AN INTERVIEW WITH CONNIE HILL SHELDON

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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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 accompany the individual interviews.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project.

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Preface

Connie Hill Sheldon and her identical twin, Billie, also were members of Rancho High School's first graduating class of 1962. Connie and Billie were born in 1944 in Oklahoma and spent their early years in southern California before moving to Las Vegas in 1956 with their mother, brother, and stepfather, Gerald Elmore. In Las Vegas Connie and her siblings attended Sunrise Acres Elementary School before going to Rancho, and the family was active with Homesite Baptist Church. While she was at Rancho Connie worked at the Huntridge Theater, and she continued working there after she graduated.

In 1968 Connie married fellow Rancho '62 classmate Clyde Sheldon in Goldfield, Nevada. At the time of their marriage Clyde was an active-duty Marine. Over the course of his twenty-year USMC career the Sheldons lived in several places, but following his 1983 retirement they returned to Las Vegas and then moved to Pahrump. In this interview Connie particularly focuses on military life in New York City and in Havelock, North Carolina, and on her work over the years at the Huntridge Theater, the Nevada Test Site, and Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company, Inc. (REECo).

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February 11, 2013
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Claytee D. White

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV

Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project
Rancho High School Class of '62

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CJSheldon 2/11/13

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This is Claytee White and I'm with Connie Hill Sheldon this morning. We're in the Reading Room, Special Collections. It is February 11th, 2013.

So how are you this morning, Connie?

I'm very well, thank you.

Wonderful. Connie, I know that Sheldon is the usual spelling, but could you spell your last name?

S-H-E-L-D-O-N.

Thank you.

You're welcome.

I'm going to call you Connie if that's okay.

That's perfect.

Good. Connie, could you tell me a little about your early life?

Well, I was born in Oklahoma in a really small, small town called Heavener. I was born at home. I'm an identical twin, so that was quite unusual. I don't know if you want stories or anything.

Yes, please.

There's a story that goes that my aunt, because we were so small, she put a doll in the bassinet with us and told the mailman that we were triplets.

And did the mailman believe it?

I don't know. Probably not. But who knows in those days? Anyway, that's just the story. Well, when we were eighteen months old we moved to Southern California.

Why did the family move to Southern California?

I think it was work. My biological father [John H. Hill Jr.] was a glazer by trade. The men in

that family were glazers.

What is that?

It is a glass cutter, basically. In fact, I have handmade mirrors that they made and they're lovely, just lovely. They're etched and beveled and they have birds and flowers and that type of thing. My grandfather was a very talented man, as well; uneducated, however. Never went to school. Could only sign his name. Could not read. By my father, of course, was some education. So we were there in California until, oh, approximately—well, I was in the eighth grade. So about 1956 or '57.

So where in Southern California?

Lynwood, California is where we lived actually. My brother was born in Compton, California. He was born in 1947; my sister and I in '44. We had a very happy life there. I remember going to grammar school there at Lincoln Elementary. We used to walk there; then I guess you could do that. And then we went to Hosler Junior High School before we moved to Las Vegas.

And give me your parents' names.

My mother's name was Margaret; her maiden name was Walkup. And then my father's name was John H. Hill Junior. My mom and dad divorced when we were in the third grade, I believe, and my mother then later on went to work and she met my stepfather. She was a bookkeeper at a car dealership in Huntington Beach, California; that's where she met my stepfather. Then in 1956 I believe it was we moved to Las Vegas.

Why did you move to Las Vegas?

He had a job here as a salesman for Navajo Freight Lines.

And what is that?

Well, it's a freight line where they move furniture and freight and that type of thing.

Wonderful. And his name is?

His name was Gerald L. Elmore.

Okay, wonderful. And even though your mother worked as a bookkeeper at one time, you consider her a housewife.

I do. She did not work before she and my father divorced. She was a very talented bookkeeper and accountant. But then when we moved to Las Vegas, she also did not work; she stayed home. She baby-sat some, but really did not work.

So where did you live when you first moved here in 1956?

Oh, we lived on I think it was North 14th—no—North 17th. I think it was called Greater Las Vegas; it was like tract homes. They were really seventies, well, fifties-type homes: ranch style with lots of windows and that type of thing. They're still there; the home is still there.

Okay, good. So did you have your own bedroom or did you and your sister—

Oh, no. We always shared. I can't ever remember our having a separate bedroom until she got married and left. She married three years before I did.

So tell me about that early period of Las Vegas. You were eighth grade. Were you moving into the ninth grade or still in the eighth grade when you moved here?

No. In the beginning of eighth grade, in September of that year.

So which school was that?

Sunrise Acres [Elementary School].

So you began to meet some of the same people that you went to Rancho with.

Oh, absolutely. And we went to church. We were very active in church, Homesite Baptist Church, which was on 25th Street then; now it's Eastern [Avenue]. The church is not there—well, the building is there, but it's no longer Homesite Baptist. That's where we became close

with a lot of our friends that we still keep in contact with because we all went to school in Sunrise Acres, we all went to church together, and then we moved on to high school.

Oh, that's wonderful. Tell me about recreation at that period, what kids did.

Well, we went to ball games—basketball, football. Even in grammar school they had a very active sports and recreation-type thing. And we went to the movies. We bowled a lot; we were bowlers.

Where did you bowl?

Showboat [Hotel, Casino, and Bowling Center].

Now, did your parents ever go out to the Showboat, an adult date?

Seldom. I can remember a couple of times they went out usually with some of my [step] father's clients. I think they gambled some. But as far as dating goes, I think they went to the movies a few times, but not a lot. Money was tight in those days. We were not well off; I would say middle or lower income—middle income, I guess.

Did you work as a teenager?

When I was fifteen.

What did you do?

I went to work at the Huntridge Theater.

Fabulous. Why did so many kids work?

Because I think we were poor. On our side of town—and I guess that's pretty ugly to say, but that's the way it was; there were rich areas and not-so-rich areas, and over by Sunrise Acres and in that area, that was a poor area. So if you were going to have clothes and those sorts of things and get a car and things like that, you had to work. And so basically I didn't tell the truth about my age and got a job at the Huntridge. In fact, one of my classmates in high school helped me

get a job because he was a manager there. He said, "Go down and see so-and-so." And I did, and I got a job there. I worked there actually until I was married.

Oh, that's wonderful. Tell me about some of the movie openings. Do you remember any of those?

Oh, *Ben-Hur*; that's the one that stands out in my mind.

Tell me about it.

Oh, it was fantastic. They took the box office that was normally where you just paid your money and stuff and they put ticket—because everybody had an assigned seat. So they had ticket numbers and things like that and you bought your ticket right out of that—well, the lady at the cashier's office would say, "Well, this is what's available," just like they do now, only you purchased your ticket right there. Then we sold, oh, books with a *Ben-Hur* thing in it; that was an extra thing. And they got uniforms for us. In fact, we went to the old El Rancho [Vegas (hotel and casino)] to be fitted for them.

Oh, my. So this was important.

Right. There was a seamstress there. Oh, it was a very big thing, very big thing.

So this seamstress made the uniforms?

Yes, a seamstress. We went to the El Rancho and they fitted us there and then they custom made them for us.

Describe one of those uniforms.

It had a dark blue skirt and then a little bit lighter blue blouse.

And anything reminiscent of that era, of that *Ben-Hur* era? Did you have a headdress?

No. We didn't do anything of that nature.

