and my mother was crying. [Crying]

I picked those little leaves off. And every time I picked one off I thought of her crying. So I never went back.

That's a great story.

What do you see as the future for Las Vegas?

Oh, boy. Well, I had a friend, a teacher, he was a teacher with me, and he said, "I think that this valley is going to be houses from mountain to mountain."

I said, "Ah, come on."

"Yes, sir," he said, "I think so. You just watch."

And it's almost happened. It's a lovely place to live in the summertime.

Why just the summer?

No, not the summer. [Laughing] Not in the summer, darn it. Not in the summer. In the winter, marvelous. In the early spring, great. Fall, great. Middle summer, go some other place. But it has

a good climate. It has lots of entertainment. And these new communities, they're building them with a little organization right there. I have one daughter that lives up there and they can go up there and learn how to do woodwork, how to do this and that, anything you want.

So is that Summerlin?

Yes.

Plus, don't they have plays an all of that out there?

Oh, yes. Yeah, I go to their plays all the time. I go to plays all winter, plays and concerts. I went to 15 plays last year and maybe ten concerts. I take my daughters if I go. Usually they're so gosh darn busy that they can't. So I've got a friend who is not busy. She's almost as old as I am. So I call her up and she says, "Yeah, let's go." So I take her and we go and visit.

Now, your church -- and this is a very personal question that I'm going to ask now, and you don't have to answer this. Because your church is so adamant about good families, why didn't you ever remarry?

Well, lots of them do and I thought about it. Sometimes it destroys the family. You get the wrong one and then the rest of the family can't come in and you can't get along with their family. It's a difficult thing.

Years ago I used to teach the kids -- I don't know whether this had any influence or not -- it was a little song that I taught them so they would not be afraid, so they could do it without any problem. It's called "The Hindu Paradise." It goes:

"The Hindu died, a happy thing to do when 20 years united to a shrew. Released, he hopefully for entrance cries before the gates of Brahma's paradise. 'Hast thou been through purgatory?' Brahma said.

'No, but I've been married,' and he hung his head.

'Come in, come in, and welcome to my son. Marriage and purgatory are as one.'

In bliss extreme he entered heaven's door and knew the peace he never had known before.

Scarce that he entered the garden fair, then another Hindu asked admission there. The same question Brahma asked, 'Hast thou been through purgatory?'

'No. What then?'

'Thou canst not enter,' did the god reply.

'Well, he that entered first was there no more than I.'

'Oh, that is true, but he has married been, and so on earth has suffered from all sin.'

'Married, uh-ho, well, I've been married thrice.'

'Beyond we'll have no fools in paradise.'

[Laughing] I don't think that had anything to do with it. But any rate, I just never found anybody that I thought would fit in and I could have had three or four or five different ones.

You've traveled a lot.

I've been a lot of places.

There is a sense, even today, that Las Vegas is just a different city from any city we can name, even if we name five or six cities right here in the Southwest. How do you compare it with other cities, maybe cities here in the Southwest, and do you see it as the same? Is it different?

Oh, yes, it's different. I don't think there's any place quite like it. I think the climate has a good deal to do with it and the fact that we have so many shows. If they want to go, they can. There's many other things to do, places to go, beautiful places to visit. There's a lot of pretty places to go. The Valley of Fire over here, have you ever been over there?

Yes.

Wonderful. I have some of the most beautiful pictures of the early time there when all those carvings were on the rocks before some of them were destroyed. And then there's a pretty canyon right up here close. Ah, yes, there's lots of places to go and see.

I don't know if you have friends around the country. How do you think people from other cities see Las Vegas?

Oh, some of them don't quite understand it, of course, but I think almost all the friends I have would like to come to Las Vegas for a short time. I don't know whether they'd like to live here or not. And some of them have lived here and moved to other places. But it depends on what you want to do. Some of them like boats. They can go out here on this lake and just have the greatest time in the world. Then if you like horses, over here where you go to Pahrump, you go that way and then you turn south and there's a big ranch there where they have all kinds of horses and they do trail riding and they do roping and they do everything, show you how to do it. Lots of people just love to go out there.

That's almost like a modern day dude ranch.

Yeah, it is. It's a modern day dude ranch is exactly what it is.

Okay. My last question is about the power here in the city. The power in this city, who really runs this city? Do you see it as the government or as the Strip casino owners? How do you see that and do you think that has anything to do with why this city is different from most cities?

Well, I'm sure the Strip people have a great influence. I'm sure they do. I don't know exactly how much. But I do know that I've had a few altercations with the big shots up here. There's one right across the street here. They built this cockeyed little square box, and they were supposed to try to build something that would fit into the neighborhood. It's absolutely wrong. I circulated a petition and did everything, went up there and met with them and everything. And I found out that whoever was in charge had somebody in the inner circle give them that permit without anybody even having anything to do with it.

So what is the square box?

Well, it was supposed to be a credit union I think and credit unions are not supposed to be in this district at all. And so then, finally, we got a big to-do up there and I took a lawyer up there and we went to work. They said, yeah, we'll do something; we'll change it. It's been almost two years and nothing's been done. Supposed to have been done within nine months. There's influence someplace.

Anything else that you'd like to say now? This is going to be used by historians and researchers who will listen to this to help learn about this city. Is there anything else that you'd like to say?

Oh, there will be very few people listen to this. [Laughing] Any rate, no, I think this is a great town and I'm just sorry that some of the good things about it have changed. We got a new superintendent. I went and heard him speak yesterday. I know he's going to have one heck of a job. He says the main thing, the main thing is do we teach kids to read? And I believe that. And the next he said is we've got to teach them a little algebra so they'll know how to solve problems. And that's good, too. But I think they've got a lot of other things. I think they're not going to improve the schools, really, unless they improve the families.

Do you think improving the families here would be any more difficult than any other city?

Depends on how much the family is required to work. If both parents are required to work night and day, they're not going to have any time for the family. I think that's the big thing.

And you see that as a problem here more than most cities?

Well, I think a lot of the people here both work. I really do. A lot of people that I know of that I've talked to, and I know a lot of people. Not very many in this town now, but still a lot of people.

Well, I really appreciate this and thank you so much.

A

atomic bomb tests · 17

D

Desert Corral · 24

F

Family Home Night · 19
Flamingo hotel/casino · 15, 16
Frazier, Maude · 6
Fremont Street · 8

G

Gather, Billie · 15

H

Helldorado Parade · 12

K

Kiwanis Quartet · 6

M

Maude Frazier · 5, 7
Moulin Rouge · 18

P

Pahranagat Valley, NV · 2, 3
Panaca, NV · 3, 4, 5, 6

U

University of Utah · 4