Any special shoes?

No. No, you didn't have special shoes or anything. You just wore what you had.

I will tell you a little story. Working behind the snack bar it's messy, a messy thing, and you had to clean and things like that. Well, the fronts of our uniforms—and they had to be dry cleaned, as I recall, and that was something most people couldn't afford, really. How many people went to the dry cleaners? Not very many. But anyway, finally Mr. [Harry] Zumar hired my mother to make aprons for everybody. That way it helped to keep the front of your—and you only wore the apron when you were behind the snack bar. And boy, if you didn't keep that apron clean, you were in trouble because they didn't want you looking messy back there. And my mother was a very exceptional seamstress, as well. In fact, she made Joyce [Rasmussen]'s wedding gown.

So did she make your wedding gown, as well?

No, she didn't.

Wow. Now, why didn't you have your mom—

I didn't make my daughter's wedding gown, either. I made my niece's, but I didn't make my—I couldn't please her I'm sure.

So are you a seamstress, as well?

I do; I sew, not very much anymore, but I used to.

So let's talk about Rancho. You've already talked about the work that you did outside of that. What was the difference going from your junior high school to Rancho? What were the differences that you found?

Well, we changed classes for one thing. I don't know if that's the type of thing you—and then we met kids from all over town and that was unusual, I thought. I might mention, too, that—I don't know if this is appropriate—at Sunrise [Acres] I think we were the only school who had black

kids and I think there were two. In fact, I think I can remember a couple of their names, but not right now because I'm a little nervous. But anyway, they were very important in our lives. And coming from California that's the first time—I'm kind of backtracking—that's the first time I ever had a class with someone that was of color.

So Lynwood didn't have any kids of color at that time?

Not where I went to school, not one.

And you were saying that your brother was born in Compton?

Uh-huh, a hospital in Compton; I think it was Compton Community Hospital.

Wow. Yeah, because those communities today—

Oh, I know they are. Yeah, yeah. Primarily people of color. But that was the first time—Macio Harris; that's one of the—and my husband [Clyde Sheldon] played ball with him because he was in the same class as us. He and Macio were very good friends. In fact, if I'm not mistaken he still may be in that area over there.

Over in the Sunrise Acres area?

No. Over on the Westside. I mean I think he's not in there now, but I think he does go to church there. I think he may be a minister of some kind or a deacon or something. It seems like I was working with a girl who knew Macio and said that he was a deacon in their church or something.

Harris?

Harris, Macio Harris.

Wonderful. A name like that I should be able to find. We're doing a special African-American project at the same time as I'm doing this, so I really appreciate that.

That gives me goose bumps. That's great. That's wonderful.

So since you mentioned Macio's name, tell me about race relations at the time. We have

Native Americans here at that time, Latinos and blacks.

The Latinos, well, they didn't—I don't know. It's just unusual—because there were so few in Sunrise Acres—because most of them went to Madison and I can remember going there for a basketball game one time. That gym is still there.

So where was the gym?

Over on, I think it's D Street. It's a well-known building. It's something else now.

Not the Westside School?

It might have been there at the Westside School. There's a very large building right by the street. It could be. D and—

D and Washington [Avenue]?

Yes, that's where it is.

Okay, that's the Westside School.

Yeah. Most of the kids went there. I don't know why we had a couple of boys. There were no girls, but there was one boy. I remember he walked to school. So he must have lived right on the outskirts, or something of that nature.

So at Rancho, what kind of mixture did you find when you went to Rancho?

There were not a lot of black students. There were a few Indian, Paiute children, and then there were more Mexican-Americans I guess is what you would say. But there were very few black; you can look in our yearbook and see that. And we lived in a poorer side of town, so you would have thought, maybe, that there would have been more, but there weren't. And when you say "relations," that automatically makes me think of "issues." As far as I know there were none.

And when I say race relations I'm talking about the whole gamut, playing together on sports teams.

Oh, yeah.

Going to movies together. All of that.

I do not know that any of them—well, I don't know if any of them ever went to school. But I know that we went to sports together. They didn't have separate places to sit and things like that. That was never nothing that I knew of.

What kind of classes did you enjoy most and the teachers?

I think I enjoyed most things like psychology. I remember a Mr. Paul. He was a coach, Coach Paul. He was the only Ph.D. I understand in town at that time. He was a coach and he taught psychology and I don't know what else he taught. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed government. I enjoyed English class; that was a good one. But Dr. Paul—we didn't call him doctor then; Coach Paul—I remember him. And I enjoyed shorthand and typing and things like that, too. I knew that even if I went to college, which I wanted to do, that I would have to work, so I tried to prepare myself to be able to do both of those things.

That was smart.

Well, I knew I would have to work. So I needed to type and I needed to try to do shorthand and things like that and be a business-type person so that I could go to school.

Tell me about the sports activities that you engaged in.

Personally? I was in pep club and GRA [Girls Recreation Association]. GRA was so profound I can't remember doing anything.

What was GRA?

Girls Recreation Association. If I'm not mistaken that was my mother's idea. For one thing, it wasn't expensive to be in it; it was playing sports and doing things like that after school. But my mother was also quite a sportswoman. She was very tiny, but she played basketball and all sorts

of things like that in her community. She graduated in 1940 in Arkansas and everybody knew her for some reason. But anyway, she played that, so we did that. And I think we might have played a few times. But again, being in our economic group, we had to ride the bus to school and home, so it was very difficult to stay after school and then get home. Rancho is on Owens [Avenue] and, well, I guess it was around 12th, so that would be Bruce [Street]. So we'd either have to walk home or get a ride. And we lived on Nellis [Boulevard] and Bonanza [Road]. And it was dirt road mostly. So it was a long way to walk for things like that.

So how far do you think?

Oh, I'm terrible at that kind of thing.

So how long did it take you? Did you ever walk?

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

So how long did it take you?

I can't remember. It's been a long time. So anyway, so unless we could get a ride with somebody…

But Pep Club was a little different story. You stayed a few times after school, not long, and then we also going to the games and things like that. My folks could always take us and then pick us up there. And it was fun. It was a neat thing to do. It was good, a lot of camaraderie. During assemblies and things, Pep Club normally sat in one spot, especially if it was a game thing. So it was really neat.

That's good. What about lunch hours? You had an open campus.

Yes.

What did you and your group of friends do?

We stayed on campus.

Did you bring your lunch?

Yes. Very seldom did we get to buy lunch because we didn't have the money to do that. When we did I think I bought pizza and a grape drink. Yeah, we brought our lunch.

What about hanging out after school or on weekends?

On weekends we'd spend it at church mostly.

Okay. So no Blue Onion?

Oh. Yeah, we always hung out at the Blue Onion.

Tell me about that.

That was so much fun. A lot of times that was the church people; we would go after church and go over to the Blue Onion. And we'd go all the way from the Blue Onion—I know you've heard this a dozen times—all the way up from the Blue Onion up to the Union Station and then turn around because there was a park there. Then you'd go all the way around and go all the way back down to the Blue Onion and go around a couple of times and then you'd stop and have your snacks or whatever.

I can remember in the heat of the summer they even installed those air-conditioning things. It was like a big piece of—well, flexible LLS pipe; that's a vent pipe. You can put it in your back window and roll it up and then you get some air.

Oh, my.

No one has told you that?

No one told me that. See, that's why we ask the same questions because of those different answers I get. Somebody remembers one thing; somebody—

Oh, I can't believe nobody said that.

Oh, yes. And somebody else will remember something else.

I was sick when they changed that to something else and it wasn't—and we used to go there even after I went to work. I know they had a very nice coffee shop there, and we used to go there for lunch. It was a nice place to eat. I know some kids walked over there to have lunch from Sunrise Acres if they had the money and their folks didn't have...

I have to tell you, watching these cutouts here. I don't know if anybody's told you about this or not. But we also had Sammy Davis Junior come to our school for an assembly.

Why?

And the Platters, too.

Wow. Why?

I don't know. I don't know what the deal was. Every once in a while we'd have an assembly with a movie star or a singer. I can remember—and my husband remembers this always, too—that he came out and he had a cigarette in his hand and he took a big puff off of it and he went [blowing], "Share it amongst you." That's just one of those silly things you remember. No kidding.

[Laughing] I love it.

Yeah, yeah. And the Platters sang a couple of their great songs. Connie Francis was there once. I mean those were people of that age. I'm thinking that maybe Nat King Cole was there, too; I'm not sure. I'd have to look in the yearbook for sure. But yeah, we had some really—

I love it. Thank you so much for those memories. So getting back to Fremont Street.

Oh, I'm sorry.

No, no, no. Oh, no. This is what I want you to do. You're doing it perfectly. This is what we want.

Getting back to Fremont Street, when you used to do the circle, driving around

seeing all your friends, what do you think about it today when you see it?

Oh, I'm sad. Well, but it's been that way a long time. The Union Station closed a long, long time ago. Then after I worked at the Huntridge, I worked at the Fremont Theatre for a while, too. So you'd see people going up and down even then and you could wave or they'd wave. In fact, I remember one time I saw my husband—he was home on leave; I didn't even know he was in the [U.S.] Marine Corps—and they rolled down the window and he waved at me and said, "Hey, Connie," and we were talking. At the stop signs you would stop and talk to everybody, at the stoplights. Yeah, I mean it was a neat thing.

It was a wonderful time then. But it was a smaller town. Everybody really knew each other. In school, once we got from junior high to high school, then you met kids from all over town. When I look back on it now and I see the people at our reunions and things like that—in fact, we were joking at the reunion and we were taking pictures of all the Sunrise Acres people were here and all the J. D. Smith [people] were here; we all took pictures like that. And we jokingly said, "Oh, those are all the rich kids."

Which ones were the rich kids?

Oh, Shirley Gragson.

No. I mean—

Let me think of the school. Twin Lakes. Twin Lakes and Garside and places like that. Some of them didn't have junior highs. Sunrise didn't have a junior high, but J. D. Smith did. So when we were in our freshman year there were only like three or four schools. We had a small freshman class because some of them had a ninth grade.

Exactly. So they had a junior high.

Yeah. We went from eighth grade right to high school. And there were only—I don't know—

maybe four schools, three schools that had no ninth grade.

But Fremont Street was really special. I really miss that. When I see it today, I know it's progress and things like that, but it's just not the same.

I think everybody will agree with you.

Recently I know Dr. [Leonard] Carpi passed away and he used to be the eye doctor down on Fourth Street—it was Third or Fourth. When I worked at the Fremont [Theatre] I used to walk by his office all the time because that's where I got my first glasses was Dr. Carpi's office.

Oh, I'll tell you another story. When I worked at the Fremont, I every so often would get my car towed away. Well, I didn't have change to put in the thing to get your ticket out and put on the thing. So I'd go to get in my car and, "Oh, not again;" I'd get towed away.

So tell me about the ticket and putting it on your windshield.

Yeah. I just parked my car and left.

Okay. But they had some kind of a system where you would get a ticket?

Yeah. You put your money in the machine and they'd give you a little ticket, just like you do at the airport, and then you put it on the dashboard. Then they wouldn't tow you away because they know you paid. But I would get towed every once in a while. Well, I'd be in a rush.

How much did it cost at that time to get your car?

I can't remember. It must not have been a lot.

Yes. But you just talked about the eye doctor that was down on Fremont Street. What other businesses do you remember?

Oh, where it was Trader Joe's or Trader Vic's.

Trader Vic's.

Trader Vic's. The El Portal Theatre was in one block and the Fremont was in another. Let's see

what other businesses? Herb and Marv's, they were across the street.

What did they do?

They had a men's store. This is another story.

Good. I love those stories.

Well, years and years and years and years later my sister was an accountant and Herb and Marv used to be one of their clients in her office. They always wanted her to come to work for them and she kept telling them no. She says when you make a million dollars I'll come to work for you. And then they made a million dollars and she still wouldn't come to work.

[Laughing] I love it.

But there was Herb and Marv's and then Hecht's. The senator [Chic Hecht] owned a dress store there. I bought a lot of things from Hecht's. That was right across the street from the theater, within a block or two. And J. C. Penney was on that street and the phone company, it was there, and Sears and JoAnn's Bridal where I bought my bridal gown. It was further down.

But no one has ever said anything about a bridal shop.

Yeah. In fact, I walked there from the courthouse once to show one of my coworkers my wedding gown when I went to get it fitted.

So that was down toward the phone company?

Yeah, yeah. Well, I'm not sure what was the phone—I think it might have been Sears building and then it became the phone company in there. But it was about a block further on than that, so it was probably around Sixth [Street] would be my guess.

Any beauty shops or barbershops on Fremont Street that you remember?

Not that I remember.

So they must have been on other streets, side streets.

I remember they had a beauty school not on Fremont Street but on one of the side streets there because I can remember going there and getting my hair cut.

Wow. Thank you for those memories.

Tell me about some of the other recreational-type activities, like the proms, senior dances, Sadie Hawkins, any of those.

I only went to one and that was the Freshman Frolic. I didn't have a date. It was a very small thing; there was hardly anybody there as I recall, not very many people at all, but probably because we were freshmen and it was a small class at that time. Then the junior and senior prom I was always working and never had a date, so I just never went. Nowadays I know my daughter, she didn't want a date for the junior and senior prom; she went with her friends. I said, "You're kidding?" She goes, "No."

[Laughing] I love it.

But anyway, then you didn't do that; you only went if you had a date or whatever. But anyhow, I used to see the pictures and everything and they were wonderful.

Sadie Hawkins Day, that was always fun. I don't think I ever asked anybody to go because I didn't have the money and then I worked. When I did have the money, I worked. I would always opt to work because I just felt like I needed to.

And did you spend the money to help the family or did you buy your own clothes and books and things like that?

In general I spent it on myself, my own clothes and things like that, because I really didn't have anything until then.

Did you buy a car?

Yes. My sister and I bought our first car and we paid forty dollars for it. It was a 19—either a

'49 or '50 Nash Rambler. It was the kind where you—you don't probably remember this—but you flip the little button and the seat went flat down and almost made a bed. It was ridiculous.

Oh, my. They had that back then.

Yeah, yeah. I guess they were family cars. And people knew our car; it was funny.

What color was it?

Black. It was black. In fact, one time it needed a new something; I don't remember what—it was a carburetor. And my dad said, "No, it needs a new carburetor." And he wouldn't put it in there and we didn't have the money to get it fixed. So we bought the carburetor. It had so much room inside the engine thing, not like today where everything is so compact that we opened the hood and we were sitting on the fender-type things with our feet down in the—there was that much room in there. We were in there taking the whole thing away. We got it all back together and there was one thing that we didn't know where it went, so we just left it off. But it worked.

[Laughing] I love it.

So we drove it around like that. One of our girlfriends who you're going to interview, Linda Raul was there the day we were doing that. She probably doesn't remember it. But yeah, she was just shaking her head. But it had to be fixed; we didn't have a way to get around.

I love it. So you just became a mechanic. You just did what you had to do.

More or less. You did what you had to do.

I love it. Later on in life when you finished high school you continued to work for the movie theater?

Yeah. It was called the Nevada Theater Corporation. It still may be that; I don't know. I don't think they own the movies anymore, but I think they do have some sort of corporation. Mrs. [Edythe] Katz.

Edythe Katz. Lloyd.

It's her husband, Mr. [Lloyd] Katz and Edythe. Edythe's mother actually I think owned part of it, too, Mrs. Sperling. Gertrude Sperling was her mother's name. So anyway, I continued to work there. I actually worked two jobs. I worked at the courthouse for a lady who had a service there, a title search company. I worked there until I got married at almost 25.

So how did you meet your husband?

In grammar school at Sunrise Acres.

But you never had a date. Why not?

He dated my sister. They went steady in our freshman year. But we were friends from church, as well. So years went by, years went by. I worked a couple of jobs. I always kept my theater job because it was fun and I saw people. People always came and went. Then one day I saw Joyce somewhere and she said, "Guess who I saw next door to me?" And I go, "Who?" And she says, "Clyde Sheldon." And I says, "Really, what's he doing now?" And she said, "He's in the Marine Corps." And I said, "You're kidding." So I said, "Well, if you see him again, have him call me."

Well, I don't think she did, but I called his mother—or I called his house because everybody was in the book then. And so I said, "Can you have Clyde call me?" So then he asked me out on a date and we went on a date and that was it.

That's wonderful.

He was a career Marine when I married him. So I mean he had another life and really so did I, but remained good friends.

So did you travel with him to different locations in the Marine Corps? So where are some of the places that you lived?

Well, the Marine Corps is a little different than most services. He was overseas twice to Vietnam. So, of course, I couldn't go. And to Okinawa, he was there and I couldn't go there, either. The job that he did you couldn't go with them because they had to be able to move in a hurry. Anyway, but we were stationed in California at El Toro Marine Base [El Toro Marine Corps Air Station]. When we first got married we were stationed for a while in Barstow, California. That was a real shock. Barstow, I thought, what's in Barstow? But anyway, there's a Marine Base [Marine Corps Depot of Supplies] there, so we were stationed there. Then I became pregnant. Then he got orders back to Vietnam and I came home. I was nine months pregnant. I had to move. In fact, I saw the doctor here twice I think or three times before our daughter was born. Then when he came back from Vietnam, we went to El Toro and we were there seven years. He was commissioned as a warrant officer while we were there. Then he went back overseas and I came home with our two children for a year while he was overseas. Then when he came back we went to New York City.

Was he stationed in New York?

Yep, in the Bronx at Fort Schuyler. There's what they call an I-and-I staff, which is inspector-instructor. That's basically the reserves. The I-and-I staff is the one that trains the reserves. So it was a reserve unit, but they were active duty. It was at Fort Schuyler in the Bronx, and we lived at Fort Totten, which was an Army base at the opposite end of the Throgs Neck Bridge. It was quite an experience coming from—it was cultural shock.

This was the first time you were moving from the West?

Yeah.

So tell me about the cultural shock.

Oh, my gosh. When he got us off the airplane, I went—he said, "Oh, you're not going to believe

it, you're not going to believe it." He said, "Everybody's rude." And he gave me some driving tips. He said, "Now, when the light turns green, don't go right then; you watch both ways because people don't pay attention; they just go anyway." Then he said, "Wait till you see this place." And he said, "There'll be a floor that's burned out and people will be living two or three floors above it and below it." I said, "You are kidding me." I mean, my mouth was just dropped open. Then he said, "Watch this, watch this," because he didn't have the right change for the toll booth because there's so many toll booths there, and so the guy was rude. My husband just laughed. He said, "See?" I said, "Oh, my gosh, this is just terrible."

And then I felt like—and even with the children in school when our kids went to school, they talked terrible to their parents, I felt. They would argue with their parents. I can remember telling my daughter, "You're not going to argue with me like these New York kids here argue with their parents; that is not going to happen," because she started picking that up and things like that.

That's interesting.

In fact, once a year the Marines have a ball, the Marine Corps [Birthday] Ball. And I can remember telling him, "Where's the Marine Corps Ball," because that's the big event everybody's formal and everything. So he said, "Over in the Bronx." I go, "The Bronx, you're kidding me?" I said, "Where in the Bronx?" He goes, "It's on the third floor of a burned out building," because he was a jokester. But it wasn't. He said, "Connie, there are nice places in the Bronx." And it was in a country club-type thing, so it was really nice. But it was funny.

Then I worked for three months at Rockefeller Plaza.

Doing what?

I worked for Liberty Mutual Insurance Company. I walked by the ice skating rink every

morning. I rode the express bus and the subway to get there and come home. It was just really an experience. I'm so glad I did it.

We always tell everyone it's the best and worst of both worlds there. If you see a car on the side of the road where it's stalled on the freeway, it'll be stripped because if you have to leave it there, people just stop and take the stuff—the battery, the spare tire, everything. It's just incredible. It was just really kind of shocking.

But we met some of our very best friends there. They were from there, but they were stationed there; they were [U.S.] Air Force. He was an Air Force doctors' recruiter. What they try to do in the [U.S.] Army—and I don't know what about the Marine Corps—but the Army and the Air Force, they tried to put people that are recruiting back in the areas they came from because they know the area, they know the people and customs and that type of thing because it's a different ball game there; let me tell you. Anyway, so we met our really good friends there and they really made it livable for us because we met their parents that were from the area and things like that. They always had Sunday dinner together. It was an Italian family that lived in the same house; grandma and grandpa lived below and mom and dad lived here and blah, blah, blah.

Anyway, it was a wonderful time. We loved the theater. We went to the theater all the time. And we loved West Point. Any chance we got we went up to Palisades Parkway up to West Point and museums and things like that. It's a wonderful place, but it's just not anyplace I want to live. Although I have to tell you that my daughter was there a few months back and she was in the area and now Fort Totten is a park. She went there and asked them could she go by our house. So she took pictures. She took pictures of the church we went to on base and everything. I said I'm getting emotional. And I am now, in fact. She says, "Oh, I shed a few tears today myself," because that was a wonderful three years, lots of wonderful memories.

I'm glad you took the offer to move back there. That's great.

Well, we had no choice [laughing]. But then the last eighteen months of my husband's career we were in North Carolina.

Where?

[Marine Corps Air Station] Cherry Point. It was in Havelock; that's the name of the city. Havelock is a wonderful place, too. And the base, Cherry Point, is probably the only reason it's there. I was a teacher's aide there and loved it. It was another culture shock. It was just incredible.

Which year were you there?

Probably '81-82. It was a wonderful place. In fact, we considered retiring there; it was that great. Well, I'm a homemaker at heart and we picked berries and strawberries. We were close to the ocean and you got all the wonderful seafood you wanted to eat at a reasonable price and things like that. It was great.

And the taste of the berries.

Oh. Well, we picked strawberries and I made jelly. We picked blueberries. It was just magnificent.

Oh, I also drove the school bus. If you were an aide, you had to learn to drive the school bus. And they told me that; that's a condition of your employment. I said, okay, well, new mountains to climb. So I did get a job. I find this to be so funny because people would take the job and say okay they'd do it and then they wouldn't, or they would automatically fail the test on purpose so they didn't have to do it.

Well, I have to admit having sixty screaming kids on your bus is scary. I did not like that job because I never got off of that place that I wasn't scared I was going to run over somebody or

something.

Finally I was just a sub and then finally they said, "Oh, Mrs. So-and-so has paid her dues; you're going to have to do it." I go, "Oh, no." But I had to; I just felt like I took that job.

So anyway, as it ended up we took two or three days of classwork and then there were only two of us two passed the test. There were some who did it on purpose because there was a classroom full of people. Anyway, then we had to spend two or three days driving a bus. And these are not buses like you see today. No air-conditioning. You had to pull the thingy out like this, like when we went to school. Anyway, so we drove and drove and drove.

The other gal—well, first of all, the instructor said to me, "Well, can you tell me, one to ten, how well do you think that you will be able to drive the bus?" It's got a standard transmission, because people will just say, "Well, I can't drive a standard transmission," and stuff like that. I'd say, "Well, seven." And he goes, "Boy, Mrs. Sheldon, you're really sure of yourself." And I went, "Well, my husband has had every kind of truck there is; I've driven all kinds and I learned to drive a car on a stick shift because that's what my parents demanded of us." So he said, "Okay." So then there was me and this other gal. So we get on the bus. So he decides he'll let me do it first. We drove and we drove and we drove till my leg was about to fall off because they were these big old, huge buses. And everybody kept telling me, "Oh, Ms. Sheldon, Ms. Sheldon, wait till they get you on the railroad track, because there the railroad tracks go up like this and then the railroad track is up here. Well, if you get stuck, you're on there. And they say they get you on there and they make you sit there and if you go back just a little ways, he flunks you; you fail. And some people would do it that far and then they'd fail. And so he did that. We got up to this thing about the last day I think it was. We got up there. So I feathered the clutch and just sat there. And I said, "Can I go?" And he goes, "Yeah." So

then I pulled up over the railroad tracks. And I go, "How did I do?" And he said, "That's just the way I would have done it."

I love it.

He passed me. He told me I was a good driver. Oh, another story about that. There in North Carolina, too—I don't know if you've ever been there.

I was born there.

Oh, you were? Oh, gosh. Well anyway, you know how the roads are all grassy and they're ditch grassy; they're not gravel or anything like that. It's grass, and then you have a two-lane road. So you had to turn a bus around in that road. I mean if you went to school there and you rode the bus, you know this. And we'd go down these country roads because these kids were poor. A lot of African American children lived way down in the country with no water, no nothing.

Anyway, so I'd go down there. Well, he told us how to do it. And I guess because I don't know any better, I did exactly what he said. He said, "Now, you look in this side. Now, when you go to turn around, if this mirror has all grass in it, you're in the ditch and we're going to have to call a crane to get you out." So he says, "You don't want to back up and let it get any closer than half." So I did exactly that and I could always turn around. And I always remembered. He says, "Just pull back up if you get in too much grass." So I did exactly what he said and I passed with flying colors.

Well, when I was done he told this little gal that I was with, he goes—she had never driven a stick shift. So it was her time to drive. I had to hand it to her because she was the only aide that passed and she passed the thing. She was a black gal and just as sweet as she could be. And I thought the rest of you people could do this. And they weren't necessarily of color, but they just didn't want to do it. And I handed it to her because she did it.

So he said to me, "Okay, it's Ms. So-and-so's turn to drive." I forget what her name was. Anyway, we're sitting there and he says to me, "We're going to do a lot of holding on to today [laughing] because we were going like this." So anyway, he says, "Ms. So-and-so, you're going to have to take the driving part again." So she didn't pass, but I did.

Especially if you've never driven a stick shift.

Oh, to have the nerve to do that. I mean she deserved a big pat on the back as far as I was concerned.

So I had to drive this bus they told [me]. I go, "Oh, I don't want to." You had to leave the buses at school—you probably know this—because if there was a hurricane—because we were close to the water—if there was a hurricane they had to get the kids home before they could get the bus drivers to come to the school to pick up the buses. So they had to have enough people that could drive the school buses to get those kids home within a certain length of time. That was the modus operandi.

Anyway, so I had to take that bus home with me every night. I drove the kids because I lived on the base. And we lived the very last street on the base, way in the back. So I'd drop everybody off. Then we lived in a cul-de-sac. Oh, my gosh. The people across from me—there was nobody in that house. So I learned from this gentleman's—I mean he was a great teacher. I could pull around and back that school bus into that driveway in three turns.

Oh, my God.

I know. In fact, one time some guy was moving in next door to us, some guy, and he was out there trying to—I says, "Get away, let me alone," because I know exactly what I'm supposed to do. I pulled that in there. He was a pilot and he goes, "Well, I can't believe that." And I says, "Well, believe it." Then when we went to move they couldn't get the trailer in to get the thing,

so the guy next door said, "Let Connie pull it in."

[Laughing] I love it.

I know. I thought that was great. But anyway, it was quite an experience to drive a school bus. Oh, my gosh, I never wanted to do that again. Then when I came back here when my husband retired, I got an interview for a bus driver's job and they told me I didn't pass the—

For the city bus?

No. For the school bus. I didn't pass the oral thing to talk to them.

Oh, please.

I know. I went, "I don't buy it." But anyway, I didn't get the job. But it was just as well.

So did you work when you came back to Las Vegas?

I did.

You had now lived in New York, all kinds of places—Barstow, El Toro, New York, North Carolina. So coming back to Las Vegas to live again is, what, the late eighties?

It was '83.

1983. What were the changes? I'm sure that you had visited during the years.

Well, when we lived in California we did. When we lived in New York we only came back once, and I don't think we did at all in North Carolina. I always went to Oklahoma to visit with my grandmother in the summers. So only one time that I remember we flew from New York to here.

Why did you decide to come back to Las Vegas to live?

Well, my husband considered—and he was number one on the promotion list and so they wanted him to stay. He was here looking for a job when he got that news. And I said, "I'll support whatever you want to do," because we're not unhappy and I love the military life. So anyway,

when he came home he said, "I'm retiring." He said, "I want to feel as good about the Marine Corps the day I went in as the day I get out."

That's wonderful.

And he said, "I don't have three more years to give." I go, "Okay." And I told him, "We can get a house here and stay here if that's what you want to do," I said, "but I have to go home for at least a year." My mom had cataracts really bad and my sister had been here all this time helping them and everything. I said, "I've got to go give my sister a break. And we've been separated for a year before. So I said, "I've got to at least go home for a year." So he says, "No, let's go home."

So we came here. It was just so big and everything. It was huge compared to the way it was. We moved not too far from where—on the east side of town near Nellis [Boulevard] and Bonanza [Road]; that's where we had a home.

Now, is that considered Sunrise Mountain?

Yes, near Sunrise Mountain. Our kids went to Eldorado High School. So we moved back here. And the traffic and everything was really—and the jobs. My sister at that point was a personal assistant to a veterinarian here in town who had a lot of clinics. So I went to work, working on weekends or a couple days a week at one of the vet clinics. She got me that job or gave it to me; she did the hiring. So I just made a little bit of money. Then I went to work—where did I go to work? I forget. Oh, I think I was at a CPA's office, which I hated. I didn't like it. Then I had a few odd jobs. Then I went to work for Palm Mortuary, which was my favorite job in the whole world.

Really? So tell me which location of Palm?

I started out in the valley; they call it Palm Valley View out on South Eastern [Avenue], 7600

South Eastern. I loved that job.

What did you do there?

I was a receptionist and secretary. It has a big cemetery there. I also was in charge of the inventory of the cemetery, like when they sold spots or when people were buried and things like that. It was my favorite job in the whole world. My daughter was going to college, so I had to make more money. So I moved from that job to go to the Las Vegas Hilton, which paid me a lot more.

What did you do at the Hilton?

I was a secretary to the director of catering.

Oh, good.

It was awful.

So a lot of negotiating with the clients?

Not me. It was a very—oh, they got so many tips and they were just—I don't know. It was just so clannish and so—I don't know. I didn't like it at all.

So you needed juice?

Well, I got that job because of one of the guys at Palm; his wife worked there. Well, I did have to take a test and things like that. But she said there's an opening, blah, blah, blah. So I did go down there. And it did pay more. But there were no benefits.

So this is not a union position?

No, it wasn't. There were no benefits. You got tips only if they felt like giving them to you and depending on how generous the director was or whatever. It just wasn't my kind of job. I'm kind of proud to say that even though this is the industry that keeps this place alive that I only worked there once; for eight months I think I worked there. I made some very good friends and I still

keep in touch.

Then I got an opportunity to go—well, I took a test only to shut my sister up—to go to work at the Nevada Test Site. That's where I worked until I retired.

So how long were you at the Nevada Test Site?

Twenty-three years.

Oh, my goodness. So when you came back here you were still a very young woman.

I was thirty-nine. My husband retired at forty.

Your husband was only forty years of age?

Right, when he retired.

So did he go to work again?

Yes, he did.

Where did he work?

He worked at Roberts Electric. He didn't want to work behind a desk anymore. He was an administrative officer and a legal officer in the last job that he had. Anyway, he didn't want to work behind a desk anymore. And so my sister got him a job, well, basically, or recommended him at Roberts Electric, which she used to work at years ago.

So is that similar to Reynolds Electric?

No. It's an independent electrical company.

Okay. Having nothing to do with the Test Site?

No, no.

So did you go back and forth to the Test Site every day?

I did, yes.

So how did you do it then? Did they have transportation?

When I first started it was a bus and I caught the bus at Bonanza and Nellis there at the K-Mart I think it is; there's a parking lot there and that's where we caught the bus. I worked in a place called Area 12 and it was two hours and fifteen minutes on the bus each way. I spent a whole day practically on the bus. But you became a family with those people because you rode the bus with the same people all the time.

Oh, that is wonderful.

Yes, yes, it was.

And you did clerical type work at the Test Site?

I did. What did they call us? Not a payroll clerk. But we basically just did the input of the time sheets and a few clerical duties. It was a clerical thing.

Then my husband always wanted to take a look at Pahrump [Nevada] for a place to live. I go, "I am not driving sixty miles."

Why Pahrump?

I don't know. The kids that lived in Pahrump went to Rancho. They rode the bus on that dirt road.

Oh, my God.

I know. And then when I move out there I realized they didn't even have power; they used kerosene lamps. I used to ask them, "How did you do your homework? It's dark by the time you get home." And they go, "On the bus." Well, at Rancho—of course, we're backing up again—they used to get on the loud speaker and say, "The Pahrump kids are late again; the bus broke down," because it was a rickety old bus that somebody kept at home and then drove back and forth.

Anyway, he always wanted to move—after living in North Carolina and New York

because it was so busy and the traffic was so bad, a slower way of life was really—and it wasn't what Las Vegas used to be.

That's right. This was a faster place than what you had left.

Yeah. So I said, "I'm not driving sixty miles to work," and blah, blah, blah. Well, I was driving—it was ninety miles or whatever it was or a hundred and eighty miles to where I was going anyway. So I didn't want to move there.

Well, one day we decided we needed to buy a different house and I was looking around on my day off and I got stuck over on Alta [Drive] and Rancho, where the [Our Lady of Las Vegas] Catholic church is there and there's a school and it may be the Catholic school there. I sat at that stoplight for four times before I could get there because of the traffic and stuff. I went home and I called him on the phone and I said, "You're right; let's look in Pahrump." Our last child was getting out of high school.

Already getting out of high school.

Yes. That was 1990 and he graduated in June or the end of May and we moved to Pahrump in July. It took three months to find a place that we liked. We loved it. At first we'd leave the windows open at night and I'd say, "Quiet, somebody is out there, somebody is out there." And it was the paper guy driving down the gravel road because I could hear that. I was so used to not living like that. Anyway, so we moved out there. But it was closer to work, actually.

That's what I was thinking when you said that. So how did you get back and forth to the Test Site from there?

At first I used the bus and then I got in a car pool and I car pooled for many years. Then when the atomic testing ended, so did Area 12.

So what kind of testing were they doing in the eighties still?

They were doing underground testing. They were doing atomic testing.

What did that mean for the people working out there?

What do you mean?

On a test day what was it like?

Oh, they closed it down; you couldn't go there.

You couldn't go to work?

Well, what usually happened was they would take you to Mercury; that's right off the side of the highway there, and you sat there until they'd say that there were no releases so that you could go to work. But generally you were there for a couple of hours and they sent you home, generally.

So releases meaning that, even though it was underground, that somehow some radiation had escaped?

Yes. That happened from time to time. And sometimes they just decided it was too late to go to work. By the time you got up there it was another hour up there and there wouldn't be enough time to even bother with it. The union people, then, they got paid for four hours. So if you were there longer than four hours they had to pay you for a full day. So you would know by ten o'clock if you were going to go home or not. So that was the kind of day. So you'd go home and things like that. It was a very interesting job. I loved it. Then Area 12 was closing and so I bid out on some jobs and I got a job in Las Vegas.

Still working for the Test Site?

Yeah.

But in Las Vegas?

In Las Vegas. That was REECo [Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company, Inc.]. So I went to work down on Highland [Avenue]. I rode back and forth with my husband every day

because he still had his job here in town. So we rode back and forth, which was nice, but that only lasted about three months. For one thing, when you worked in the Forward area, in Area 12; that's what they call Forward, most of the Forward area. If it's not Mercury, it's Forward. Anyway, it was a busy job. You were always busy. When I went down to town I had to find something to do. It was a job that had to be there, but, you know. So I had applied for several jobs during this time when I got this one. Well, when they called and they said, "Well, you had applied for this job; now it's opened up again, would you like to—and now it's out at Mercury." And I go, "Sure." So I went and applied for that job and I got it. It was a nice promotion. Plus, it was closer back to home. It was a very nice promotion.

Could you get back into the same car pool?

I probably could have, but I didn't. Because of the job that I took, it was what they called an exempt job, so you were salaried. So I felt I needed to stay later and come earlier and that type of thing, and so I did.

So you drove by yourself?

I drove, yeah. And then I did get in another car pool later on with some ladies that were from Mercury that I knew really well and I car pooled with that person until she retired.

Wonderful. [Colloquy not on the record]

So I want to know more about the difference between living in Las Vegas in the eighties and living in Pahrump.

Oh, Pahrump, we didn't even have a stoplight. It was no stoplights and one grocery store, PJ's grocery store [PJ's Supermarket]. Oh, it was awful. Lots of people that couldn't get to town, didn't have a suitable car, that's the only place they could shop. But the produce I remember was terrible because they brought it in probably once a week or something like that.

But anyway, it was just laid-back. We had an acre and a quarter, which was always what my husband wanted. We had an orchard and things like that. We had a big enough grass thing that he had to get a riding lawnmower, which he loved, and things like that. It was more like a North Carolina thing; it was more laid-back and more "Old Las Vegas." Well, my husband went to kindergarten in Henderson. And so he told me that—this was his description of Pahrump when we moved there: It was like Henderson was thirty years ago. And he loved it. And I loved it. I found a nice church. It was just such an easier lifestyle because we both worked and our kids were gone. It was just a neat place. I would usually go to the commissary maybe once a month or I'd go to town. But I didn't shop much then because I didn't need anything. It was just really a kickback place.

So now what are the differences in the Pahrump of—

Eighties and now—or the nineties. We moved out there in the nineties.

Yes, to 2013.

Now we have several stoplights, lots more people, lots more traffic. I think there was only one hotel there then, Saddle West, and now there's two or three hotels and casinos and things like that. It's just a faster pace.

Tell me about the wineries.

Well, they have the one winery—well, there are two wineries. The one winery, the food is good, at the Pahrump Valley Winery. From time to time it went up and down, but as of late, since the Lokens bought it, it's really nice I think. Bill and Gretchen, I think their last name is Loken. They do a nice job with the Symphony Restaurant and that. And then she's the wine—I forget what you call it. It's not a sommelier, but she knows how to make the wine. She went to school to do that. I think she was a teacher and then when they bought the winery she went to

California and learned how to make the wine and everything. So that's fun.

Then they bought it from the gentleman what owns the other winery. I can't think of what the name of that one is. I forget, but I'll think of it in a minute. Anyway, that winery is just getting started. They don't have food or anything like that. But he does bottle his own wine there and things like that. I got a donation from him for a thing I work on, a nonprofit, and he is very, very nice, as well. But it's not comparable really to the Pahrump [Valley] Winery.

Okay, good. So I wanted to talk about those things because that's, of course, a part of your life that's different from anyone else in this project.

Oh, really?

Oh, yes. I really appreciate that. The last question about the Nevada Test Site: Do some of the workers still live out there?

Oh, yeah, a lot of people. It's an easy place to live. People can afford to—well, you've got bigger property and things like that generally and it's closer to work. I mean it's a lot different. The people get on the bus depending on which place they work. In Mercury where I worked at last, I think we caught the bus at—oh, I don't know—six o'clock, I guess, because you had to start work at seven. Yeah, seven. So you caught it at six, so that got you there in plenty of time for work. They get home around six-fifteen or six-thirty because they work four tens [four ten-hour shifts]. So it's a forty-five minute, fifty-minute drive now. When I worked at Mercury and I drove, it was forty-two miles from my front door to my office and it was a forty-five minute drive. But it's a drive that's no problem; there is no traffic except a couple of buses. I never even passed the buses or saw them; usually we were on different schedules. But there's no traffic. There's no anything. So it's not a bad drive at all because I used to plan my day out on the way to work, really, and on the way home and things like that. So it was a nice drive. I didn't mind

the subsidies for those; those rooms and the food and everything went way up. So I think now you pay—well, I don't even now—twenty-five dollars a night or something like that, which is less expensive than renting a hotel and you don't have to drive for sure. But used to, you could eat so much food up there for two dollars you couldn't eat it all. I mean then it got to where it was six dollars. You could really do better at Burger King probably. But because it was a private—the budgets were different. So the private companies like Bechtel Nevada and now the National Securities Technology, they're there to make money and they stopped subsidizing a lot of that.

I see. Just like Las Vegas as a city, at one time people could get all kinds of perks.

Oh, absolutely, yeah. But it's quite a life. I went from being a clerk—I think I started there as a chief clerk—and I was the assistant to the environmental safety health and quality manager, or director they call him, and I also ran an ergonomics program and became a certified ergonomist and things of that nature. So it was a very, very—I mean when I think of how I started there—let me think. When I retired I made six times the money I did when I started.

That's wonderful.

It was the best move I ever—but see, I could never have a career because of my husband's. So when I came back to Las Vegas and then we came back in '83, well, I didn't start out at the site until '89, in March. So I mean that was the first real career I could ever have.

And you took full advantage.

I did. I did. And it was a wonderful job. I did so many neat things. I've done assessments in the tunnels where they did the testing and done quality inspections there and things like that. I mean it was a wonderful job.

I love it. So when did you retire?

I've been retired one year this month.

Oh, this is amazing.

I retired January fifth last year.

Oh, that's great. Tell me what you can about Area 51.

I have to laugh because we could never call it 51; you couldn't even acknowledge that it existed until President Bush said it on TV and I went gee whiz. I went we're not even supposed to speak about it, because they had different names for it.

What were some of the names that they used?

Systems was what we called it. I have friends who work up there, but they still do not speak of it. I don't know what they do. I know what I suspect, but I don't know.

Can you share with me what you suspect?

I don't think I should. But I will tell you this; Systems or Area 51 has their own buses. You cannot get on and off that bus because they don't want people talking to each other. So I could not get on a 51 bus and go home. Isn't that something?

Yes.

I think that's amazing. So that bus, when it gets down to the Mercury gate, they have to go in and check everybody's badges. Usually, if it's a bus that's going to Vegas, anybody that's down there that got stuck down there can get on that bus. Not a 51 bus. I mean still they do things there they don't want people to talk about. It's not like it was, but they still have classified things. I mean there are still classified things out there. In the job that I had I was also the OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] record keeper. There were times that there would be incidents, not in 51 but in other places, because Homeland Security [United States Department of Homeland Security] is out there, the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. They

train fire departments and police departments from all over the world and you see them in the cafeteria and things like that. Things would happen and I would get word that they had an accident, but I wasn't allowed to ask. They did their own recordkeeping. Even though it occurred on the Test Site and that was supposed to be part of my purview, I wasn't allowed to ask. So there are lots of things that go there that still. That's how we make improvements in Homeland Security and things like that. We have no choice but to do those things.

Wonderful. That is amazing. At one time you had prepared to go to college. You were preparing yourself in high school to take shorthand and typing so that you could work your way through college. Did you ever have the opportunity to get some college?

I did.

Where did you go?

Well, I started at NSU [Nevada Southern University, now University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) here, but I just couldn't do it. I couldn't do it and work. I didn't have enough sense to—well, I wasn't counseled. I will tell you a little bit of this because I did my daughter and she thanks me for that. She's a schoolteacher now and she counsels other people about this.

But anyway, I came out here. I took a full load. There was no way. Plus, I don't have the intelligence that of a lot of people have and I didn't know that I had a reading disability. That's another story. I mean I made good grades; don't get me wrong, but it was because I worked hard. So I came out here, took a full load like—I can remember going to the biology lab here and the first test they gave you had to go around and identify all this stuff. I was overwhelmed. Anyway, I didn't finish. I just didn't.

But then when I got married and had children, we were in Southern California and I found out—I was taking my daughter to preschool—that there was a class offered at the

community college and there you go for free for two years.

At that time, yes.

So I went hmm. It was a music class. I thought, "That'll be easy." And it was on preschool. So I thought, "Great, I'll do that." And I needed some adult conversation. So I started going back to college, Saddleback College. I loved it. I got a certificate to teach preschool. I did; I taught in Mission Viejo. So every place we went I took college classes. When my husband retired and, in fact, I was working in Area 12, I finished at the community college. I went to work an hour early so that I could get off an hour early so that I could get to class in North Las Vegas. And it was till I finished. I was very lucky. They took all the classes that I took from all over except for one.

Oh, isn't that great?

And it was a bonehead English class and I thought I was so lucky. I mean it still took me awhile to get through because it just was that way. So I did. Oh, that's how I learned I had a reading disability. I was taking a class on teaching the learning disabled child. It was taught by a nun. I went, "Oh, my God, that's me." So I told her and she says, "It's a wonder that you've kept your love of reading." I said, "I hate to read; I hate to read." Anyway, so I realized then. But they didn't recognize those things then. And my sister was brilliant, my twin. My mother used to say it's just going to take you longer; it's just harder for you. Now I realize after this class I memorized most everything; that's the reason I did as well as I did. I just had to keep repeating. Well, by the time I was a senior in high school, I learned how to study for me. I mean that was just like turning on a light bulb, just to recognize all those years.

In fact, I have another story. One of my students in Mission Viejo, her mother was teaching a class at the college and she said, "I'd just love for you to take my class." I go, "What

is it?" And she went institutions of—oh, jeez, I don't know; something so off the wall, national institutions or something. I went, "Okay." So I said, "All right, I'll take it." Well, I read every single night and I was still behind. Unless it was something I totally knew all the terminology and things, it didn't make any sense. So I went to her and said "I'm really behind and I've read every day." She said, "Well, how far behind are you?" And so I told her. I said, "I'm still really trying to decipher chapter one." I said, "Here's the thing; if I don't get it in a lecture, I don't get it because I can't read this book. I'm going to tell you right now I can't read this book; I don't know the terminology or anything." She gave the first test and she realized I probably wasn't the only one that wasn't getting it because it was so deep. Political Institutions, that was the name of it. Anyway, so even on one of my tests one time she wrote a note: "You missed this lecture." I got an A in the class, but it was because I had to get it from the lecture and I had to take my own notes and I studied from my own notes.

And she realized.

She knew I was telling the truth, plus I was teaching her kid. So she knew I knew what I was talking about. I just told her, "I'm going to have to drop." She says, "Well, I don't want you to drop." So she started giving all the testable stuff in the lecture. And so that's how. I just finally got to where if it was a reading class I would go to the professor and say—and now they make exceptions for that—I would say, "I don't need to take the test orally, I just want you to—" If it's a subject that I'm not familiar with—if it's a teaching manual, I'm okay. But if it's political institutions or something like that, I just tell them, "If you don't give it in a lecture I won't get it," and I said, "And I'll do my best to read, but I spend more time in the index trying to figure out what each word means or the larger words mean and how it meets this text than works for me." Anyway, I learned that I could learn; that it was just different learning thing for me.

Well anyway, I was telling you about going to school out here. I can remember this lady sitting at this desk and she looked at my score from when you take ACTs and things like that. I don't even remember what mine was; it must have been awful because she looked at me and goes, "You're really going to have to study hard." And I went, "Okay." But when I think back on that I can see that lady's face right now and I thought, "How discouraging." But they didn't know. They didn't know.

Right.

Today if I was in that lady's spot I wouldn't approach it like that. But it didn't discourage me; I was still going to go. But I quickly became discouraged. But I always tell my daughter, I told her when she went to college—and she used to tell people, "My mom's the only one that has a better grade point average than me." Anyway, I told her, "When you go to college" (and she went away to school in Missouri), I said, "make sure that you don't sign up for every reading class. You don't take a history class, an American lit class, and five or six of these other things. You alternate it with a math class or something where you do the work in here and then you have time to do all this reading." I said, "If you don't you're going to be so overwhelmed and so behind it won't work."

So does she study similar to the way you study?

No. She does not have a problem, not at all. She has her master's from here. But this is her second career. She teaches at Las Vegas High School, the one up on the hill. She was a banker. Well, actually her degree is in textiles and design. She wanted to be a buyer for clothing and things like that because that's what she loves, but she knows all about fabrics and things. She went to work retail with the intentions of getting a buying job in either New York or someplace like that. She loved the city life. She said, "I gave it six months." She didn't tell me this, but

that's what she gave it. At the end of six months she told the people at the store, "If you don't have a buying job for me today, this is my notice." And they called her from New York, the president or whatever called her, and she said, "I have a college degree and wanted to be a buyer. I gave this six months. If you don't have a buying job for me today, then I'm giving you my notice." And she did and she went to work at the bank part-time and that lasted three days because she said, "It's all sales. Banking is the same thing as sales." So she did a fantastic job. Then she said to me one day several years later and she had a divorce and she said, "You're not going to freak out, are you," she says, "if I told you I wanted to go back to school and be a teacher?" I said, "That would be a thrill to me; that's what I always wanted to do." Anyway, so she sold her home. She did everything and lived off her credit cards for two years, because she had a degree in something else, to become a teacher. That's her life. That's what she does and she loves it. She teaches—what do you call that?—it used to be Home Ec [Home Economics], but it's not Home Ec—careers and whatever. And she teaches sewing and design and things like that. She started that Fashion Forward for the Junior League in this town. She's the Shannon Sheldon that started that. They have it in the paper every year and she still participates. She started it. But anyway, I live my teaching life through her, really.

And we talk about our teachers in such a demeaning way.

Oh, and she lost her pay raise. It was sickening. They're never going to be able to keep teachers. They'll never want to get a higher degree because they won't be able to get better pay. She's got her master's in thirty-one and she says I miscounted and I need one—and she says now I won't be able to get a raise until they take this off. And you know what? The thing of it is she works day and night. This Fashion Forward thing, she takes those girls or they meet her to buy the fabric for their gowns after school. I mean she works day and night. It's a sad thing when you think

about it like that. But she loves it, so that's the main thing. And she's in debt up to her eyeballs, of course, for education. Like most people.

Of course.

I'm sorry I've talked your leg off.

No. This is exactly what we want, exactly what we want.

Las Vegas is a wonderful place and so is Pahrump.

Well, I will tell you another story. My daughter used to tell that I always gave all of her friends the third degree. But I said, "It's not the third degree; people like to talk about themselves." So I'd say, "Are your parents from here?" And then I'd find out if I knew them. "What's your father's name or what's your mother's name? What was her maiden name?" Blah, blah. And so Shannon will tell everybody, "If my mother has to stand in the bank line, she knows the two people in front of her and two people behind her before they're done." But now that she's older she says, "Oh, I'm turning into my mother," she said, "because she's teaching her fellow students' kids." She said, "I'll say. 'Is your dad's name blah, blah, blah?'" And she said, "I went, 'Oh, my god, I'm turning into my mother.'" But it's true.

It's such a small world. I meet people all the time that I went to school with their parents or went to school with their whatever. So Vegas is still a small town. I think that those of us who grew up here have a hard time leaving it. Maybe we do physically, but I don't think we ever do. It was just such a great place, still is.

Perfect. Thank you so much.

Oh, you're welcome.

[End of recorded interview]

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